My Heart Is True As Steel

by prettysailorsoldier

Summary

When Sherlock and John become roommates at a prestigious sixth-form college, they both get a lot more than they bargained for. Between Shakespeare, rugby, and not a small amount of murder, it promises to be a very interesting year, but there is much more going on than meets the eye. A noose is tightening around the duo, darker and more dangerous than anyone realizes, and it will take everything they both have to unravel it before they lose everything they've found.

Notes

Just so you know what you're getting into: this is Teenlock, this will be fluffy, this will get sexy (I promise), this will be funny, this will be sad, this will have lots of cases, this will NOT HAVE major character death, but I cannot say the same for major character danger.

***** indicates a perspective shift, ~~~~~ indicates a passage of time

The title is from "A Midsummer Night's Dream". All will be made clear in time.

Still with me? Well then, ALLONS-Y!
Chapter 1

He rolled his suitcase into the room, everything he owned condensed into a bag and a cardboard box. Placing the box on the bed with a muffled thump, he surveyed his temporary surroundings. It was nothing remarkable: faded, blue walls, single bed cloaked in a grey duvet, wooden chest of drawers and wardrobe, and a desk shoved in the corner next to the window.

“I didn’t get you a desk lamp or anything,” his aunt said from the doorway behind him. “I thought you would already have one.”

“It’s alright,” John replied, his voice shamefully weak, and he smiled at her over his shoulder to make up for it. “I’ll be moving into the college in a couple days anyway. I can pick one up on the way.”

She smiled back, a weak twitching of tightly-pulled lips, and then retreated back out into the corridor. “I’ll let you get settled in,” she muttered, and he nodded, closing the door as she left.

He let the suitcases drop unceremoniously to the floor, wincing at the thunderous sound, but he couldn’t be bothered to unpack at the moment. Walking over to the bed, he sat down on the edge, the springs creaking in protest beneath him. He traced his fingers over the worn cotton, watching the swirls and ridges of shifting air form and fall across the surface. With a sigh, he pulled his phone out of his pocket.

4 New Messages

He groaned, but slid the touchscreen unlocked anyway. Three of them were from Harry.

R u on the train? ?

Mum wants 2 knw if ur there yet

R u @ aunt claires? Mums worried

His mother did not want to know if he had arrived, nor was she worried, that much John was sure of. She probably wasn’t even awake yet, considering she had only just arrived home shortly before he left, sending him off with a muffled grunt of goodbye against the couch cushions.

When John’s aunt had suggested he apply to transfer to Langley College, a prestigious, private school on the outskirts of London, he had never dreamed he would actually get in. Transferring in for just the second year was practically unheard of, and his only connection to speak of was a friend of his aunt who worked as a secretary at the school. He was hardly a shoo-in. By some freak accident, however, he had gotten in, and he thought he ought to be a lot happier about it than he was.

Langley was the sort of place anyone who wanted to become anything went to. It was a fast track into almost any university you could dream of, and the website was plastered with glowing dossiers of students who went on from there to be prime ministers, ambassadors, scientists, and endless other professions in which they won numerous awards.

His aunt had known that, which was why she was so insistent that he try to get in in the first place. Doctors didn’t come from the nobody college in Kent he had been attending, and, though his mother thought he was just going through a phase, his aunt really did believe he could be a doctor.

He should be happy, ecstatic even, but he couldn’t stop thinking about Harry. He’d had to leave her
behind, leave her to make her own breakfasts and lunches, to get herself to school, to clean the house while their mother snored on the couch, freshly back from yet another attempt to hit every pub in town. He made a mental note to periodically remind Harry about the bin he usually put out by their mother as he tapped out a response.

*Just got in. Knackered. Talk to ya later.*

Figuring that would ensure him some privacy for a while, he turned his attention to the last message in his inbox.

*When ya movin in?*

That one was from Mike Stamford, a friend from secondary school and the only person he would know going into Langley.

*Sunday. Stayin at my aunts in London til then.*

*Why?*

John lowered the phone to rest on his knee, looking out aimlessly in front of him. *Why?* Because his aunt had offered. Because he couldn’t spend one more day being guilted by his mother for accepting the rugby scholarship, for wanting to make something more of himself. Because he was tired of listening to her excuses and pretending to believe them for Harry’s sake.

*More convenient to move from here.*

It was true, and much more socially acceptable than the other answers.

*Right. Get your room info yet?*

He sat his phone down on the bed to rummage through the box beside him, his fingers searching for the folder he’d shoved all his school papers in, but his mobile buzzed loudly before he could find it. He glanced down at the screen, rolling his eyes and chuckling as he answered. “You couldn’t wait two minutes?”

“Hey, it’s not every day your best mate moves to your college,” Mike’s echoing voice snapped back at him, but John could tell he was smiling. “So what house are you in?”

“God, you’re clingy,” John teased, and he heard Mike huff faintly on the other end of the line. ”Just a sec,” he said, locating the folder and awkwardly flipping it open onto his lap one-handed. “I’m in Kingsley. You?”

“Same,” Mike replied, his attempt to sound nonchalant painfully transparent, but John could hardly blame him; he was excited too. “What room you in?”

“Um,” John murmured, his eyes scanning down the page, “117.”

“Roommate?”

John read the name twice before answering, unable to believe it could possibly be right. “Er… Sherlock Holmes,” he said, the name thick and heavy in his mouth, as if the posh syllables were fighting against passing his commoner lips.

The sound Mike made was an indescribable combination of a snort and a choke, and John jolted the phone away from his ear for a moment in alarm.
“Sherlock Holmes!?” Mike exclaimed. “Your roommate is Sherlock Holmes?”

“Yeah,” John replied, growing both anxious and annoyed. “Why? Who is he?”

“Oh, John,” Mike laughed, and John scowled at his patronizing tone, “you wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”

*****

“No,” he snapped as he glared out the window of the taxi.

“Sherlock,” Mrs. Hudson sighed, leaning inside the open, car door, “will you please get out. The man has to go.”

He hesitated just long enough, and then huffed and slid across the seats the second before he knew she would scold him again.

“Cheers!” she called to the cabbie as she closed the door, but he merely grunted and waved absentmindedly over his shoulder before driving off. “Right then! Sherlock, can you grab my bag?” she asked, turning and walking back toward the building behind them.

“Why? You’re not staying,” he answered scathingly, crossing his arms across his chest.

“Sherlock, we’ve talked about this,” Mrs. Hudson said tiredly, and he glared at her as she grabbed the suitcase and began rolling it toward the door. “I can’t stay at Langley with you this year. You’re not making any friends.”

He scoffed loudly, forced into following her so she would hear it.

“You do need friends, Sherlock,” she answered, reading his mind in that annoying way she’d adapted over the years of being his tutor (and, in spite of his protests, babysitter when Mycroft was away -which was always). “Besides, I’ll be glad to get out of those dormitories. Honestly, the things you boys say.” She shook her head disapprovingly as she fumbled with the keys in her hand.

Sherlock could tell which one fit the door, of course, but he wasn’t going to help her. He didn’t want her living here anyway. He was just going to let her stand there and try one after another after another after-

He snatched the keys from her hand, flipping to the correct one and sticking it roughly in the lock as he tried to ignore the small smile he could see out of the corner of his eye.

“We’ll get mugged if we stand out here much longer,” he muttered in explanation. “This is a terrible neighborhood. Crime rate’s up 15% percent in the past three years.”

“You made that up,” she said, flashing him an infuriatingly warm smile as she passed him to enter the apartment.

He glared at the back of her head, and then turned his eyes to the door of the apartment that was stealing her.

221B stared back at him, the autumn sun glinting off the gold letters, and he thought he had never seen anything so loathsome in his life.

“Sherlock,” Mrs. Hudson called from within, and he reluctantly stepped across the threshold.

The entryway was nothing spectacular, blue paint giving way to awful wallpaper as he progressed
further inside. A staircase stretched up the left side, while the corridor continued to the right, leading to two other, interior doors.

“Well, don’t need to go down there again,” Mrs. Hudson muttered as she emerged from the door on the left, brushing her dress even though there was nothing on it. “Everything is falling apart, and it’s so damp!”

Sherlock’s mind sparked at the opportunity. “Perhaps Mycroft made an error in your accommodations,” he said as casually as possible.

Mrs. Hudson waved a dismissive hand in his direction, and his heart sank. “Oh no, that’s not my flat. Although, I suppose I do own the whole building now, don’t I?”

He didn’t see the need to respond, considering they were both perfectly well aware that Mycroft had bought the building in Mrs. Hudson’s name so she could stay close to Langley.

“Oh, here,” she said, sickeningly delighted as she opened the door to her flat, 221A.

His curiosity temporarily overtaking his completely righteous fury, he followed her inside, lips curling up in disgust as he surveyed the flat.

Mycroft had obviously taken the liberty of setting the place up for her, most of the furniture from her rooms in the mansion already scattered around the deep-pink living room. There was a myriad of doilies, patterned quilts, pillows, and a floral tea set already sitting out on the mahogany coffee table. It was painfully stereotypical, and Sherlock wanted to rip it to pieces.

Mrs. Hudson had apparently been speaking, because she was now looking at him expectantly.

He tilted his head in an unspoken inquiry, and she shook her head with a smile.

“I was saying, there’s another flat upstairs. Two bedrooms.” Her eyebrows lifted slightly, and Sherlock’s furrowed.

Something was being implied, something about those two bedrooms in the upstairs flat, something involving him. Was he supposed to stay there? During uni, maybe? After? But two, why would he need two bedrooms?

“Mycroft thought you may want to come here for leave instead of going back to the mansion,” she continued, but his eyes only narrowed further, knowing that wasn’t the whole story. “And, if you wanted to bring a friend back with you—”

His eyes widened. Oh.

“You could. And you could always stay here through university. Maybe get a flatmate or something,” she finished, beaming as if it were the most wonderful idea in the history of mankind.

Sherlock snorted. “Don’t be absurd,” he scoffed, watching Mrs. Hudson’s face fall in his peripheral vision as he looked out the window. “Who’d want me for a flatmate?”

****

“John Watson?”

“Here!” he answered, and then immediately felt stupid for it as he pushed his way through the remaining students to reach the housemaster, Mr. Parish.
The man gave him a quick glance before turning back to the table behind him, plucking a small, white envelope off the blue tablecloth. “Room…117,” he said, his eyes widening slightly as he looked down at his clipboard. He looked back up at John, shock written all over his face for a moment before he collected himself, clearing his throat loudly. “Right. Here’s your key and your orientation forms,” he continued, handing John the folder hesitantly, his eyes flicking between the paper and John with trepidation.

There was a moment of tense silence, John’s fingers shifting anxiously on the handle of his suitcase.

“Is- Is that all, sir?” John asked tentatively, not wanting to be rude, but his aunt was waiting for him.

“Oh, yes,” Mr. Parish said, clearing his throat again as he nodded. “It’s just-” He paused, his eyes shifting side-to-side before he leaned down toward John. “If you have any…problems and want to switch rooms, let me know.”

John looked up at him, dumbfounded by the pity in his expression, as if John were about to walk to the gallows instead of a dormitory. “Er…thank you, sir,” John muttered, and Mr. Parish nodded in dismissal.

John walked away, his eyebrows furrowing down at the folder in his hand as his bag rattled along the uneven pathway. The number 117 was written across a white sticker in blue pen, and it looked entirely nonthreatening.

“Your roommate is Sherlock Holmes?”

Mike’s words rose up in front of him as he walked, and he looked down at the navy numbers with renewed interest. Was that what Mr. Parish had meant, that he would have problems with this Sherlock Holmes?

John couldn’t imagine that one boy could have made such an impact that even the housemasters were warning against him. What would someone even have to do to garner that level of a reputation?

“All sorted?” Aunt Claire asked, and he jumped slightly, hardly realizing his feet had taken him back to her while his brain was occupied.

“Yes,” he answered, nodding with a small smile.

“Got your key and everything?” she asked, her eyes flickering down to the packet in his hand. He nodded again. “Yeah, I got it.”

She smiled, but it slipped from her face as she turned, scanning the crowd and buildings around them.

“I know where the house is,” he offered, guessing at her thoughts. “I can take it from here.”

“Are you sure?” she asked, her expression concerned and caring, and not on a mother or father like it should have been.

“Positive,” he confirmed, bending to pick up the box he had left at her feet. He placed it on top of the rolling suitcase, leaning it against the handle. “I’ll be fine.” He smiled brightly at her, only forcing it a little.

It seemed to convince her well enough, though, because she smiled back, nodding. She hesitated, her arms twitching slightly, and he could tell she was struggling with whether or not to hug him.
“Thanks for helping, Aunt Claire,” he said, stretching forward to give her an awkward, one-armed hug.

She returned it with a full, forceful one, but quickly withdrew, and he felt immensely grateful for that as a group of girls walked past them on the pavement.

“You just let me know if you want to stay with me over leave,” she said, but the intensity in her eyes said so much more.

He nodded firmly, trying to show her he understood. “I will.”

She nodded in return, and then took a small step back, her car keys clinking together as she pulled them from her pocket. “You’ll do so well, John,” she assured, and his insides twisted as he watched her smile grow watery. “You belong here. I can feel it.”

John wasn’t exactly sure about all that, but he smiled anyway, and allowed her to pull him into a parting hug, mumbling a muffled goodbye into her perfumed jacket before she released him and headed back to the parking lot.

John turned and walked back toward the ancient, stone buildings, bracing the balanced box with his arm as it shifted. Following the directions Mike had given him, he managed to find Kingsley House, but he would definitely have to attend one of the tours later that afternoon, considering “the one with the orange banner, next to the wonky tree” didn’t exactly give him confidence in Mike’s navigation abilities. He pushed past the rowdy groups of boys running through the halls, turning his head wildly to take in everything.

There was a common area on the first floor of the house, splitting the dormitories in half on either side of it, where various game tables and televisions were set up. What a bunch of 17-year-old boys would want with a billiards table, John had no idea, but maybe that was just one of the penchants of the upper class. Although, there were already several groups huddled in front of televisions screaming at one another over Call of Duty, so perhaps it wouldn’t be as different here as he thought.

A sign stuck to the polished, grey, stone walls of the corridor pointed him to the left for his room number, so he followed the hall as it cornered, his eyes flicking side-to-side as he scanned the numbers.

111, 113, 115…

He stopped, his eyes scanning the empty stretch of wall in front of him. His eyebrows furrowed, and he turned back around, wondering if he had somehow passed it when a rustling sound reached his ears. Turning forward once more, he noticed a shaft of light stretching out into the corridor from somewhere around the corner and slowly stepped forward. He reached the end of the corridor, popping his head out around the wall to find a door standing ajar. Opposite the open door was another, closed one labeled “DANGER: Do Not Enter”, but John drew closer, trying to find a label on the open room.

Suddenly, the door jerked open, and John jumped backward as he came face-to-face with a petite, elderly woman.

Her brown eyes widened as she gasped, a hand clutching at her chest. “Oh, you scared me, love,” she chuckled, brushing a section of her light-brown hair off of her face.

“Sorry,” John muttered, backing up against the opposite wall to give her some space. “I-I was looking for my room.”
“Oh, you must be John!” she exclaimed, her pink-rimmed mouth stretching into a wide smile. “I was hoping you’d arrive soon. I wanted to meet you before I left.”

John gave her a shy smile, not entirely sure how to respond.

“Are you all alone?” she asked, stretching forward to peer around the corner.

“I- Uh, yes,” John muttered, the shock of the encounter wearing off enough for him to begin forming sentences. “They dropped me off at the gate,” he added, not wanting to specify that his aunt had brought him, knowing that would bring on questions he didn’t want to answer.

The woman nodded, still smiling brightly, but John saw that familiar haze of pity in her eyes. “Ah, well, let me help you with that, then, dear,” she said briskly, snatching the box from atop his suitcase before he could make a move to stop her.

“No, I- You don’t have to,” he spluttered, following her through the door she had darted back inside.

“Nonsense, it’s no trouble,” she insisted as she placed his box on the desk that was still bare. “Can you pass me the linens?”

“Can I- What?” he stammered, too distracted by the room to take in her words.

His bed was bare and untouched, as was his desk, bureau, and wardrobe, but the opposite side of the room looked as though someone had been living there for months. Papers were piled almost a meter high on the desk, bent and sticking out at odd angles. Several books lay open on the bed, various markings and highlighting exposed on the pages, but the bed linens themselves were smooth and unruffled. One of the bureau drawers was open, revealing meticulously folded and lined-up socks, and more books and scattered sheets of paper were stacked on the wooden top. A white, human skull crowned the tallest tower of volumes, the dark voids of eyes seeming to bore into John’s wide, blue ones.

“The bed linens, dear,” the woman repeated, and he snapped his mouth shut as he turned his attention back to her, hardly realizing it had been hanging open.

“Oh, right. Yes,” he said, retracting the handle of his suitcase and laying it down on the cold, tile floor. “But I can-”

“Oh, hush,” she interjected with a mock glare, taking the regulation, school sheets from him as he removed them from the top of his bureau. “I’ve lived with teenage boys long enough to know you’re hopeless at making your beds,” she added, flashing him a playful smile as she began tucking corners around the mattress.

The warmth emanating from her tugged at his chest, and he smiled gratefully back, somehow thoroughly at ease with her already. “Thank you,” he said, rising to his feet from beside the suitcase. “So, are you- Uh…” He trailed off, both not wanting to pronounce his roommate’s name wrong, and not wanting to get the relation wrong.

“Sherlock’s sister?” the woman finished with a wink, and John’s guard collapsed at the joke as he smiled. “I’m Mrs. Hudson, Sherlock’s tutor,” she continued, pausing in making the bed to stretch a hand out to him.

He closed his fingers around her small, frail ones, giving them a small shake. “Pleasure to meet you, ma’am.”

“Ma’am? Oh no, dear,” she muttered with a grimace, shaking her head as she released his hand.
“Call me Mrs. Hudson.”

John smiled as he nodded. “Pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Hudson,” he amended, and she positively beamed at him. “So, do you live on the grounds?” he asked as he bent down to begin unpacking his luggage.

“I did last year,” she said as she rattled his pillow into its case, “but I have a flat in London now. There are a couple extra bedrooms too, in case Sherlock wants to stay over leave. Oh, but I’m being rude!” she exclaimed suddenly, turning around to him. “Here I am, talking your ear off, and you two haven’t even met!”

John chuckled as he placed his folded, uniform trousers into a drawer. “It’s fine, I’m sure we-”

“No, no, no,” she fussed, swatting her hands at him as she urged him out the door. “You go on. I’ll finish putting your things away.” She paused, a nervous glance passing between him and his open bag. “I mean, if that’s…alright,” she added, eyebrows lifting as she watched him.

He tried to fight the redness climbing up his neck. “Er, yeah,” he muttered, clearing his throat. “Yeah, it’s fine,” he added with a strained smile, a little uncomfortable with the possibility of Mrs. Hudson touching his underwear, but more uncomfortable with what she would assume was in the suitcase if he refused her help.

She smiled, nodding at him as she bent to pull out a couple of his white, button-down shirts. “He’s just in there,” she said, pointing out into the hall. “Don’t bother knocking, he won’t answer, and you’ll probably have to talk a bit to get his attention once you’re inside.”

“In- In there?” John asked, jerking his thumb back at the “DANGER: Do Not Enter” clearly emblazoned on the door in yellow.

Mrs. Hudson smiled kindly at him. “Oh, don’t worry, dear, that’s just there to keep people out. If there’s no smoke coming from under the door, it’s perfectly safe.”

John smiled, ready to chuckle, but his face fell as Mrs. Hudson merely returned to putting his shirts in the drawer, his stomach tightening at the realization that that may not have been a joke. Shaken, he stretched his hand toward the door, pausing on the handle before gently pressing it down.

“Hello?” he said as he swung the door inward, half expecting to see the fuse burning out on a bundle of dynamite as he poked his head into the room. There wasn’t any dynamite, but he wasn’t sure if what he did see was much better.

The room must have been another dormitory at some point, but it had been thoroughly transformed into what could only be described as a laboratory. Shelves lined the walls, loaded with even more stacks of paper and a large assortment of rather unpleasant-looking things suspended in jars. Several tables lined the walls, scattered with books, beakers, phials, petri dishes, and all manner of scientific equipment. A microscope that probably cost more than his first semester’s tuition sat on the table to his right, next to an assortment of colorful petri dishes he made a mental note not to get too close to. On the table directly in front of him was a stainless steel microwave, looking oddly normal and out of place in the room he’d swear he’d just walked through a wormhole to get in. A hissing sound drew his attention, and he looked up to find a figure sitting at a metal table against the opposite wall, silhouetted against the light from the window in front of him.

He was wearing the standard, school shirt, the long, white sleeves rolled up to his elbows as he leaned over something on the table. Light filtered through his dark-brown curls, catching on the arms of the plastic safety goggles that stretched over his ears. His arm, thin and pale, stretched out across
“Er…hello,” John said, lifting his hand in greeting, and then embarrassingly pressed it back to his side as he remembered the boy couldn’t see him. “I— I’m your new roommate, Jo—”

“John Watson,” the boy’s deep voice interjected, though he neither turned nor looked up from whatever it was he was doing.

“Um, yeah,” John muttered, his eyebrows furrowing at the back of the boy’s head. John waited, but apparently that was all he was going to say. “So,” John continued, clearing his throat, “you must be—”

“Sherlock Holmes?” he interrupted again, leaning to the side just enough for John to see the flame of a Bunsen burner stretching up in front of him. “I should hope so. Otherwise Langley has quite the security problem.”

John chuckled nervously, daring to take a few steps forward, if only to satisfy his curiosity on what exactly his wannabe-mad-scientist roommate was setting on fire. Stepping slightly to the side, able to see around Sherlock’s shoulder without getting too close, he saw the boy pinch something between the points of his tongs.

“What are you— JESUS!”

He leapt back as Sherlock put the object into the flame, a violent plume of orange and yellow bursting around it, leaving only a dusty, charcoal mess.

“Hmm,” Sherlock murmured, tilting his head as he twisted the tongs in his fingers, “interesting.” He laid the tongs down, taking up a pad of paper and making a note before lifting the instrument again.

John couldn’t help it. He stepped forward, standing at Sherlock’s right shoulder and peering down at the table. His eyebrows furrowed as he looked down at the piles of…crisps?

“Sherlock?”

John turned at the voice in the door, but the boy being summoned did not.

“What are you doing?” Mrs. Hudson hissed, leaning backward out the doorway to peer down the hall, and John marveled at the fact that she seemed to be more concerned with someone catching Sherlock blowing things up than Sherlock blowing things up.

“Testing the explosive properties of different flavors of Walkers,” Sherlock replied tonelessly, picking up what looked to be a piece of sour cream and onion.

John’s eyebrows furrowed, and he looked down at the top of the boy’s head. “Really?” he asked, his head tilting in disbelief.

“Obviously,” Sherlock snapped, and John’s eyes narrowed briefly, an inherent reaction to the sharp tone.

He suppressed it quickly, however, curiosity overruling offense.

“What’s winning?” John inquired, stretching his neck to read the notes over Sherlock’s shoulder.

Sherlock straightened and froze, slowly lowering the tongs back to the table, and John could physically feel the sudden shift in the air. “At the moment,” Sherlock said, soft but deliberate, “Tomato Ketchup.”
“Huh,” John huffed, but it sounded slightly strangled, his throat tightening with the rising tension in the room. “I would’ve thought it’d be Thai Sweet Chilli.”

Sherlock scoffed, and the hair on the back of John’s neck prickled with annoyance. “Typical,” he muttered dismissively, and John glared down at the mop of curls, the closest thing to the boy’s face he could see.

“Your hypothesis says Thai Sweet Chilli,” he muttered, annoyance emboldening him to stretch his arm out and tap the notepad, where the prediction was clearly written in handwriting that looked like it belonged on a royal declaration.

There was a snort from behind him, and he suddenly remembered Mrs. Hudson, but he was stopped in turning around as Sherlock finally looked up at him.

His skin was pale, stretching across prominent cheekbones that swept in sharp angles across his face. Brown curls hung haphazardly across his forehead, but it was his eyes that sent a cold shiver up John’s spine. They were pale, grey-green in the light from the window, and staring up at him with an intensity that froze him to the spot. There was something threatening in that piercing gaze, as if Sherlock could see every hope and secret laid out bare in front of him, and John screamed at himself to look away, but he couldn’t bring his eyes to do it. He started when the boy spoke, forgetting that time had not frozen quite as much as he had.

“Kent,” he said simply, his eyes narrowing slightly as they shifted between John’s.

“Sorry?” John managed to say after a moment, his voice humiliatingly breathy.

“You’re from Kent—Maidstone or Ashford, if I’m not mistaken—but you didn’t come from there this morning. You’ve been staying in London for at least”—his eyes scanned downward, and John realized he was holding his breath—“two days, probably with your aunt. You’re here on a sport scholarship for rugby, but you’re more the academic type. You don’t get along with your parents, but you have a younger sister you’re close to, and feel guilty for coming here and leaving her at home. You had a sausage roll on the ride in, along with a coke you only half finished, and”—his eyes met John’s once more—“you’re left-handed.”

Absolute silence stretched out endlessly around them, so quiet, John could hear his pulse pounding in his ears. He realized his mouth was hanging open, but couldn’t seem to summon enough brain power to close it, too transfixed by the grey eyes that seared into his skull.

Sherlock stared back at him so calmly, John could almost believe he had imagined the whole thing, but then an almost imperceptible smirk tugged at the corner of the boy’s mouth, and John’s brain clicked back into motion.

“How- How do you know that?” John breathed, his lips trembling slightly as he spoke.

“Know what?” Sherlock answered, his eyes glinting mischievously as he tilted his head.

“That!” John exclaimed, growing angrier as Sherlock got haughtier. “Everything you just said. How did you know that?”

“I didn’t know, I saw,” Sherlock answered irritably, as if John had asked him something painfully obvious, such as why the sky was blue, or the ocean wet. He turned back toward the table, picking up his tongs and prodding through another pile of crisps.

“Saw?” John repeated, leaning against the table now in an attempt to get back into the boy’s eye line. “What do you mean you-”
“I’m really rather busy at the moment, in case it’s escaped your notice,” Sherlock snapped, never taking his eyes off his progress of searching for the perfect crisp.

John’s fingers tightened into a fist as he glared, but he smothered his anger, crossing his arms firmly across his chest. “Fine. You tell me how you knew- sorry, saw all of that, and I’ll leave you alone.”

The air thickened with tension again as Sherlock stilled, but, after the longest few seconds of John’s life, he lowered the tongs, removing his goggles with a sigh before twisting his chair to face John.

“The traces of mud on your shoes have a slightly greenish hue to them, no doubt to the greensand deposits common in the Maidstone and Ashford areas of Kent. There are no trains leaving that area early enough this morning for you to be arriving here at this time, nor could you possibly have driven, so you must have been staying somewhere close. The general state of your jeans indicates you’ve worn them at least three days, and there’s mud splatter on the backs of the legs, suggesting you packed a single pair of jeans for a short stay in London, and that you were here for the heavy rain two days ago.”

John looked down at his jeans, his cheeks burning with self-consciousness, but the blue denim still looked perfectly fine to him, except perhaps some barely-noticeable brown smudges near his shoes.

“There’s a faint odor of perfume on your clothes, not from your mother or sister; they would have walked you inside. Could be a grandmother, but the scent is quite youthful. Aunt, then. Moving into a private school where you’ll be gone months at a time and your parents don’t bring you? Sure sign of a poor relationship right there.”

John opened his mouth to argue, but Sherlock had apparently only paused for air.

“Then there’s the matter of your sister,” he continued undaunted, as if he hadn’t noticed John trying to speak even though he was looking right at him. “The bracelet on your right hand is one of those ridiculous friendship things all the girls are doing now, obviously a gift from someone. Could be a girlfriend, but it’s faded, implying you’ve been wearing it for some time. A more permanent relationship, then, most likely a sister. Younger, of course, because that’s the age group most inclined to the trend, and you keep tugging and twisting at it, suggesting some sort of anxiety associated with her. You wouldn’t still be wearing the bracelet if you didn’t get along, so the stress must have some other cause, most likely worry and/or guilt. I suspect the and,” he added with a smug tilt of his head, but John was too shocked to feel patronized. “The rugby is obvious, what with the particular muscle groups that are more developed.”

John could feel himself turning scarlet at that. He was wearing jeans and a jumper; how the hell could Sherlock tell what muscles were developed!?

“And coming in in your last year? Must be a sport scholarship, but the ink residue on your fingers, in conjunction with the recent paper cut on your left thumb, suggest you’ve been doing a lot of reading recently, probably familiarizing yourself with your schoolbooks, so your real focus is academics.”

John turned his fingers up, looking down at the faint, black smudges on the pads of the digits. “But…my lunch,” he murmured blearily.

“Oh, that part was easy,” Sherlock said with a shrug, waving his hand inconsequentially. “In addition to the perfume, you also smell faintly of sausage, and there are flecks of puff pastry on your left sleeve. That and the paper cut tell me you’re left-handed. There’s also a small stain of coke on your jumper, which is how I know you had half a can on the way here.”

“How can you possibly know I only drank half the can,” John muttered, shaking his head in
“Simple,” Sherlock scoffed. “You wouldn’t need to drink that much with a sausage roll, and an athletic, health-conscious person like yourself wouldn’t drink an entire can of coke that early in the day anyway.” Finally finished, or so it would seem, Sherlock turned his chair back toward the table and replaced his safety glasses in one fluid motion of long, pale fingers.

John stared at his profile for a moment, utterly dumbfounded, and his mouth started working before he had completely decided what he was going to say. “That was…”

Sherlock stalled in his movements, the tongs holding a fresh crisp freezing in midair just shy of the flame.

“Amazing,” John finished breathlessly.

The crisp fell to the table, cracking as it bounced on the metal surface, and sent greasy shards shooting out like shrapnel.

“Really?” Sherlock murmured, and John was shocked to hear something close to uncertainty in the boy’s voice.

“Of course it was!” John exclaimed, smiling broadly down at the curious, grey eyes peering up at him. “It was…extraordinary!”

One of Sherlock’s eyebrows lifted up toward his curls as he continued staring, his eyes searching John’s face. “That’s not what people normally say,” he muttered.

“What do people normally say?” John asked, his eyebrows furrowing.

Sherlock paused, looking to the side for a moment as he thought. “Piss off,” he answered after a couple seconds, looking back up at John, and he said it so calmly, so matter-of-factly, that John couldn’t help but laugh.

It started as a chuckle, puffs of mirth bursting up his chest, but quickly grew into the kind of laughter he hadn’t experienced in a long time, the type that made you shake and lift a hand to your mouth to cover your idiotic grin. Evidently, it was contagious, because Sherlock’s low chuckles soon joined him, and he looked down to find the boy laughing down at the table.

The chuckling evaporated into the air shortly thereafter, leaving him staring down at Sherlock, remnants of smiles left on both their faces. The silence quickly grew uncomfortable, however, and John cleared his throat, pushing off the table and taking a few steps toward the door.

“Well, a deal’s a deal,” he said, smiling back as Sherlock turned his chair, following his progress. He glanced over his shoulder, making sure he didn’t run into Mrs. Hudson as he walked backwards toward the door. “I’ll, er…see ya,” he added, lifting his hand in a weak wave he berated himself for immediately after.

He turned after that, momentarily taken aback by the glowing smile on Mrs. Hudson’s face as he made his way to move around her.

“John?”

He spun embarrassingly quickly at the voice, his eyebrows rising.

Sherlock was standing now, his mouth opening and closing, and a lump moved down the front of his
frail throat as he swallowed. “Do- Do you,” he stammered, pointing his thumb back toward his experiment. “Wanna see some more?” he asked, the words rushing out between his lips.

John looked at him, seeing him properly for the first time now that Sherlock was fully facing him.

He was tall, his legs long and thin in the black, school trousers, and his body was all edges and angles. His shirt was ruffled and only half-tucked, the other side draping down over his belt. The safety goggles were still perched on his nose, but his eyes pierced through them, wide and expectant, and John found himself unable to say anything but: “God, yes.”

Sherlock smiled, bright and mischievous, and John was returning it and walking back toward him before he was even aware of wanting to.

“What flavor ya gonna try next?” John asked excitedly as he drew level with Sherlock, who bounced into his chair and spun back to the table.

“I was going to do Cheese and Onion,” Sherlock said, picking up his tongs again, “but I think Paprika might be more impressive.” He looked up at John with a dangerous smirk.

“Definitely,” John replied, nodding eagerly as he took the extra pair of goggles Sherlock magically produced from nowhere. Hovering at his roommate’s shoulder, he leaned down to watch as the boy plucked through the pile of red-speckled crisps. He was dimly aware of the sound of a door closing behind them, signaling Mrs. Hudson’s exit, but the progress of Sherlock’s tongs toward the flame quickly drowned out any other thoughts.
John awoke the next morning with a distressed groan, rolling away from the window and tugging the blankets up over his eyes. He had been up far too late burning crisps with Sherlock, and his roommate had still been at it when John had turned in at 2am. Maybe Sherlock was lucky enough to not have double biology first thing in the morning, though.

With a reluctant sigh, he removed the blankets, squinting down at the alarm clock sitting on the desk at the foot of his bed. He sat bolt upright, tight panic surging through his chest as he double-checked the time.

“SHIT!”

He sprang out of bed, nearly falling all over himself as his legs tangled in the sheets. Embarrassed, he looked up to the bed across from him, but found it empty, and he scowled at the rumpled sheets his roommate had obviously vacated without waking him.

Grumbling irritably, he quickly dressed, rushing to the bathroom with only enough time to tame his hair and brush his teeth before heading to breakfast.

It was 8:40 when he burst into the dining hall from the grounds. His skin, chilled from the morning air, tingled slightly as he made his way to the breakfast tables, nipping a tray and a plate and beginning to pile on whatever was left. He reached the end of the line with an impressive assortment of the dregs of various dishes, and plucked an orange juice off the final, beverage table before turning his attention to the room.

People were milling around—mostly leaving, as classes started at 9—and John scanned through the crowd for a familiar face. Mike was nowhere to be seen, but a familiar head of dark curls stuck out at a table in the corner. His fingers tightened on the edges of his tray, his eyes narrowing as he stomped toward it.

Sherlock jumped as John slammed his tray down across from him, pale fingers nearly losing their grip on the book they were holding.

“You could’ve woken me, ya know,” John muttered, glaring as he stepped to the inside of the bench and sat down.

Sherlock merely stared at him, book hanging lax in his grip, his pale eyes wide with shock.

John’s hand stalled in delivering eggs to his mouth. “What?” he asked with a frown.

Sherlock opened his mouth, but quickly closed it again, his eyes narrowing as he searched John’s intently.

“What?” John asked again, irritable with hunger, but too uncomfortable to eat with the boy watching him like that.
“You’re going to sit here?” Sherlock said finally, his voice soft and careful.

“Yes,” John replied slowly, his eyebrows furrowing. “Is that okay?” he added, fighting the beginnings of a humiliating flush.

“I- I suppose so,” Sherlock muttered, his narrowed eyes still disconcertingly scanning John.

John sighed, giving up and lowering his fork. “Do you want me to move?”

Sherlock leaned back slightly, blinking in rapid succession and looking thoroughly nonplussed. “No,” he murmured after a moment.

“Okay,” John chirped, the cheerful tone edged with frustration. He began eating, focusing intently down at his plate so he didn’t have to know if Sherlock was still staring at him.

As John was chewing on a particularly stubborn piece of toast, he heard a faint rumbling of the low voice across the table, and quickly finished his crunching to look up.

“Sorry?” he asked, meeting the grey eyes that had already been looking at him.

Sherlock rolled his eyes. “I said,” he hissed, and John raised an eyebrow at the reaction, “no one ever sits with me.”

John blinked, uncertain how to react when the sentence sounded so sad but Sherlock looked unmoved. “Oh?” he murmured. “Why not?”

“Apparently I’m rather abrasive,” Sherlock answered, and though he didn’t say it with a hint of amusement, John laughed.

“Well, yeah, you are,” John chuckled, hastily continuing as Sherlock’s eyes flashed, “but you’re also kind of…brilliant, in a way.”

Sherlock tilted his head, his eyebrows furrowing, and John felt a twinge of embarrassment twist in his gut.

“I bet you’re loads of fun at parties,” he added with a faint chuckle, trying to diffuse the tension at his abrupt compliment.

“I wouldn’t know,” Sherlock answered with a shrug, returning to his book as if nothing had happened.

“Whadya mean? Do people not have parties here?” John said, gulping his orange juice.

“Oh, there are plenty of parties,” Sherlock said as he turned a page, not looking up, “I just haven’t been to one.”

“You’ve never been to a party?” John asked over the top of his almost-empty container, his eyes wide. A sinking feeling crept into his chest when Sherlock didn’t reply. “Have- Have you been… invited?” he dared slowly.

Sherlock’s fingers tightened slightly on the edges of his book, but his face remained impassable. “I’ve had ample opportunities to attend parties; I’ve just never found the idea of watching people descend into even further idiocy with the combination of alcohol and moronic music appealing,” he muttered, perfectly aloof.

John nodded, trying to hide his smirk by biting off a chunk of sausage.
“What?” Sherlock snapped, John’s sausage ruse apparently failing.

“What?” he said with a shrug, but he couldn’t push the smile from his lips. “It’s just, that’s what everyone who doesn’t get invited says.” He lifted his head, smirking as he ripped off a corner of toast with his teeth.

Sherlock’s jaw stiffened, his eyes narrowing minutely, and then he buried himself behind his book once again.

John shook his head at the black binding, his eyes grazing over his grumpy roommate.

He looked much the same as he had last night, in fact, his shirtsleeves still rumpled and rolled to his elbows, and John wondered briefly if he had even changed. He’d added the grey, cotton sweater vest that was required with the school uniform, but had neglected the royal blue tie, even going so far as to undo his top button.

Realizing he’d probably been staring too long, John dropped his face, chasing the last chunk of egg around his plate with the fork. “So, what A-levels are you taking?” he asked before popping it into his mouth.

“No idea,” Sherlock said as he dog-eared a page.

“No idea?” John repeated, tilting his head at the book still covering his roommate’s face. “How can you not know? Classes start in 10 minutes.”

Sherlock sighed, painfully put-upon and overdramatic, and snapped his book shut. He let it fall to the table from his hand and reached down to pull his book bag up from the floor, setting it on the bench beside him with a heavy thud. Without a word, he plucked a folded piece of paper from a front pocket, flicking it to John across the table.

John watched Sherlock return to his book, somehow finding the correct page again, before opening the paper. “Biology, chemistry, English literature, and music,” John recited, scanning down the columns of his schedule. “Sound about right?”

Sherlock merely shrugged, and John couldn’t help but smile at the perplexing boy.

He waited, but Sherlock remained silent, obliviously reading his book.

“And what A-levels are you taking, John? Because I’m polite and make follow-up inquiries about your life,” John said in the poshest accent he could manage, his head bobbing side-to-side.

Sherlock dipped his book just enough for his eyes to peer over the top. “That is the poorest imitation of me I have-”

“How thoughtful of you, Sherlock. Thank you for asking,” John interrupted, smiling brightly, and Sherlock scowled at him before going back to reading, but he did lower the book further to expose most of his face. “Biology, chemistry, and English literature,” John continued, watching Sherlock’s face carefully.

He blinked, just once, and his eyebrows shifted very slightly, but John couldn’t pin down quite what emotion that was.

“And then I have rugby a few evenings a week,” John added, still gleaning nothing from the boy’s lack-of-reaction.
Sherlock made a small sound of acknowledgement, and John frowned.

“Guess we’ll be seeing a lot of one another,” he said, realizing he would likely be carrying most conversations he ever had with Sherlock Holmes.

“Naturally,” Sherlock said, glancing up at him briefly. “We’re roommates.”

John searched his cold eyes, but couldn’t read what feelings, if any, Sherlock had on the matter of their cohabitation. “And you have almost all of your classes with me,” John added.

“That too,” he muttered, turning down the corner of another page.

John dropped his fork onto his plate, the resulting clatter causing Sherlock to look up and meet John’s glaring, blue eyes. “Am I bothering you?” John snapped, but he couldn’t entirely keep the self-consciousness out of his voice. He thought they’d got on rather well the previous evening, and couldn’t fathom this sudden shift to indifference.

Sherlock shrugged, but there was nothing uncertain about his gaze, cold and calculating. “No more than everyone else does,” he answered easily.

John recoiled, but only a little, the majority of his dignity remaining intact. “Right,” he snapped, collecting his plate onto the tray and disentangling himself from the table. “Sorry I interrupted your reading. See you in biology.” He turned away, a dark pride swelling in his chest at the venom in those parting words, but Sherlock called after him and ruined his exit.

“John,” he said, his voice just loud enough to carry to John’s ears.

John turned, albeit begrudgingly, trying to display all his exasperation on his face.

Sherlock looked uncomfortable, which John had to admit was nice, and his fingers tapped in a nervous rhythm on the sides of his book. “I… I sit in the back of biology,” he shot out rapidly, as if the words were torture he wanted to get over with as quickly as possible. “Mr. Calvin spits,” he added with a grimace.

John’s anger ebbed, one corner of his mouth twitching up in a smile. “Better hurry, then, if ya wanna get a seat out of the splash zone.”

An amused huff hissed through Sherlock’s nose as he smiled, but he did close his book and shove it into his bag.

John waited a moment for him to catch up, and they walked together to the rubbish bins, where John cleared his tray and deposited the plates and flatware in the appropriate spots.

“This way,” Sherlock said as they reached the hallway, giving the strap of John’s shoulder bag a guiding tug to the right.

It should have been patronizing, but it wasn’t somehow, and John merely hitched the strap back up higher onto his shoulder and followed.

The room Sherlock led them to was airy and bright, wide windows stretching across the right wall. There were several long, high tables set up in rows, wooden stools sitting behind them, and roughly a dozen students were already perched around the room. It may have just been first-day nerves playing with his imagination, but the room seemed to quiet dramatically as they entered, and he could feel eyes tracking their progress to the back of the room.
“Morning!” Mike said brightly from the back, corner table as they approached. He shifted his books to the side, and Sherlock took the stool behind the empty space, causing John to look between them curiously.

“Mike and I had biology together in this room last year,” Sherlock said, not looking up as he tossed his bag on the table and began pulling out reams of paper, and John thought for a moment if he had wondered aloud.

“Oh,” he murmured, and made to walk behind Sherlock to take the stool on the opposite side of Mike.

The taller boy gripped his arm suddenly, displaying a shocking amount of strength in those thin limbs, and spun him around, pushing the stool beside him out with a foot before pulling John down onto it.

“Oh, what are you-”

“Shh!” Sherlock hissed, interrupting John’s protest, but John’s indignant retort was cut short by a voice behind him.

“Oh, hello.”

He turned to find a petite girl looking down at him, her auburn hair grazing across her shoulders as her brown eyes widened.

She glanced between John and Sherlock, disappointment flickering across her face, and John instinctively knew he was sitting in her usual spot.

He opened his mouth to offer to move, shifting slightly on his stool to rise when a foot came down hard and heavy on his own, pinning him to the floor. It was only years of family dinners spent fighting under the table with Harry that kept him from crying out. He glanced very briefly at Sherlock, his eyes narrowing in silent question, and the boy shot him a subtle shake of his head. One of John’s eyebrows rose, a dozen thoughts condensed into a single second. Ex-girlfriend? Want-to-be-next-girlfriend? Either way, Sherlock obviously didn’t want her sitting by him, and John supposed he could do the guy a solid.

“I-I don’t think we’ve met. Are you new to Langley?” she asked, apparently not noticing the exchange.

“Yeah, just transferred this year,” he answered, turning toward her more fully. “John Watson,” he said, smiling up at her as he offered his hand.

She took it, albeit with a very tentative grip. “Molly Hooper,” she replied, smiling brightly before pulling her hand back. Her eyes widened suddenly, her mouth dropping open. “Oooh, you must be Sherlock’s roommate!” she said somewhat breathlessly, her eyes sparkling with excitement. “He was compla-” – a sharp cough burst at John’s back- “saying he would have one this year,” she amended quickly, smiling shyly as she shifted her weight.

“Really?” John said, keeping his tone even, but he pushed up against the sole of Sherlock’s shoe pointedly. “Did he not have one last year?”

“No, he had a lot.”

“Molly,” Sherlock interjected sharply, and the girl bit her lip and flushed as John laughed.
“What did you do?” he chuckled, turning to Sherlock over his shoulder.

“Nothing,” he muttered defensively, and John would’ve believed the innocent expression on anyone else’s face. With Sherlock, however, he only narrowed his eyes.

Sherlock sighed in that dramatic way John was starting to realize was a habit, his curls bouncing as his shoulders sagged. “There were a few, small fires,” he mumbled down at the table.

“A few fires?!” John repeated, his voice shaking with laughter.

“Small ones!” Sherlock bleated, as if that nullified the point, and John was in danger of falling off his stool.

“Remind me not to leave you in the dormitory alone,” he chuckled, shaking his head.

“Are you likely to forget?” Sherlock taunted dryly, and John sneered at him.

“I’d tell you two to get a room,” Mike interrupted, and John’s eyes shifted to him as Sherlock turned around, “but you’ve already got one.”

John chuckled, rolling his eyes at his friend’s smirk, but he stopped abruptly as he caught sight of Sherlock’s face.

His body had stiffened, his shoulders lifting as they tightened, and his lips pressed tight as something burned across his eyes.

John blinked and it was gone, Sherlock sitting in front of him looking thoroughly unaffected, and he would have let it go as a trick of the light had it not roused an angry suspicion within him. His eyes narrowed as he surveyed Sherlock’s profile, and the boy turned toward him at that moment, as intently as if John had called him.

Pale eyes, more green than grey in this light, focused in on him, and John could feel himself being read.

He looked away, this not being the time or place to have that conversation, even if Sherlock was able to figure out what it was, and turned back to Molly, who was hovering awkwardly on the fringes of their discussion.

“Would you like to sit down?” John asked, gesturing to the two stools left empty in front of him.

“Yeah, sure,” Molly said, beaming as she settled onto the stool beside John.

“So, what other A-levels are you taking?” John asked, not wanting to leave Molly out, even though he could sense Sherlock still staring at the back of his head.

“Chemistry, history, and English lit,” she replied, smiling softly as she pulled a green notebook from her backpack. “How about you?”

The corner of John’s mouth twitched, and he could practically feel Sherlock recognizing the familiarity of the discussion behind him. “Chemistry and English lit,” he answered.

“I suppose I’ll see you quite often, then,” she said brightly.

His eye twitched. “Guess so,” he replied, barely containing his smirk to polite-smile levels.

~~~~~
“I’ve offended you.”

“Most people start with ‘Hi’,” John replied, his eyebrows furrowing as he watched Sherlock sink cross-legged onto the grass in front of him.

“Why?” Sherlock continued, his fingers steepling under his chin as he balanced his elbows on his knees.

“Because it’s friendlier?” John answered hesitantly, his eyebrow quirking.

“No, not that,” Sherlock snapped, disentangling his fingers to swat a hand through the air. “Why are you offended?”

“I don’t know what you’re-”

“Yes you do,” Sherlock interjected, not angry or frustrated, just certain.

John flattened his lips, his jaw stiffening. “Fine,” John muttered, whistling shut the biology book he had been reading. “Why did you get all weird when Mike said that thing about us getting a room?”


John lifted his eyebrows, but did nothing else, not rising to the obvious goading.

Sherlock leaned forward, his hands returning to their steepled position as his face contorted into the familiar, searching expression.

After a few seconds, he blinked, the tension around his eyes loosening. “You’re worried I have homophobic tendencies,” he stated.

There was no room for a question in it, and it was correct anyway, so John remained silent and waited.

“But why?” Sherlock mused, more to himself it seemed. “You’re clearly attracted to women, so the offense can’t be personal. Mike is your best friend, the only other acquaintance you’re likely to be so protective of, and he’s also straight. A family member?”

John wasn’t aware his face shifted at all, but the flutter in his chest must have shown somehow because Sherlock nodded.

“Family member.” It was not a question that time. “Your sister,” he added moments later, and that wasn’t a question either.

John looked down to the closed cover of his textbook, rocking as he shifted side-to-side on the grass.

There was a long moment of silence, John tracing patterns in the grass with the capped end of his pen.

“It wasn’t about that,” Sherlock said softly.

John stopped his movements in the grass, staring down at his hands for a moment before looking up. “What was it, then?”

Sherlock blinked back at him, his eyebrows furrowing thoughtfully as he dropped his head. “I…I don’t know,” he murmured, plucking at the blades of grass in front of him.
John frowned as he watched him, his fingers looking even paler against the bright green.

When it became clear that Sherlock wasn’t going to elaborate, and John began to genuinely worry about how seriously the boy was staring at the ground, his eyes flitting back-and-forth frantically, he cleared his throat.

Sherlock snapped his head up, his eyes wide and startled, as if he had forgotten he was in a conversation, but he quickly regained that cold, impassive expression.

“Do you know where the rugby pitch is?” he asked, tilting his head. “I’ve got tryouts later.”

“Boring,” Sherlock muttered, flicking a hand in the air, a few loose strips of grass fluttering off his fingers into the wind.

John snapped his head back, his lips parting in shock. “Sorry?” he said, affronted.

“Oh, come now, John,” Sherlock said with the tiresome tone of trying to communicate with a toddler, “surely you don’t have to go through something as tedious as tryouts. You’re obviously going to make the team.”

John was grateful for the fact that Sherlock was looking away, as he could feel heat in his cheeks. He hadn’t known the boy very long, but he was still fairly certain that a compliment from Sherlock Holmes was not easily won. “Yeah, well, everyone has to tryout,” he murmured, twisting his fingers together in his lap. “So, do you know where it is?” he asked again, swallowing his embarrassment.

“Weren’t you supposed to go on some sort of tour to get that information?” Sherlock answered, the teasing glint in his eyes the only thing keeping it from being condescending.

John’s mouth curled up into a half-smile, but he pushed it away to sigh dejectedly. “I was going to,” he said, as if missing out on the tour was one of the greatest regrets of his life, “but then I got a bit worried about leaving my roommate alone with a Bunsen burner.”

“Small fires, John, small,” Sherlock stressed, but the light smile robbed his tone of animosity. He shook his head, sweeping to his feet as he rolled his eyes, and then began walking back up the grassy slope.

“Where are you-”

“Do you want to see the pitch, or not?” he called over his shoulder, sliding his hands into the pockets of his black trousers as he retreated.

John stared after him for a moment before hastily tossing his books back into his bag and scrambling up the hill, his movements infinitely less graceful than Sherlock’s long strides.

“Hey, slow down a bit!” he shouted as he stumbled uphill on a patch of slick grass.

“Why?” Sherlock barked, not breaking his rhythm.

“Well, you don’t have anywhere to be, do you?” John snapped back, only having to raise his voice a little as he drew closer.

“No,” Sherlock answered, still making John take two steps to every one of his.

“Then what’s the rush?” he asked, looking across and smiling up at the boy’s face as he finally drew level.
Sherlock gave him a curious look, but did slow his gait to a more reasonable pace.

“So,” John mused into the silence, casting around his brain for something worthwhile to say, “Molly seems nice.”

Sherlock made an agreeable sort of humming sound.

“So does that imply she likes you?” John added, hoping Sherlock would catch his direction and spare him from asking.

He merely hummed again, but it sounded less agreeable.

“Got a lot of classes together, too.”

“Is that so?” Sherlock interjected as he stopped with a jolt. “If you want to know the nature of my relationship with Molly, I would really rather you just ask and save us both the tiresome lead up.”

John blinked at him, closing his mouth as he realized it was open. “Oh, well…alright then,” he mumbled, moving again as Sherlock continued walking. “Is she your girlfriend? Or ex-girlfriend?”

Sherlock snorted, shaking his head at the horizon. “No,” he said pointedly. “Girlfriends are…not really my area.”

John nodded, and then their earlier conversation drifted into his mind. “Oh,” he muttered, not entirely comfortable voicing his wonderings, but Sherlock seemed the type to prefer to get these sorts of things out in the open. “Boyfriends, then?” he asked, trying to remain as casual as possible, but it was ruined as Sherlock raised an eyebrow at him. “Which is fine, by the-”

“I know it’s fine,” Sherlock interjected curtly, looking forward again.

“Right,” John said, his voice high and clipped. “So…you’ve got a boyfriend, then?”

“No,” Sherlock answered calmly, and…was that a smirk?

“Right,” John said, his voice still strangled, and he winced at how terribly awkward he sounded. He whipped around as he heard a low chuckle to his left.

“My work doesn’t leave much time for…relationships,” Sherlock explained carefully.

John nodded, no longer trusting himself to speak without further adding to his humiliation. Sherlock’s response didn’t exactly answer all of his questions, but he’d already overstepped about a hundred boundaries, so he could figure the rest of it out another day. There was one thing he just couldn’t let go, however. “Your work?” he asked, twisting toward Sherlock as they walked along the concrete footpath. “Like…burning crisps?”

Sherlock shot him a glare, but it weakened as John just smiled back. “Not just burning crisps,” he said defensively. “I conduct all sorts of experiments.” He glanced over before sighing tiredly and continuing, albeit in a more subdued tone. “I occasionally assist the police with investigations.”

“The police?” John repeated, completely thrown by this turn of events.

“Mostly the Met,” Sherlock elaborated with a shrug. “Whenever they’re out of their depth, which is always, they come to me.”

“Oh,” John said, wondering and then immediately dismissing the possibility that he was being had on. Somehow, it was entirely believable coming from Sherlock. “So you’re kind of like a…private
detective?"

“God, no,” Sherlock said breathlessly, shaking his head in earnest. “I’m a consulting detective. Only one in the world. I invented the job,” he added with a brilliant flash of a proud smile.

John found his mouth caught up in the contagiousness of it. “So what does a consulting detective do exactly?”

“I look over the evidence and lend my particular brand of expertise,” Sherlock replied, as if it were perfectly normal for 17-year-olds to weigh in on police business.

“You walk in and tell everyone what they had for lunch?” John teased, smirking up him.

Sherlock laughed in a single, loud burst before it faded into his usual chuckle. “Sometimes,” he said with a shrug, and John grinned, no doubt in his mind that that happened. “There,” Sherlock continued, his voice suddenly official, and John followed his outstretched arm in the direction it was pointing.

From their spot on the hill, he could just see over the stands to the pitch that lay in the center. It wasn’t quite as elaborate as some of the professional stadiums he’d been to, but there were certainly a lot of seats. He felt a rush of panic flood through him, but it immediately stilled, the familiarity of seeing a rugby pitch calming his fear over how many people would be watching.

“You have a sentimental attachment to rugby,” Sherlock stated, and John wasn’t sure if it was a good or a bad thing that he was getting used to it.

“I like it, yeah,” John answered, a warm breeze drifting up the hill and ruffling his straw hair against his ears.

“I don’t mean like that,” Sherlock snapped, but some of the chill was out of it. “It has something to do with your father.”

John’s body barreled ahead of his mind, ignoring the pleas not to betray him, and he could feel his muscles tightening, his heart pounding, his breath stopping, and his throat closing as he forced a hard swallow through it.

“He died. Within the past year.”

John dropped his head, swallowing again.

“But that’s not why it bothers you.”

John lifted his head at that, startled by the tone of Sherlock’s voice, and the gaze that met him was no less unexpected.

Sherlock’s eyes were more blue than green now, but the same steely, silver undertones flickered beneath the color. There was nothing accusing about that gaze, nothing surprised or alarmed, just the calm that comes with knowing.

“Yeah, well,” John said softly as he turned back to the pitch, surprised at how easily something he’d never admitted before came out, “he left long before that.”

They settled into silence, John slipping his hands in his pockets as he gazed out over the sloping lawn. He could feel Sherlock’s eyes on him, but found he didn’t really mind all that much.
“My father died when I was 11.”

John turned to find Sherlock a little closer than he had been, that same calm, omniscient look in his eyes, but he was looking off at the horizon now.

“I- I’m sorry,” John murmured up at him.

“No, that’s my point,” Sherlock said sharply, turning those piercing eyes on him once more. “You don’t have to be.” It was quiet, almost a whisper, and John would swear his eyes turned even bluer as he spoke. Then, in a rustle of clothing, he was gone, leaving John staring at the empty expanse of sky the absence of his dark curls revealed.

John turned, watching Sherlock heading back down the path the way they had come, his thin arms bending as he slid his hands into his pockets. Frozen to the ground, John stared after him, marveling at how such a person could possibly exist, and how anyone could find it unpleasant that he did.

“I’m not slowing down,” Sherlock’s petulant baritone called.

John shook his head, smirking at his roommate’s retreating back for a moment before hurrying after him, resolving that, if Sherlock wasn’t going to slow down, he’d just have to learn to keep up.

~~~~~

He hadn’t exactly made plans to have lunch with Sherlock—and by not exactly, he meant there hadn’t been any discussion whatsoever—but he was nevertheless disappointed when the boy never appeared in the dining hall. Without meaning to, he realized he was nearly completely tuned out to the conversation between Mike and some of the other rugby guys, his eyes always absentmindedly drifting to the door.

Before he knew it, the room was emptying, and he looked up at the clock, startled to find it was 2:00 already.

“Hey, Mike?” John asked as they walked toward the door. “You don’t have English literature right now, do you?”

“Not me, mate,” Mike chuckled. “Not really my forte. What room is it in again?”

John smiled as he pulled out his schedule, relieved Mike had figured out he didn’t know the way without him having to ask.

“209,” Mike said, folding the paper back up and handing it to John. “You just go up these stairs here, yeah? Second or third door on your right. Can’t remember which, but there’s numbers on them.”

“Right,” John answered, trying to sound confident, “cheers. See ya at tryouts!” He threw Mike a quick wave, which was returned with a smile, and headed up the stairs.

Surprisingly, Mike’s directions had been spot-on, and he filed into the classroom before most of the other students. He saw a flurry of movement in the far, left corner, and turned to see Molly waving him over. He smiled, twisting his body and holding his shoulder bag in front of him as he slid sidelong down the aisle toward her.

The seat in front of Molly had a backpack sitting beside it, as well as a yellow notebook and pencil already on the surface, so John sat on the left of that desk, leaving the seat behind him—and next to Molly—free for Sherlock.
“Hello again,” she greeted him happily, a bright smile spreading across her face. Really, she was quite pretty. Not his type, but pretty.

“Hey,” he replied, beaming back. “So have you had any of your other classes yet? Although, I suppose history is the only one we’re not in together,” he added with a chuckle.

She giggled lightly. “Yes, I had a single of history just before lunch. Kinda hard to concentrate though,” she added, her face wrinkling as she turned thoughtful.

“Oh?” John prompted.

“Well, music is that hour, and they’re just down the hall,” she explained with a shrug, and then returned to writing something in her planner, but John’s curiosity was piqued.

“Sherlock’s in music, isn’t he?” he asked off-handedly.

Molly looked back up, slightly confused, but nodded.

“What does he play, anyway?”

She opened her mouth to reply, but they were interrupted as someone flounced down into the seat in front of her.

“Sorry,” the girl muttered, smoothing her pleated, black skirt over her legs. She said something else too, tossing the comment over her shoulder to Molly, but John’s ears seemed to have stopped working.

She was wearing the same girls’ uniform as Molly (long-sleeved, white shirt, blue tie, black skirt, low, white socks, and low-heeled black shoes) but it somehow didn’t look like a uniform on her. Her hair was long and blond, twisted into a plait down her back and tied with a blue ribbon. A few stray pieces had come loose around her face, framing her blue eyes with wisps of gold.

“John,” Molly’s voice said from somewhere a thousand meters below him, and he dropped unceremoniously back to reality to find her struggling not to smirk at him. “This is my friend, Mary.”

“Mary Morstan,” the girl offered, reaching a hand toward him.

He took it—god, her skin was soft—and smiled, hoping it didn’t look as dopey as he felt. “John Watson.”

She smiled at him and nodded, retracting her hand to pull the class’ textbook out of her bag.

He stared at her a moment longer, not quite ready to look away, when a sharp pain in his shoulder caused him to whip around.

“Ah!” he hissed, gripping at the pained skin.

Sherlock grunted in what might have been an apology—but John doubted it—as he collapsed into the desk behind him, making an unnecessary amount of commotion.

John scanned him, noticing he no longer had his bag with him, and was just about to ask what the bloody hell he’d hit him with then when there was a commanding cough from the front of the room.

“Afternoon, everyone!” the man said, smiling far-too-cheerfully at them. He was younger than most of the professors, probably in his earlier thirties, and wearing navy trousers with a simple, grey-checkered shirt. His tie was a slightly paler shade of blue than the students’, and was pinned to his
shirt with a polished, silver tiepin. “As most of you know, my name is Mr. Tyson. Although, I do see we have some new faces in here today,” he added, smiling pointedly at John, who smiled back in spite of wanting the ground to swallow him. “What we’re going to do today is go over the reading schedule and assignment sheet I’ll be handing out—he brandished a stack of papers in his hand—“so you know what’s expected of you, as well as the due dates so you can start planning ahead.”

There was a mumbled exchange around the room, in which nothing was individually intelligible, but there was a definitive “As if” tone to it.

“As you can see, we will be studying six texts in total this year,” Mr. Tyson continued as the papers made their way around the room. “Three of these will be the basis for the written examination you will be taking at the end of this year. The theme for this year is satire, so we will all be studying *The Vanity of Human Wishes*, *Gulliver’s Travels*, and *Candide*. There will be periodic quizzes throughout the year as we work through these texts, so make sure to keep up.”

The pile of papers got to John, and he plucked one of each before passing them over his shoulder to Sherlock, who snatched them so quickly, John had to bite back a curse at the paper cut singeing the draped skin between his thumb and palm. He glared over his shoulder, but Sherlock seemed not to notice, so he focused on reading along.

“The next portion of your assessment is an extended essay, and here you get a little more freedom in your reading.”

There was an appreciative murmur around the room.

“We will all be reading Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*”—a collective groan from the smaller, male percentage of the class—“but you may choose any two of the works in the list below to write your final essay. The goal will be to find and explore a theme that connects the three works, but it shouldn’t be difficult to draw connections between the options I’ve given you.” He walked back to sit on the corner of the large desk at the front of the room, perching on the edge as he held his copy of the sheet in front of him. “You will be working on this essay throughout the course of the year, and periodically required to meet with me to go over and improve your drafts.”

More groaning accompanied this, and John was beginning to sweat a little around his collar. And he’d thought he would be over his head in chemistry!

“Because we will all be studying *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* together, there will be a separate, group”—Sherlock made a nauseous sound behind him—“assignment due next term that will help ensure we all have a firm grasp of the material. I will split you into groups”—was Sherlock actually throwing up back there?—“and assign each group a key scene from the play. You will perform your scenes in front of the class”—it was too quiet, Sherlock must have died—“and receive a grade based on my assessment, as well as your group evaluations.”

John could feel something rattling the back, right leg of his desk, and surreptitiously glanced down beneath his arm to see Sherlock’s black, polished shoe tapping rapidly against the metal.

“Are there any questions so far?”

John felt a rush of air pass across his neck, and Mr. Tyson’s gaze flicked in his direction. John hadn’t thought a sigh could be a facial expression until he watched the tired resignation pass across the man’s features.

“Holmes?” Mr. Tyson said tonelessly.
There was a thud as Sherlock’s arm must have come back down onto the desk. “Can I do a soliloquy?”

John snorted, barely covering it as a cough at the end, but his hand hovered over his mouth until he was absolutely sure the grin was gone.

“No, Holmes, you can’t,” Mr. Tyson sighed, the eye roll audible. “You’ll be put into a group just like everyone else,” he said, dropping his head again as he switched pages.

There was a loud huff, and John’s desk rattled with the impact of Sherlock’s feet landing heavily on the legs.

He turned to glance over his shoulder, a smirk still tugging at his lips.

Sherlock was leaning back in his seat, half-exposed arms crossed over his chest, and an irritable, haughty expression on his face as he fixed Mr. Tyson with a glare. Noticing John turn, his eyes shifted, his head tilting and eyebrows furrowing in an unspoken ‘What?’

John smiled and shrugged back a ‘Nothing’, and Sherlock looked even more confused for a moment before smiling hesitantly in return. Turning back to the front as Mr. Tyson rattled off the different percentages each assignment would weigh into their grade, John let his mind wander, not seeing the point in listening to something he could just read for himself later. The next important thing that caught his attention was the command for everyone to pull out the copy of The Vanity of Human Wishes they had been required to print out before the first class. He reached down, flipping back the top of his messenger bag, but his fingers stalled as he surveyed the contents. Twisting so he could stretch both arms down into the bag, he pulled out two, identical packets, turning them over in his hands as his eyebrows furrowed. One of the packets was suddenly snatched out of his hand, and he twisted back to find Sherlock opening it and flipping through the pages.

“Is that yours?” John asked, pointing back with his now-free hand.

“Obviously,” Sherlock muttered, not looking up.

“Why is it in my bag?”

“Because I put it there.”

“Okay, but why?” John pressed, lowering his voice as the rustling of backpacks and pages began to die down.

Sherlock lifted his gaze, sighing noisily through his nose. “Mr. Tyson never does anything requiring actual work on the first day, so I knew all I would need is this, and you were already carrying around a perfectly good book bag without me lugging one as well.”

John tilted his head at him, his forehead wrinkling in irritation. “When did you even-”

“Problem, Watson?”

John spun in his seat as Mr. Tyson’s brown eyes narrowed accusingly, but they seemed to be looking over his shoulder rather than at him. “No, sir,” John answered firmly, feeling the insta-blush of embarrassment rising up his neck.

Mr. Tyson blinked, clearly surprised, and his glance flickered between John and Sherlock for a moment before he cleared his throat. “Alright, well…eyes front.”
John nodded, and then buried his face in his poem, begging his heart to slow down.

It didn’t, of course, because Mr. Tyson began reading, and it didn’t sound like English at all. They then began an analysis of the first stanza, and John dove into his bag for a mechanical pencil to jot down the translation. His hand bumped into a larger, paler one, and he snapped his fingers back just as Sherlock’s pulled away.

He waggled his fingers, one of John’s pencils rattling between them, and smirked with a smug twitch of his eyebrows.

John tried to shake his head disapprovingly, but the corner of his mouth lifted in mutiny, so he merely dropped his eyes and grabbed another pencil. Turning back to scratch frantically along the margins of his page, he added a mental bullet point to the list he was quickly compiling on Sherlock Holmes: No sense of personal boundaries. Somehow, John found he didn’t really mind.

The rest of English passed in a blur, and so did Sherlock as soon as Mr. Tyson dismissed them, John’s hair actually ruffling in the air he displaced. Packing his things away, he noticed that Sherlock had placed his pencil and poem back in John’s bag, and John smiled at that, in spite of being a little creeped out Sherlock had managed to do it without him noticing.

“You’re new here, right?”

John whipped his head around as he stood up, lifting his bag up onto his shoulder.

Mary smiled at him, waiting for an answer, and John completely forgot the question as he watched her rosy lips curl over her teeth.

“Sorry?” he murmured, his tongue flopping useless within his desert mouth.

She chuckled, moving across the aisle so only his desk separated them. “I asked if you were new here,” she repeated, a little louder this time.

“Oh, yeah,” he said, swallowing thickly as he adjusted his bag on his shoulder. “Just transferred in this year.” He smiled stiffly, mentally kicking himself. Of course he just transferred in this year, that was the whole point of being new, idiot!

Mary either didn’t notice the redundancy or let it go. “Oh, cool,” she said, and began moving up toward the door, John following on the opposite side of the desks. “We don’t get many transfer students halfway through like that. What are you going through for?”

“Medicine, ultimately,” John replied, reaching the front of the room and stopping to allow Mary through the door first.

“Oh, really?” She turned to him, smiling with genuine interest as they walked down the corridor toward the stairs. “What specialty?”

“I’m thinking critical care or trauma,” he answered, impressed when she didn’t look perplexed, “but I have to get through all the undergrad stuff first.”

Mary chuckled, dropping her eyes to her shoes as they progressed down the stairs.

“What about you?” John said after a beat, his nerves meddling with his manners.

“Teaching,” she answered, beaming up at him as they rounded the landing, and his heart somersaulted.
“Oh?” he inquired, getting, if possible, more embarrassed at the strangled sound of his voice. “What subject?”

“Well, I’d like to teach primary school,” she said, her hand slipping off the railing as they reached the bottom of the stairs, “so I’ll have to know everything.” She laughed and veered down a corridor to the left, and John followed her even though he had to go the opposite direction.

“And I thought being a doctor would be hard,” he muttered, and she laughed again.

“I’m sure being a doctor is much more difficult that being a teacher,” she said, smiling encouragingly at him. “Certainly more important.”

“I wouldn’t say that,” he replied, looking across at her with a slight frown. “I mean, we couldn’t have doctors—or anything, really- without teachers, right? So, really, it’s the most important job.”

She smiled, dropping her gaze as her cheeks turned rosy. “Well…thank you,” she answered softly, shooting fleeting glances up from under her lashes.

John was no doctor yet, but he was pretty sure his heart had just doubled in size, pressing warm against his lungs. “You’re welcome,” he said, internally patting himself on the back for how even it sounded.

She stopped outside an open door, shifting to the side so other students could enter behind her. “Well, I’ve gotta go,” she said, waving her hand back toward the room. “Maths,” she added with a grimace.

John chuckled, looking over her shoulder to take in the grim expressions of the students already seated inside. “Well, you’re welcome to that,” he chuckled.

She let out a small laugh, glancing down at the floor between them for a moment before her blue eyes met his again. “I’ll, er…see you around?” she said, her eyebrows lifting a bit as she turned halfway back toward the door.

“Sure,” he answered with a nod. A casual nod.

“Great,” she chirped, smiling brightly. “Well…bye, John,” she added, flipping her hand up in a short wave as she took a step inside the classroom.

“Yeah, see you…Mary,” he fumbled, imitating her farewell gesture, but it just looked stupid on his limbs.

She flashed him one last smile before turning away and disappearing down a row of desks.

John walked away from the doorway, no idea where he was going, but he didn’t want to look creepy and hover. The tightness in his chest eased as he walked back the way they had come, returning to the familiar territory of the stairs, and a kind of lightness replaced it. The smell of Mary’s perfume lingered in his nose—all flowers and fruit—and he smiled to himself, quickly stifling it so as not to look insane.

He made his way back to the courtyard, following the patterned, brick footpaths back to Kingsley House. Walking through the corridors toward his room—which he was beginning to suspect was tucked away in a corner for a very specific, curly-haired reason—he noticed several pairs of eyes lingering on him. He was willing to chalk it up to paranoia, until he passed the common room and a few people actually tapped their fellow students on the shoulder and pointed. He was right there; what, they didn’t think he had eyes!? He stared determinedly back, defying them even though he had
no idea what the problem was, and their gazes gradually fell back to their games or books. Shaking
his head, perplexed, he rounded the corner into what amounted to their own, private corridor. He
paused outside the closed door of the room, his hand poised to knock, but a sound from behind him
drew his attention. Smiling, he turned, stepping across the hall to knock on the “DANGER” door.

“You don’t have to knock, John; I’ll always know it’s you.”

“How?” he chuckled as he opened the door, half amused, half awed.

“Even if I couldn’t recognize your footsteps by pressure and gait,” Sherlock muttered, “who else
would come down here?”

“Fair enough,” John smiled, shrugging, but his face quickly fell as he surveyed the room. “What are
you doing?”

“What does it look like?” Sherlock snapped, gesturing to the spray of photographs surrounding him
where he sat cross-legged on the floor.

“Er…” John mused, eyes grazing over the scene, “séance?”

Sherlock lifted his head to give him a withering look. “Really, John, I hardly want to talk to
living people, let alone dead ones.”

John barked a laugh, and Sherlock weakly smiled before turning back to his sea of photos, eyebrows
furrowing in deep thought. “Seriously, though, what are you doing?” he repeated, bending to peer
down at the pictures.

Bright images of innocuous objects looked up at him, angle upon angle of chairs, couches,
bookcases, desks, and-

“Is that a body?!” John exclaimed, pointing at an image on the opposite edge of the semi-circle,
which showed a man who looked very much not-alive propped up against what appeared to be a
brick, alley wall.

“Obviously,” Sherlock muttered, but John couldn’t care less if he was bothering him.

“Why do you have a picture of a dead body?!” he shouted, and then looked frantically back toward
the door.

“Interesting,” Sherlock murmured, and John turned back to find he was now the subject of that
calculating gaze. “You’re obviously concerned why I have pictures of a murder scene, but you’re
also concerned about your shouting getting me caught with said pictures.” He tilted his head slightly,
his eyebrows furrowing with a flash of silver. “Why would you care, John?”

“I-I don’t know, I-“ John faltered, his mind catching up, and he looked at Sherlock with renewed
this one of those cases you were talking about?”

Sherlock, as impossible as John would have thought it, positively lit up, a wide smile spreading
across his pale face. “Yes. Fascinating, isn’t it?” he said with breathless excitement, looking back
down at the stills. “The man’s body was found in an alley, apparent mugging victim. Blunt force
trauma, wallet gone, watch stolen. It all fits.”

“Okay,” John said slowly, scanning for a path into the room, but opting to just crouch where he was
so as not to disturb anything. “But, if it’s a mugging, why all this?” He gestured vaguely to the
pictures near him, which displayed the luxurious interior of what looked to be a home office.

“Because he was killed here!” Sherlock growled with such veracity, John involuntarily leaned back to allow his conviction more room.

John searched the photographs, but they all appeared to be normal, nothing out of place and everything in pristine condition. “It doesn’t look like it,” he murmured.

“Well, of course you wouldn’t see it,” Sherlock dismissed with a flick of his hand.

“How?” John bristled, his back straightening.

“Because you’re an idiot,” Sherlock snapped in that same, stop-bothering-me-with-obvious-questions tone.

John’s mouth dropped, his eyes narrowing sharply.

“No, no, no, don’t be like that. Practically everyone is,” Sherlock muttered, shaking his head with a quick glance up.

Taking that as an apology (when translated from Sherlockese, at least), John closed his mouth and returned to searching through the photographs, but still couldn’t find anything amiss. “Show me, then,” he said.

Sherlock looked up abruptly, clearly shocked, but the surprise quickly gave way to narrow-eyed suspicion.

“I’m serious,” John assured, nodding emphatically. “Show me what it is you see here,” he continued, sweeping a hand over the pictures. “Maybe I can help.”

Sherlock looked dumbstruck, immobile except for the rapid blinking of his eyes. His eyes twitched minutely, and John looked firmly back, not wanting to convey any doubt in the expression he knew was being read. After a moment, Sherlock relaxed, a tiny quirk gracing a corner of his mouth, and then began plucking seemingly random photos from the spread.

“There,” he said, thrusting a handful of them in John’s direction. “What do you see?”

John looked up doubtfully, but Sherlock nodded him on, and he began slowly flipping through the series of pictures. “It’s an office,” he fired off, not entirely sure what he was supposed to be looking for.

“Perfectly sound assessment, but I was hoping you’d go deeper.”

John snapped his head up with a glare, but Sherlock merely smirked and bobbed his head to encourage him to continue.

“It’s…clean,” John said, a curl of suspicion creeping into his brain. He pulled the photograph he had flipped to closer to his face, narrowing his eyes in focus. “Very clean,” he added, more certain now. “Even that picture frame looks polished.” He looked up to see Sherlock smiling, and a glow of accomplishment bloomed in his chest.

“Very good, John,” Sherlock said, actually sounding vaguely impressed. He held out his hand, and John handed that photograph back to him. “The room is immaculate, which wouldn’t be surprising, as the owner of this house is obviously perfectly capable of hiring a cleaning staff. Which they did, I checked,” he threw in as an aside, and John considered asking before realizing he didn’t want to
“However,” he continued, a conspiratorial glint in his eye, “the lady of the house was kind enough to give the staff a long weekend off. At the time this picture was taken, Sunday afternoon, no one had been in to clean the house since Thursday.”

“Well, maybe they just didn’t use that room much,” John speculated, but Sherlock shook his head.

“Her husband, and our victim”—John suppressed the urge to smile at the plural—“worked from home that weekend, and his office confirmed he took several conference calls with overseas clients. Up until Saturday evening, of course, when he was murdered,” Sherlock added with a casual shrug, as if to say ‘So it goes’.

“Maybe he was just clean,” John said.

Sherlock shook his head again. “The housekeeper said he always made quite a mess on the days he worked from home. Heavy smoker—the whole room reeked of cigars—and he was apparently quite fond of that practice of attempting to throw rubbish into the bin from long distances.” He sighed and rolled his eyes, as if the stupidity of humanity was far beyond and beneath his capacity to understand, and John stifled a smirk.

“His wife could’ve-“ John started, but Sherlock cut him off with a snort.

“She’s not the cleaning type,” he said with a shake of his head. “You’d agree if you met her,” he added with his usual certainty, and John couldn’t help but entirely believe it.

It grew silent, John having run out of suggestions to get shot down, so he returned to turning through the remaining photographs in his hands.

“What else?” Sherlock said, rolling his hands in circles, beckoning John’s horrible ideas.

“I- I don’t know,” John muttered, frustrated. “The curtains probably cost more than a semester’s tuition,” he said, turning one of the photographs out to Sherlock to illustrate his point. “God-awful light fixture,” he murmured, wrinkling his nose down at a picture that included the garish piece covered in golden cherubs. “Can’t imagine what it’d look like lit,” he chuckled, looking up to commiserate with Sherlock, but the boy’s expression made his own plummet. “What?” he asked, urgent with concern at Sherlock’s wide eyes and slack jaw.

“The light,” Sherlock said breathlessly, his lips barely moving as the words hissed out.

John leaned forward, his eyebrows furrowing as he looked between Sherlock’s eyes, worried and searching. He jumped as Sherlock’s hand snapped onto his shoulders, his face suddenly flaring back to life.

“The light!” he exclaimed, rattling John slightly before leaping up, photographs flying as he scrambled over them. “Of course! They wouldn’t think to check, and there was no need to turn it on.” He wrenched open the door, sending it bouncing off the wall as he strode across the corridor.

John clambered to his feet, catching the door on the rebound and rushing after him.

“Brilliant! Absolutely brilliant!” Sherlock was muttering to himself as he raced around their room, banging through his desk drawer and pulling out a mobile. He paused, his thumb tapping wildly across the touchscreen for a moment, before lowering the phone and leaping forward.

John stumbled back, collapsing onto his bed to avoid being trampled as Sherlock barreled to his wardrobe, flinging it open with a bang that made John wince.
“Oh, the look on Anderson’s FACE!” he shouted, punctuating it with a clap of his hands before reaching in and shaking his coat off a hanger. He slipped it on as he spun, the fabric flaring out in a fluid arch around his legs, and tugged up sharply on his collar before disappearing out the door in a bounce of brown curls.

John gaped at the doorway, shell-shocked, as if a tornado had just caught him up and flung him away, miles from anything familiar. He blinked, closing his mouth as he looked down at his black shoes, the scuffed leather grounding him somewhat against the alien landscape of the pale, grey-flecked tile. John had hardly even been in the room with Sherlock, at least not while he was awake, but it still somehow felt echoingly empty in his absence.

“John!”

He jolted up to find silver-blue eyes glittering at him from the doorway, an irritated scowl spread across the mouth below.

“Come on!” Sherlock urged, jerking his head before twisting on his heels and vanishing down the corridor again.

John hesitated, his hands gripping the edge of his mattress.

What did he know about Sherlock Holmes, really? He’d known the boy less than 24 hours, and in that time he’d admitted to setting fires and solving murders. Was John really going to just run off with him to...god knows where?

“NOW!”

John grinned, pushing off the bed and snatching his jacket, not even bothering to lock the door behind him as he grabbed his phone and ran down the corridor after the beckoning voice.
John burst out the doors of Kingsley House, garnering more than a few strange glances, but he looked right through the curious, prying eyes. He half ran forward, tentative to commit to a direction before he was sure it was the right way. A swirl of black at the school gate caught his eye, and he raced after it.

Sherlock was around the corner by the time he got through the gate, but John assumed he was heading toward town, so he turned to the right and kept running. Sherlock was still some distance in front of him, crossing the street with an abandon that made John cringe.

John followed after him, waving his hand apologetically at the cars he cut in front of, and searched for the black coat amongst the people walking along the main street. He spotted the sleeve of it, jutting up in the air to wave at a cab. John pounded down the pavement, pushing through irritated pedestrians as he raced the black car approaching from the opposite direction.

It beat him, of course, and Sherlock opened the back door, one foot stepping inside as his mouth moved furiously across at the driver.

"WAIT!"

Sherlock snapped his head around, looking surprised, but John couldn’t imagine why. He had asked him to come along, after all. Had he not seen John rushing after him like an idiot?

John was panting slightly as he drew level with the cab, the surprised curiosity not yet drained from Sherlock’s face. He stopped, waiting for Sherlock to get in, but the boy just continued staring down at him, his head tilting as his eyebrows furrowed. “Alright, then,” John mumbled, slipping inside first and bouncing across the seat.

Sherlock followed after a moment, slamming the door behind him, back to looking coldly nonchalant.

“Where’d you say again, mate?” the driver said, glancing back over his shoulder at Sherlock.

Sherlock’s face pinched, and John got the distinct impression he did not like repeating himself. Or perhaps he just found thick, London accents offensive. Sherlock barked an address at him, somewhere John didn’t recognize, and the car lurched forward.

John watched Sherlock for a moment, assuming he would explain what it was exactly they were doing, but the boy was busily tapping away at his phone, his forehead furrowed in deep concentration. John turned out to the street, leaning close to peer out the window, trying to pay attention. This was the town that the college was in, after all; he’d be spending a lot of time here. There wasn’t much to hold his attention, however.

The small town seemed to have sprung up out of necessity around the college, taking advantage of
the students and faculty that were stuck on the outskirts of London. There was one, main street which housed all the amenities there were to be offered: a handful of restaurants, a random spattering of shops, a small supermarket/pharmacy, and a couple cafes. Apart from that, it was mostly flat buildings and houses scattered across the green landscape, no doubt to hold the staff that couldn’t—or didn’t want to—live in the faculty housing on campus. The area was hardly urban by any stretch of the imagination, which begged the question…

“How did you get a cab?”

“How did you get a cab out here?” John repeated, waving his hand toward the blurry scenery. “Seems like you’d have to hire a car from a town like this.”

“Very good, John,” Sherlock said, and John had never heard a compliment sound so scathing. “I have a standing agreement with the owner of the company. I managed to get him out of a particularly nasty divorce settlement by proving his wife had been having an affair. As such, I merely send a text, and he sends the closest car. It usually takes 15 minutes or so, but sometimes I get lucky and there’s one passing through.” He said all of this as if it were the most normal thing in the world to prove adultery, and John merely blinked, not having any idea how to even begin to respond.

“Oh,” he settled on, feeling his head spinning slightly as he looked back out the window. More houses broke up the natural landscape, then larger buildings, and more cars began to join them on the road as they drew closer to London.

“You don’t have to come into the crime scene.”

He turned to find Sherlock still focused on his phone, and thought he may have imagined hearing his voice entirely. “Sorry?” he asked, just to be safe.

“There’s nothing interesting there, of course; you saw the photos,” Sherlock said, stowing his phone back in his pocket and looking up, “but you don’t have to come in if you’re…uncomfortable.” He grimaced slightly as he said it, as if the prospect that someone might not want to tour a murder site was appallingly beneath him.

John opened his mouth to answer, but paused for a moment to think on what it said about him that he so readily came to an answer. “No, it’s fine,” he said with a shrug.

Sherlock studied him closely, currently green-tinged eyes glinting, and John wondered what he must look like to Sherlock, his face spread out in a map of small expressions that led all the way to the darkest corners of his thoughts.

“You wouldn’t be bothered if there was a body.”

John regarded him for a moment, searching for a trap, but Sherlock didn’t appear to be implying anything. “Not really. I mean, I guess I wouldn’t really know for sure, having never seen one in person.”

“But you feel your extensive study in human anatomy and medical procedure has prepared you enough that you wouldn’t be particularly disturbed.”

John blinked, momentarily stunned once again, and then smiled slightly as he shook his head. “Are you going to do that a lot?”

“Probably,” Sherlock answered with a shrug, turning back to the window. John watched as his
eyebrows lowered, his jaw tightening. “Why, would it bother you?” he muttered stiffly, glancing back toward John out of the corner of his eye.

“No,” John said honestly, smiling to prove it, “I’d just like to know how you know.”

“I don’t know, I-”

“Right, right, sorry,” John interrupted, lifting a hand to halt his argument. “See. I’d like to know how you see.”

Sherlock’s glare held for a few seconds longer, and then shattered with a twitch of his lips. “It was quite simple, really. You have the most recent issues of a few medical journals on your desk, obviously you’re a subscriber, and the A-levels you’re taking are required for entry into any university medical program. Well, except for English, of course.” His eyes narrowed. “Why are you taking English?”

“Needed a third A-level,” John shrugged. “I thought it’d be easy.”

Sherlock laughed, a single, mocking burst, and looked toward the front of the cab as John glared at him.

“Well, why are you taking it, then?” he goaded.

“No idea,” Sherlock answered, not looking away from the street in front. “I don’t pick my classes.”

“You don’t pick your classes?” John repeated, and Sherlock spared a moment to shoot him a withering, ‘Clearly you heard me the first time’ look. “Who does?” he added. That was at least a new question.

“My brother,” Sherlock spat, and there was so much venom in it, John didn’t think he would ever be offended by the way Sherlock snapped at him again.

“Your brother? I didn’t know you-”

The car bumped to a stop, and Sherlock had swept out the door and thrown money at the cabbie before John could so much as turn toward him.

“Hey, wait!” he shouted as he scrambled across the seat, wondering just how many times that phrase was going to come out of his mouth. “Thank you,” John muttered as he closed the door behind him, the driver lifting his chin in response, and then bounded after Sherlock. John certainly didn’t have to worry about staying in shape with Sherlock around.

Wait, was he already planning on this being a regular thing? Did he want that? Those thoughts were pushed back for revisiting later, however, as Sherlock leapt up the few steps in front of a polished, black front door.

“Sherlock!”

Grey eyes turned back to him, wide and slightly confused, and it struck John that it was the first time he had called his roommate by name. Probably fitting that it was borderline scolding.

“Do you have to run everywhere?” John said as he drew level with the taller boy on the doorstep.

Sherlock gave him a puzzled look. “I thought you played rugby,” he said casually, twisting the handle and sweeping into the townhouse with a smirk.
“I do!” John snarled, his face creasing with frustration as he followed.

“Mhmm,” Sherlock murmured as he stomped through the elaborate, marble foyer, and John glared furiously at the back of his head. “Ah, Lestrade!” Sherlock chimed as he swept through a doorway. “And Anderson,” he added, his tone and face falling into disdain. “Here to miss more evidence?”

A small, greasy-haired man—couldn’t have been older than 25, John would guess—opened his mouth to retort when a tall man stepped between them.

“Save it, you two,” the man John assumed was Lestrade muttered in a slight, Estuary accent. Looking past the bags under his eyes, he appeared to be in his late twenties/early thirties, and was dressed sharply in black trousers, a white shirt, and a grey jacket. There was a badge hooked to his belt, and a telltale bulge at his hip. “Who’s he?” he barked, and John’s heart stuttered in his chest as the man’s dark gaze settled on him. “You can’t just bring random people to a crime scene, Sherlock!”

“Colleague of mine,” Sherlock brushed off, and John fought not to look up at him incredulously.

“Colleague?” Lestrade huffed angrily as he approached. “You’re 17, for chrissakes. What kind of colleague could you possibly have?”

John’s fingers twitched nervously, and he thrust them into his pocket as he attempted to look unaffected.

“More useful one than Anderson,” Sherlock answered with bitter sarcasm, and the man sneered at him over Lestrade’s shoulder.

Lestrade gave him a withering look, and Sherlock drew himself up straighter.

“He was instrumental in my discovery this afternoon,” he said, commanding and official.

John couldn’t help it; he snapped his head up.

Lestrade looked shocked too, staring at Sherlock with bewildered disbelief. “He was?” Lestrade breathed, looking at John with bemused awe, and John wondered if he should be offended.

“Well,” Sherlock muttered with a wave of his hand as he brushed passed Lestrade, “in a manner of speaking. He’s not particularly luminous on his own, but it appears he serves as a very effective conduit for my brilliance.” He paced in a slow circle, staring up at the ceiling with sharp, scanning eyes. “A…conductor of light, so to speak,” he murmured with a shrug, never removing his eyes from the smooth, white plaster.

The corner of John’s mouth quirked up, and he worried vaguely about being flattered by such an absurd compliment.

Lestrade seemed to have the same idea, half-turning back toward Sherlock. “A conductor of- I don’t even know who this-”

John stepped forward, his movement catching Lestrade’s eye, and the man turned back, watching him warily. “John Watson, lighting rod of genius,” he said by way of introduction, smiling brightly as he extended a hand. “Business cards are still in the post, I’m afraid.”

Sherlock barked a sharp laugh as he paced to the other side of the desk, and Lestrade jumped, whirling around with his hand frozen half-stretched toward John’s.
Anderson was doing the same, gaping unashamedly at Sherlock’s turned back.

Whether due to the palpable shift in the air or the silence, John couldn’t say, but Sherlock halted his observations and turned back to them, his eyes shifting curiously between the two, stunned men. “What?” he muttered irritably.

“Did you just laugh?!” Anderson sputtered, pointing at him as if leveling some horrible accusation.

Sherlock raised an eyebrow at him.

“You never laugh,” Anderson clarified, his eyes narrowing in suspicion.

“Well, that’s decidedly untrue,” Sherlock said briskly, bending down to peer at an office set on the desk. “I laugh at you all the time, Anderson.”

“No, you don’t,” Anderson snapped, still genuinely curious, and John wondered how the man could possibly not see where this was going.

“Don’t I?” Sherlock glanced up over a picture frame with exaggerated puzzlement. “Must have been behind your back,” he added with a shrug.

Aaaaand, there it was. John’s smile twitched, and he dropped his head trying to press it flat again.

Anderson’s face collapsed into a scowl as Sherlock’s smirked.

“Alright, alright,” Lestrade interjected, pinching the bridge of his nose in tired frustration. “Anderson, just… give him what he needs.”

“But, sir!”

“Just do it!” Lestrade spat, turning along with John as a clicking sound approached the door behind them.

“How much longer is this gonna take, Sergeant? Mrs. Gravin’s getting antsy, and I’m not sure if I can hold her off- Oh.” The woman stopped in the doorway, brown eyes shifting across the group from beneath her wild, curly hair. Her gaze lingered on John, narrowing slightly in confusion before looking past him and turning exasperated. “Finally,” the woman spat, “bout time you showed up, freak.”

“Sally,” Lestrade said warningly, low and dangerous.

The woman sealed her mouth in a tight line, disdain etched in every curve and ridge of her dark complexion. Her eyes seared into Sherlock for another moment, and then lowered back to John, the anger slipping into confusion. Her eyes narrowed as she tilted her head, and John realized he was glaring.

He relaxed his expression, loosening the fists he hadn’t realized he’d formed, and forced himself to smile stiffly.

“Who’s this?” Sally muttered, directing the question at Lestrade as she jerked a thumb at John.

He went back to glaring for a moment before stepping forward. “John Watson,” he said coolly, stretching out a hand toward her. He, at least, could be civil.

“Sally Donovan,” she replied, giving his hand one, quick jolt, “Police Constable.”
He nodded, letting his hand fall back to his side.

Sally crossed her arms in front of her, searching him curiously, and John was once again reminded of how much he loathed being short. He couldn’t properly meet Sally’s gaze with a stubborn one of his own when she had a couple inches on him.

“So, who are you, exactly?” she asked, some of the ice melting from her tone.

“I’m- Well, I’m no one, really,” he muttered, shifting his glance between her and Lestrade. “I’m Sherlock’s roommate at Langley.”

“Good god!” Sally snorted. “And you haven’t demanded to be moved?” She chuckled, but it was devoid of humor; a cold, wicked thing that made John’s muscles twitch.

“No,” John said firmly, watching the PC’s chuckle die in her throat. “Don’t intend to, either.”

Sally looked at him as though he’d just changed color. She then shook her head and sighed. “Look, John, you seem like a nice boy,” she said with soft pity, and John prickled at the sentiment. She was only a handful of years older than him, and, at 18, he was no boy. “Let me give you some advice. Stay away from Sherlock Holmes. Get out, and fast.” She took a half step forward, leaning into him. “While you still can,” she added ominously, her eyes burning her point into him.

Perhaps he was supposed to be afraid, to have some sort of epiphany and run from that room and that man as fast as his legs could carry him, but John’s only reaction was anger. His jaw tightened with firm defiance, his eyebrows twitching together slightly as he unblinkingly met her fierce gaze. He watched her realize it, watched her eyes search his face and her fortitude falter, and then she pulled back.

Sighing at him as if he were a lost cause, she grimly shook her head again before brushing past him, and John could hear her mumbling something to Anderson behind his back.

“John?”

He turned to Lestrade, relieved to have warm eyes looking down at him instead of arctic ones.

“Can I have a word?” he asked, nodding his head toward the doorway.

Something twisted in his stomach, writhing and beating against the sides, but he nodded, walking shakily after the sergeant. Instinctively, he glanced over his shoulder, his eyes searching before his brain knew what he was looking for. He found it regardless, however, and Sherlock was already looking back at him.

He nodded, just once and almost imperceptibly, but John released the breath held hostage in his chest and took the last step out of the room, rounding the corner and losing Sherlock behind the wall.

Lestrade stopped some distance down the hall, turning and pocketing one of his hands. “You said you were Sherlock’s roommate?” he asked, his forehead furrowing, his head tilting slightly.

“Yeah,” John answered with a nod. “Moved in Sunday.”

“And you two aren’t- He’s not- You’re getting on alright?” Lestrade looked concerned, and John frowned in confusion.

“I guess so,” he murmured, one eyebrow rising.
Lestrade narrowed his eyes at him, and it would have been intimidating if the probing gaze was not dwarfed by Sherlock’s.

“Sergeant, what are you asking me, exactly?” John said, his voice growing firmer as his frustration with all this cryptic nonsense grew.

Lestrade regarded him for a moment longer, eyebrows knitted, and John held his breath. Whatever the test was, however, he seemed to have passed, and the tension drained from Lestrade’s body.

“Are you sure you won’t be moving out?” he asked, but it sounded more like added clarification that doubt.

John merely nodded.

“You’ll probably get dragged out on to a lot more of these, ya know? Crime scenes. Most of them not so” –he gestured vaguely back toward the office door- “clean.”

John nodded again. “I know.”

One of Lestrade’s eyebrows rose up toward his grey hair. “And you’re okay with that?”

John knew on some level that the appropriate answer would be no, but Lestrade seemed to already know his wasn’t, and there was no judgment in the sergeant’s gaze. “Yes,” John answered with stern finality.

A faint smile tugged at Lestrade’s lips, and he nodded. “I’ll put something on the books, then.”

John smiled his thanks, even though he had no idea what that meant, and almost turned back toward the office when he felt the weight of something unsaid settling in the air. “Something else, Sergeant?” he ventured into the thick quiet.

“Call me Greg,” the man said quickly, and then cleared his throat, a signal of forthcoming solemnity. “There’s something you need to know, John. I-I shouldn’t tell you. I shouldn’t tell anyone, really, but you’re living with him, and…well, I worry.” Lestrade swallowed hard, shifting his weight between his feet. He sucked in a lungful of air, releasing it with determination before fixing his eyes on John’s. “Sherlock got into some…stuff awhile back. The kind of things that never really go away, that you never completely get past.” He said it slowly, purposefully pressing meaning into every syllable.

John’s heart stuttered, unable to imagine the conclusion his mind was proposing, but it was there, written in Greg’s long-suffering gaze.

“I managed to get him to go to treatment by letting him get more involved in cases,” Lestrade continued sadly, shaking his head down at the floor, “but sometimes weeks go by and nothing good comes across my desk.” He looked up at John, suddenly so much older, desperate concern stretching thick across his face. “I- If I don’t see him, I can’t…” He let the sentence drop away, but John felt it somewhere in the spinning mess of his stomach.

After a few moments of processing silence, he met Lestrade’s eyes, his decision firmly and irrevocably made. “What do you need me to do?”

Lestrade blinked in surprise, his mouth parting slightly. It quickly closed into a small smile, and something about his expression reeked of being thoroughly impressed. “Nothing, really,” he muttered. “Just keep an eye out. He gets in these…moods sometimes,” Lestrade sighed, shaking his head with regrettable nostalgia.
John nodded somberly into the silence.

Lestrade huffed out a breath, seeming to clear the heavy topic from his lungs. “Do you have your mobile?” he asked, casually businesslike once again.

“Yeah,” John muttered, fishing it out of his pocket and holding it out.

“Good,” Greg said as he snatched it away. “I’m going to put my number in here, as well as Sherlock’s brother Mycroft’s,” he informed him through periodic glances up from the task. “If anything happens, if you even suspect anything, let us know.” He held John’s gaze until John nodded in acknowledgment, and then handed the phone back. “Better get back in there,” Greg said begrudgingly. “Those three can’t be left alone too long without some blood loss.”

John chuckled, but it quickly withered as he pondered the genuine possibility. Apparently there would be no violence today, though, because Sherlock strode out of the door in front of them just as John and Greg reached it.

“Whadja find?” Greg demanded.

“Blood,” Sherlock said in a delighted whisper, his eyebrows rising up into his hair. He twisted abruptly, stepping back into the room, and John and Greg exchanged a curious glance before following after him.

Anderson and Sally were leaning against the opposite wall, looking thoroughly miserable as they glared at the black-cloaked figure.

“It was on the light,” Sherlock explained, gesturing up at the awful, gold fixture. “Droplets propelled off the statue as Mrs. Gravin bludgeoned her husband to death.”

John wasn’t sure whose eyebrows were higher, his or Lestrade’s.

“Anderson?” Lestrade said, turning toward the man scowling in the corner.

He nodded. “I got some swabs,” he grumbled.

Lestrade smiled brightly, turning back to Sherlock. “Well, I’ll be damned. She did kill him here then.”

Sherlock rolled his eyes, and ‘I’m surrounded by idiots’ may as well have been flashing over his head in neon. “I’ve only been telling you that for a week,” he snapped.

Lestrade’s smile didn’t falter, and John wondered just how long the two had worked together in order for that immunity to be formed. “We’ll have to test the blood first, but if it comes back as the victim’s, that should be enough for an arrest warrant,” he said, flipping out his phone and texting furiously. “I’ve got something else back at the Yard I wanted you to take a look at, too.”

Sherlock’s eyebrow rose, and he would have looked only casually interested were it not for the slight tremor John caught in his hand.

“Rash of homeless deaths. All stabbed, all left in well-known haunts. It’s startin’ to look like a ser-Oi, where are you going!”

Sherlock bolted past them, coat waving behind him as his shoes clapped against the marble hallway.

“You won’t be able to get in without me!” Lestrade called after him.
Sherlock wrenched the front door open, already halfway out before he turned. He smirked with patronizing pity, tilting his head back at Lestrade, and then disappeared with the click of a lock.

Greg sighed, dropping his head as he ground his fingers into his forehead. Muttering to himself, he turned around and headed back into the office, passing John where he stood frozen and dumbfounded in the foyer.

A tornado. The man was an absolute tornado.

John glanced back into the office, but no one seemed to be paying him any mind. He lingered for a moment, anxiously debating whether it was expected he would say goodbye, but decided against it and followed Sherlock’s path to the door.

Stepping outside, he closed the black door behind him and descended down the concrete steps to the pavement. He twisted his head left and right, his eyes squinting as he searched the street, but Sherlock was nowhere to be found. Disappointment sunk John’s heart in his chest. He supposed he shouldn’t have been surprised that Sherlock left him there, what with the manic way he’d flown from the house, but John didn’t know London very well and couldn’t help but feel a little put out that Sherlock had left him to navigate his way back on his own.

Sighing heavily, he shoved his hands in the pockets of his black trousers and began to walk in the direction of what looked like a rather busy cross street. He could probably get a cab there, at least, and hopefully the driver would know where Langley was. The smooth plastic of his phone brushed against his fingers, and he pulled it out, opening the contacts to investigate the new ones Lestrade had entered. The endeavor was cut short, however, as he noticed a new name had been added to his favorites, hovering at the top of the list along with his mother and sister. Chuckling, he clicked the name, opening a text.

*Do i want to know how your number got in my phone?*

He held the black phone in his hand, watching the swirling circle change to a time as the message sent. His elbow had barely bent to return the phone to his pocket when the chime sounded.

*How would I know? I can’t read minds, John.*

*SH*

John shook his head with a breathy laugh as he swiped out a response.

*You added yourself as a favorite.*

Again, the response was nearly immediate. Sherlock may be a bit manic, but at least he was punctual.

*I am aware.*

*SH*

John rolled his eyes, glancing up to avoid a collision with a postbox.

*Bit forward don’t ya think?*

His thumb had barely compressed the lock button when the screen lit up again. It shouldn’t even be possible for someone to text that fast!

*It is merely a convenience, not an insinuation.*
Good because favorites don’t ditch me in London. I could get mugged or something.

Highly unlikely. In case it escaped your notice, you’re in a rather wealthy neighborhood. The crime rate is much lower than the city average.

John smiled to himself. Sherlock would know that.

It could happen. Lost in a strange city. Abandoned. Alone.

Tad dramatic, don’t you think?

Suddenly a dark figure emerges from an alley ahead.

There are no alleys, John. That street is all townhomes.

A knife glistens in his hand, long and silver.

People are statistically more likely to comply if an assailant has a knife rather than a gun, which is completely illogical considering the odds of a fatal injury are much higher with firearms.

It pierces my side and I fall, blood spreading across the pavement while my mobile buzzes with useless trivia from my insensitive roommate.

It’s hardly useless, and I see no need to be sensitive to an entirely fictionalized scenario.

I can hear sirens in the distance as my vision begins to go dark.

It would be impossible for an ambulance to reach you that quickly. It would have to have been dispatched before you were stabbed.

With my last thought, I remember the git of a roommate who betrayed me.

I’m not the one who stabbed you.

My blood is on his hands, never to be washed away.

I’ll use industrial strength soap.

John laughed. He laughed so hard, his eyes watered, and people around him jumped back to stare at him with wide-eyed shock.

You’re one heartless bastard, ya know that?

Not dead then?

No, John’s dead. This is his murderer commenting on how you’re a heartless bastard for not being there for him in his time of need.

Then I would say you are hardly one to talk.

John shook his head, trying to lower his laughter into something more socially acceptable. He lifted his eyes, searching the street for a cab. A bold, red sign grabbed his attention instead, covered in swooping, white lettering in a language he could not read.
I'm gonna grab takeaway. Want me to bring back anything for ya?

I don’t often make a practice of having dinner with murderers.

John snorted.

Fine. I’m not dead. Do you want dinner?

Kung Pao chicken and fried rice. Mention my name and they won’t charge.

How in the hell do you know it’s a Chinese restaurant?

Obvious. You’ll get back before me. Don’t bother waiting to eat.

SH

With that rather clear dismissal, John pocketed his phone. The script of the conversation drifted back up into his mind, and he tried not to smile too widely to himself as he entered the restaurant, a bell tinkling over his head.

At the mention of Sherlock’s name, the staff sprang into a chorus of delighted shouts and squeals, muttering to one another and smiling enthusiastically at John, who could only nod dimly in response. The order was put together faster than he had even seen at McDonald’s, and he was shouting thanks over his shoulder to a line of beaming, waving restaurateurs in a matter of minutes. The plastic bag swung against his leg, and he stretched his arm out farther to avoid any further jostling of the boxes.

Approaching the edge of the street, he leaned out to flag down a cab, but abruptly leapt backward with a strangled yelp as a black car surged toward the curb in front of him. The car lurched to a stop, the back door directly ahead. The passenger door opened, and John retreated several steps as a tall, black-suited man stretched out. Without so much as a glance at John, he stepped along the pavement, opening the back door of the sleek car.

John peered into the dark interior, but all he could see in the shaft of light entering through the opening was a pair of polished, black shoes and the hems of grey trousers hovering above them.

“Mr. Watson,” a polite, male voice said, and one of the feet seemed to bob in acknowledgement. “Would you kindly get in the car? I do so hate to idle. Terrible for the environment.”

The only thing that kept John from running down the street screaming was the slightly familiar tone of the voice. He didn’t recognize it exactly, but there was something there, something in the cadence, that struck a chord of memory, but he couldn’t quite place what it was.

“Who are you?” he asked, his voice a firm snarl. “How do you know my name?”

A heavy sigh drifted out to him, and that unidentified chord thrummed in his mind once again.

“Really, Mr. Watson, there’s no need to cause a scene. I assure you, I am not taking you anywhere but back to Langley.”

“How the hell do you—”

“Mr. Watson, please,” he interjected, and a shiver ran down John’s spine at the cool venom in those words, although the man’s tone hardly rose at all. “Get in the car.”

Every poorly-acted video he’d been forced to watch in school, every pamphlet that had been distributed, every emergency alert that broke through his program on the telly combined together in
his mind to tell him that getting anywhere near that car was the worst idea imaginable. But, with that icy command, John had just placed the familiar quality of that voice, and he was too curious to walk away. Closing his fists and straightening his back defiantly, John marched toward the vehicle, trying not to think about how the effect was probably significantly damaged by the Chinese swinging at his side. He climbed into the car, taking the first available seat beside the door and getting his first glance at the owner of those shoes.

The man was older, mid-twenties if John were to guess, and his height was obvious even as he sat. His grey suit practically screamed money, and the shiny, red tie beneath his smirking face only enhanced the red-brown hair groomed meticulously atop his head. He would have looked completely ordinary were it not for his eyes, a pale, grey-brown that seared into John in a way that made him almost 100% certain his suspicions had been right. He did have a way to be positive, however.

The car started to move, but neither man broke the silence, John not dropping his glare even as his fingers slid into his pocket. Only when he had removed his phone did he break the stare, his eyes following down the reel of his contacts list.

“Am I keeping you from something, Mr. Watson?”

He hesitated a moment before replying, buying himself time. “No,” he said slowly, his finger freezing as he found his target. He tapped the name, grazed across the green, phone icon, and waited. A shrill ring bounced around the cabin of the car, and John’s lips twitched in satisfaction as he ended the call. “No, you’re not keeping me from anything,” he added casually, smiling as he pocketed his phone, “Mycroft.”

Mycroft Holmes smiled back at him, that strange, impressed look he had seen Sherlock wear gracing his face for a moment. “Very good, John,” he said with a nod. “And, now that introductions are out of the way,” he continued, and John frowned, not sure guessing his kidnapper’s identity counted as an introduction, “I’d like to ask you a few questions.”

“Like what?” John spat. Maybe it was the fact that he’d plucked him off the street, but John had formed an immediate dislike for the man in front of him.

“You are no doubt aware that Sherlock’s previous living arrangements have not…worked out,” Mycroft said with a strained smile. “Seeing as you seem to have inexplicably survived, I would like to make you an offer.”

John said nothing, tilting his head and narrowing his eyes in question.

“If you could, on occasion, pass along information about Sherlock—nothing untoward, nothing you would feel particularly uncomfortable with—just the odd question I would need answered—” Mycroft explained, and John’s fingers tightened against the leather, “I could arrange a fair amount of money to be transferred into your account on, let’s say…a weekly basis.” He smiled as if he had just asked something as innocuously innocent as what John took in his coffee, but John’s blood was boiling.

“No,” he said flatly.

“But I haven’t mentioned a figure,” Mycroft chuckled.

“Don’t bother.” His voice was dark as he glared into the man’s face, and he watched icy fire flash through grey-brown.

A second later, Mycroft smiled, and it looked significantly more genuine now, if a little patronizing. “You are an interesting man, John Watson,” he mused. “You’ve known my brother, what? Not even
48 hours? And already you’re touchingly loyal.”

John’s eyes narrowed at the dripping condescension. “I’m not going to spy on my roommate,” he said, firm and final.

Mycroft leaned back, gingerly folding his hands across his lap as he tilted his head. “No, you’re not,” he murmured, as if just coming to that conclusion for himself. “Tell me, Mr. Watson,” he added briskly, leaning forward over his knees, “what exactly are your intentions with my brother?”

John laughed, a biting bark of breath. “Don’t worry,” he said snidely, “I won’t take him for any carriage rides without a chaperone.”

The car stopped at that moment, and John looked out the heavily tinted window to see the front gates of Langley, looking more like the gates of heaven than the entrance to a school had any right to.

“Thanks for the ride,” he deadpanned, wrenching at the door handle, half-hoping to tear it off. His shoes ground against the gravel, and he gripped the exterior handle, ready to slam the door behind him when a voice called him still.

“John,” Mycroft said, and that part of John that could not help but be polite forced him to look back at the man’s face. “If you reconsider, you have my number.” He smiled, bright and falsely charming. “Enjoy your Szechuan chicken.”

John’s hand tightened around the smooth metal. “I won’t,” he assured, glaring furiously. He pushed on the door, his fingers about to release when he paused and pulled it back. “And it’s Kung Pao,” he added, meeting Mycroft’s rising eyebrow with a sneer as he finally shoved the door closed with a satisfying bang.

He did not turn as he heard the car grind against the gravel, his fingernails digging into his palms as he tried to calm his pounding heart. Not that it would make any difference, he realized with an internal sigh. Sherlock would probably know the moment he saw him anyway.

*****

Sherlock paced around the room, his fingers steepled beneath his chin as his index fingers tapped against one another in rhythm with his steps.

John should have been back at least five minutes before him, even accounting for a cabbie taking the long way to squeeze extra money out of someone who didn’t know the area, but Sherlock had been back for—he checked the clock on his phone again—seven minutes, and there was no sign of him.

He stopped, contemplating a text message that demanded a response without sounding needy, when he heard a familiar gait approaching down the hall. The muscles in his knees twitched, fighting against the urge to rush and greet him with questions, but he instead took the precious few seconds to collapse onto his bed. Reaching behind him to pluck a book off his desk, he opened it to a random page near the middle, and hovered it over his face just as the door swung open.

“Hey,” John grumbled, and before he even glanced at the boy, Sherlock knew he was furious. John had an incredibly expressive voice, and Sherlock would almost advise him to be more careful about it if it didn’t make things so much easier.

He shifted the book away, snapping it closed before dropping it unceremoniously to the bed beside him. “What happened?” he asked, sitting up and bouncing into a cross-legged position. His eyes followed John’s steps, watching carefully as he lowered himself to the edge of his bed and rummaged through the plastic bag.
“Oh, nothing really,” John muttered, rattling a Styrofoam box free. “Just got kidnapped by your brother.” He held the box out to Sherlock, a plastic package of cutlery balanced on top of it, but Sherlock made no move to take it.

“You…what?” he said, inwardly cringing at the breathy shock that invaded his tone.

John smiled weakly, an encouraging sign that he wasn’t holding it against Sherlock himself. “He followed me from the crime scene,” John explained, somewhat tiredly, and bounced the box in his grip.

Sherlock took it from him, but merely sat it atop his duvet, never removing his eyes from John’s face.

“A car pulled up outside the Chinese restaurant—remind me to ask you how you knew that, by the way—and he told me to get in.” John shrugged, obviously still irritated, but not particularly perturbed. Nothing too terrible had happened, then, but Sherlock needed specifics.

“What did he say to you?”

John hesitated, a fraction of a second of stillness in his progress of removing his own food from the bag, but Sherlock noticed.

“Did he offer you money to spy on me?”

John snapped his head up, obviously shocked, but there was an edge of shame to his face.

Sherlock nodded, sparing John the need to respond. “Did you take it?”

“No!” John bleated, his forehead furrowing in offense.

“Pity,” Sherlock murmured, sitting back and pulling his food into his lap. “We could have split the fee. Think it through next time,” he admonished.

John smiled bewilderedly before shaking his head and opening his own takeaway. He speared a piece of chicken, lifting it halfway to his mouth before pausing, pulling his fork back and smiling absentmindedly down at the chunk of glazed poultry.

“What?” Sherlock probed, his toes curling and uncurling with the anxiety of unanswered questions.

“Nothing, just something Mycroft said,” John chuckled, setting his fork back down against the side of the box. “After he asked me about spying on you, and I refused,” he added with a stern, pointed glance, “he asked me…” He trailed away, his eyes drifing away in hesitation, and Sherlock wanted to shake him. “He asked me what my…intentions were. With you.” John’s face wrinkled across at him, amused confusion etched around his eyes.

“Really?” Sherlock scoffed, somewhat relieved it was only a snide remark and not something more sensitive. “What did you say?” he asked, watching John through the tops of his eyes as he took a mouthful of fried rice.

“I assured him I wouldn’t take you on any carriage rides without a chaperone.”

Sherlock snorted, and then coughed violently on the rice that stuck in his throat. “You what?” he choked.

John smirked and shrugged.

Sherlock’s mouth fell open slightly. “You really said that?”
“Yeah,” John chuckled, pulling a piece of chicken off his fork with his teeth.

Sherlock shoved his food to the side, scrambling off the bed to grab his mobile out of the coat draped over his desk chair. The screen glowed with the notification of a message, and he grinned as he opened it, turning to face a rather perplexed John.

“What is it?” John asked, shifting his own food off his lap, his eyes growing concerned as his forehead furrowed.

“Text from Mycroft,” Sherlock explained, twirling his phone toward John and wagging it in the air for emphasis.

“What’s it say?” John folded his legs beneath him, mirroring Sherlock’s previous position, and leaned forward, his elbows perching on his knees.

Sherlock raised an eyebrow at him, and John wilted slightly.

“Ya know, if you wanna tell me,” he mumbled with an awkward shrug. “I-I don’t need to know, really.”

Sherlock smiled, chuckling softly as he shook his head and turned back to the phone. “One day and you’re already solving crimes together?” Sherlock recited, overdramatic in his imitation, and John beamed. “Should we expect a happy announcement soon? A white, winter wedding at the Dorchester?”

John laughed, rolling onto his back, his legs flailing in the air for a moment before he righted himself and slung them over the edge of the bed. “No, that’s far too soon,” he said, clearly struggling to be serious as he sat his Chinese back in his lap. “People will think I’m pregnant.”

Sherlock laughed, immediately beginning to type out a variant of John’s response. He watched the blond boy out of the corner of his eye, waiting for him to realize he’d cast himself as the woman in this scenario and make some sort of crass comment to reassert his masculinity.

John did realize it a rather impressive 1.5 seconds later, pausing in his chewing to furrow his eyebrows and cock his head slightly to the left. Then, surprisingly, he merely gave a small, vague shrug and went back to eating.

Sherlock’s eyes twitched wider in response. It was not often Sherlock Holmes found himself surprised at the behavior of another person. Usually he knew what they were going to do before they themselves did, but John Watson appeared to be an exception, the only exception to date.

John not only hadn’t stormed out, ranting about the mad Sherlock Holmes and demanding another roommate, he had sat with him, spoke to him, actually looked at crime scene photos with him, and, perhaps most impressively, he had stuck up to Mycroft. It had evidently been quite the showdown as well, considering the frustration Sherlock could read in his brother’s text.

Yes, Sherlock Holmes would definitely need more data to understand the workings of John Watson.

“So how did you and Greg meet?” John asked abruptly, looking up as his jaw worked on rice.

“Who?” Sherlock muttered, slipping his phone back into his pocket as he returned to sit on his bed across from John.

“Greg,” John repeated, looking at Sherlock as though he was being purposefully obtuse. “Sergeant Lestrade?”
“Oh, that’s his name?” Sherlock said, tilting his head as he popped a breaded hunk of chicken into his mouth.

John blinked. “You didn’t know his name?” He smiled, chuckling breathily. “You’ve been working on cases with him for…who knows how long, and you didn’t know his first name?”

Sherlock shrugged. “Must have deleted it.”

John lifted an eyebrow, chewing hastily. “Deleted it?” he asked after swallowing.

Sherlock hesitated for a moment, covering it with chewing another bite of chicken. Was it too soon to talk like this with John? He didn’t want to scare him off. Not that he cared, really. Because he didn’t. Not at all. But, if he did—completely hypothetically, of course—it seemed unlikely this would be the last straw, considering John had followed him to a murder scene earlier.

“My brain is like a hard drive,” Sherlock explained, obscuring the strange feeling of anxiety with added haughtiness. “I store what I believe is pertinent, and the rest I delete.”

John stared at him, still and silent, and Sherlock’s stomach twisted.

“What?” he muttered, perhaps a little more earnest than he’d intended.

“Nothing,” John mumbled, but he chuckled as he went back to his food, and Sherlock’s chest unclenched in relief. “I’m just trying to decide if you’re brilliant or barmy.”

“They’re mutually exclusive?”

John tilted his head up and laughed, and something seemed to tumble in Sherlock’s chest at the alto sound.

Was he getting sick? Dehydrated? Perhaps he just needed to eat. He slid another forkful of rice into his mouth as John’s chuckling died away.

“No, I suppose not,” John said, shaking his amusedly. “But anyway, how did you two meet?”

Although it was probably indistinguishable to John, Sherlock winced. He had hoped he could successfully distract John from this line of questioning. He supposed he could just cut out the less savory bits. “I was always going into the Met, offering my assistance when they were being incompetent, which is always,” he added with a scoff. “Lestrade finally saw reason and started calling me in. He’s risen in the ranks quite quickly since then. I think I could get him to Detective Inspector by summer.”

“You’re taking all the credit, then?” John said, one side of his mouth curled up into a smirk.

“Obviously,” Sherlock muttered, his chest filling once again as John chuckled. There was definitely something wrong with him. Perhaps he was developing a cardiac condition. John would probably know; there was surely something in one of those books of his.

“Well, I should get ready,” John said, his voice straining as he stretched up off the bed.

“For what?” Sherlock asked, hastily clearing his throat of residual rice.

“Rugby try-outs, remember?” John answered, smiling down at him as he walked past to place his remaining Chinese on his desk. “Or did you delete that?” he added, casually mocking.

Sherlock laughed without humor, and John matched it with that continually perplexing laugh of his
“You could come, ya know,” John offered, turning to face Sherlock as he leaned against the edge of his desk, his hands folded over the base of his spine. “I know it’s just try-outs, but if you have nothing better to do.” He shrugged, not meeting Sherlock’s eyes. “Mike will be there.”

Sherlock watched John, who was now looking out the window to his left, and thought frantically about how to respond. There were medieval torture methods he would prefer to watching grown men chase a ball, but John had invited him, and Sherlock had no idea what to do about it. Being completely clueless was not something he was accustomed to, but he simply had no data to inform him in this particular scenario. Was this something roommates did, go to one another’s sporting activities, even if they were only try-outs? Sherlock had never been much of an acquaintance to anyone, and especially not the type to offer moral support, but if John was asking that of him, if John was nervous, if Sherlock’s presence would help…

“I suppose I could watch for a little while,” Sherlock said, perfectly calm in spite of his blood rushing in his ears.

John finally looked at him, beaming, and that rapidly worsening heart condition of his resurfaced.

“But I’m bringing the case file.”

John chuckled, shaking his head as he pushed off the desk and walked to his bureau. “Of course you are,” he said, but it sounded more fond than mocking. “You did get it, then? Lestrade said you wouldn’t be able to without him.”

Sherlock snorted. “The woman at the front desk is new, and quite young. It wasn’t difficult at all to convince her I was a plainclothes officer.”

John’s back stiffened, and he turned slowly to face Sherlock, some folded athletic wear in his hands. “Are you saying you…flirted your way in?”

Sherlock’s eyes narrowed as he tilted his head. “Is that so surprising?”

“Yes,” John chuckled, nodding as he sat the clothes on his bed. “Yes it is.”

Sherlock glared at him, and was just about to retort when John tugged his sweater vest over his head, pulling the white shirt out of his trousers and up his torso several centimeters.

He was dying, he was sure of it, and what a terribly boring way to go: heart attack in his dormitory at this accursed school.

He looked away, his mind going disconcertingly quiet as he stared down at his fingers twisting in his lap. It was nonsensical, completely illogical. He had seen plenty of naked bodies laid out on slabs in the morgue; there was no reason why a small slit of John’s stomach should have any effect on him whatsoever. He rose from the bed, grappling at the case file on his desk and burying his face inside it. The work, focus on the work. He could deal with…whatever the hell this was later. Box it away, shove it in a back corner of his mind palace and padlock the door.

“Found something?” John said, and it was all Sherlock could do not to jump through the ceiling at the proximity of it. John was standing at his shoulder, athletic shorts now in place and completely bereft of a shirt.

Breathe, dammit!
“Not yet,” Sherlock said, internally crying with relief that his voice sounded so perfectly unaffected.

“Eugh,” John grimaced, pulling back and—thank GOD—pulling the sport shirt over his head, leaving his sandy hair ruffled and electric. “Pretty gruesome.”

Sherlock closed the file, heart palpitations dissipating with the covering of skin, and turned to face John.

He was still standing quite close, apparently sucking all the oxygen out of the air between them, and if Sherlock noticed the flecks of golden brown in the boy’s blue eyes, it was purely scientific.

“Indeed,” was all he trusted himself to say.

John twitched a smile and turned, leaving Sherlock to finally suck air into his lungs as the shorter boy riffled through his bureau. He pulled out a pair of black socks, perching on the edge of his mattress as he tugged them up his calves. He then bent down, fishing under the bed before removing a pair of grass-stained boots and thrusting his feet into them. “Ready?” he asked, brushing his shirt down his abdomen as he stood.

It wouldn’t have been apparent to anyone else, but Sherlock knew his response time was a little slow before he replied, “Yes.” He swiped his coat off his desk chair, following John out the door of their dormitory and closing it with a click behind him.

They passed a handful of students in the corridors, and a large group of them in the common area, and they all wore an identical expression of unashamed shock.

Sherlock thrust his hands into his pockets, his shoulders stiffening against their unspoken scrutiny.

“So, you ever played?” John asked as he pushed open the main door, holding it open with his fingertips.

He looked down to find John smiling brightly up at him, a clear attempt to diffuse the tension their staring peers were creating, and Sherlock felt a rush of unfamiliar fondness toward him for the gesture. “No,” he replied, his shoulders relaxing somewhat, “sport is…”

“No your area?” John supplied, smirking up at him.

Sherlock smiled back. “Not really, no,” he answered, shaking his head.

“Seen a match?” John tried again, still smiling up at him, but looking decidedly less hopeful.

Sherlock hesitated, and John started to chuckle.

“Well, sorry this has to be your first experience,” he said good-humoredly. “But at least you’ll get to watch me get my arse kicked!”

“I’ve already told you, John,” Sherlock muttered as they approached the pitch, “you will most certainly make the team. There will be no arse-kicking involved.”

John laughed brightly. “Well, if you think so, it must be true,” he said, and Sherlock was surprised to find nothing mocking in the bright-blue gaze.

“Glad to see you’re catching on,” he answered, unable to entirely subdue the grin that pinched at his cheeks.

“I’m a quick study,” John said with a shrug, and they slowed to a stop at a gap between the stands.
A handful of other boys were already on the pitch, stretching or tossing a ball back-and-forth between them, and Sherlock watched them for a moment, trying to pick out who would survive try-outs.

“You could sit in the stands,” John suggested, and Sherlock smiled softly at the doubtful tone in his voice. John really was a quick study.

“I’ll stay back here,” Sherlock murmured.

“Alright,” John said, shifting his weight as he looked out to the pitch, clearly anxious. “Don’t feel like you have to stay the whole time. If you get bored or something, you can just-”

“John,” Sherlock interjected, trying not to smile and mostly succeeding. “Go.”

John sighed heavily, swallowing hard as he watched the progress of a ball being passed between two, large boys. He then nodded, and Sherlock watched as his entire demeanor changed to unyielding determination. “Right. See you,” he said with a confident flash of teeth, and then jogged away, waving to Mike as he went.

Sherlock stared after him, perplexed for not the first time that day, and wondered just how many times he would misjudge John Watson before he finally figured him out. Hopefully, it wouldn’t take much longer; he was growing quite tired of being less-than-completely correct.

He slid into the shadows beneath the stands, tucking his coat under him as he sat down on the grass. He settled his elbows on his knees, holding his head in his hands as he tapped his right index finger against his jaw. Eyes narrowed, he watched John laughing, shaking hands with the other boys as Mike made introductions. Something bit at his insides, a piercing stab of hot fury, and he realized with a jolt that he was jealous. His eyebrows furrowed, trying to explain this new development, and the answer, while surprising, came easily.

Sherlock Holmes had, unwittingly and unprecedentedly, made a friend. And, true to his obsessive nature, he wanted to hide him away, prolonging the inevitable moment when John would find other people who were more normal and grow tired of him. He wanted to keep him from rugby and Mike and Mary, with her sickly sweet perfume that Sherlock had inhaled from John’s jumper as they were looking through the photos that afternoon.

His lips pursed into a line as he continued to piece together the puzzle of his emotions. Was that the basis of his reaction earlier? A possessiveness stemming from the unfamiliar feeling of friendship? Surely, he wasn’t attracted to John.

His eyes shot wide, his head lifting from his fingers as his spine straightened. Sherlock understood the mechanics of sexual attraction, of course. He had never experienced it beyond the uncontrollable hormone imbalances of a teenage boy, and any action he had taken to pursue it had been purely for experimental purposes, including both men and women in the sample. He had yet to feel the need to repeat any of those activities, and, considering he hadn’t been entirely sober for any of them, wasn’t sure he could in his right mind. Those encounters had been filed away, evidence of the petty amusements of ordinary people, and Sherlock had not thought of them since. No, that couldn’t be it. Sherlock simply did not feel those things, did not engage in that particular distraction, and, regardless, what would possibly attract him to John anyway?

John was…good. He held doors and said thank you, being polite to even the likes of Donovan in spite of the fact that he obviously hadn’t wanted to. His blond hair and blue eyes were almost gratingly common, and then there was his name, which was so widespread, it was used as a logical conclusion for male corpses. No, there was nothing special about John Watson, nothing immediately
remarkable at all, and yet…

Sherlock growled, frustrated with his inability to pinpoint the source of his fascination. There was something there, something in those moments where John laughed when others would balk, told the truth when others would lie, and was simultaneously unflinchingly stubborn and nauseatingly kind. John was, for lack of a better word, impossible, and Sherlock realized with alarm that the sky had grown dark over him, at least half an hour having slipped by as he’d thought.

He shook his head, internally berating himself for the lapse in judgment. He mentally blockaded what he dubbed ‘The John Problem’, refusing to let something as petty as an undoubtedly temporary friendship interfere with his work. The work came first, always, and he could not allow John to take up undue space that he needed to devote to processing. Sherlock may have accidentally stumbled into a friendship, but that didn’t mean it had to be important. He snapped open the case file in front of him, fanning out the pictures and steepling his fingers beneath his chin as he scanned the four crime scenes.

An undetermined amount of time later, a shrill whistle cut through his musings, and he bit the inside of his lip as a firm reminder not to look up. He furrowed his eyebrows, intensifying his focus on the photos, but was pulled away once again by footsteps approaching from behind.

“Sherlock Holmes,” a familiar, drawling voice said, and his blood ran cold. “I started to wonder if I’d ever see you again.”

Sherlock didn’t look up, keeping his eyes fixed on the images in front of him, but he saw garishly neon trainers come to a stop beside him in his peripheral vision, muddy from the forest path used by those who didn’t want their presence or absence noted by the school.

“Still meddling where you shouldn’t, I see,” the man chuckled, and Sherlock could hear the rustling of his clothes as he knelt down.

In one, quick motion, he swept the photos back into the file, flipping it closed with a rush of air that ruffled his curls. “Don’t you have someone else to hover over?” he spat through bared teeth.

“Now why would I wanna do that?” The trainers moved to stand in front of him. “What with my best, campus customer right here and all. How ya been, Sherls?”

Sherlock looked up, rage burning patterns on his lungs as he glared into glittering, brown eyes. “Go away, Victor.”

Victor Trevor sneered down at him, pale, thin lips peeling back over yellowed teeth. “Oh, come now,” he whined. “You don’t mean that.”

“I’m quite certain I do,” Sherlock replied, slow and dangerous, and was rewarded with a slight flicker of indecision in Victor’s faltering grin.

“But I got your favorite. I always bring a bit along when I’m making deliveries up here, just in case. Already dissolved and everything. 7%, just how you like it.” He reached inside his jacket, and Sherlock leapt up, striking out like lightning and wrapping his fingers around the man’s wrist.

He willed death on him with his eyes, watching fear taint the smugness, and the stench of product wafting up from the greasy, bleach-blond hair stung Sherlock’s eyes. “I said no,” he snarled.

Victor laughed, but it was a high, anxious sound. “Come on, Sherls,” he urged, wincing slightly as his wrist struggled in vain within Sherlock’s grip. “I’ll even give you a taste. On the house.”
“Problem?”

Sherlock jerked his head up, looking over Victor’s shoulder to find John, dirt-streaked and sweaty, standing barely two meters away, fury sparking out of every pore on his cross-armed frame. His eyes were an icy slate, glinting even in the dim light, and Sherlock knew with absolute clarity that he never wanted to be on the other end of that gaze. When John’s eyes did flick to him, however, he saw something even more terrifying.

The blue softened, filled with a concern that hit Sherlock like a truck. John knew exactly what was going on here, and Sherlock’s insides hollowed with cold shame. Suddenly, his inquiries about how Sherlock met Lestrade made a whole new level of sense, and the hand that wasn’t clenched around Victor’s trembled.

Desperately, Sherlock searched his face, hoping to find some hint of where to begin his excuses, and was stunned to see there was no need.

There was no disappointment in the angry lines that stretched across John’s skin, no pity, no admonishment. There was worry in his furrowed eyebrows and anger in his clenched fists, but no blame or accusation, and the gratitude over that lack of judgment expanded in Sherlock’s chest like a world-devouring supernova.

Emboldened by this unspoken confidence, Sherlock pushed Victor roughly back, and the man gingerly touched the ghostly impressions Sherlock’s fingers had left on his wrist.

“No,” Victor muttered, his voice shaking slightly, “no problem.” He backed away, twisting his head to keep his eyes on both John and Sherlock as he made his retreat. “I’ll be seeing you, Sherls,” he added, almost comical in his attempt to be threatening when his eyes were so wide with fear.

“No, you won’t,” John said, the quiet murder of his tone sending a shiver down even Sherlock’s spine, and he couldn’t blame Victor at all for the visible tremor that ran through his body.

It was only when the pale head was a distant dot bobbing against the deep green of the night-shaded grass that either one of them moved.

“Lestrade told you.”

John didn’t answer, his usual reaction to Sherlock’s not-a-questions, and his eyes did not waver from Victor’s retreating head, even as Sherlock turned back to look at him.

“Why didn’t you say something?” Sherlock asked, his voice embarrassingly quiet.

John met his eyes, the relaxing tension in his body signaling Victor’s disappearance over the crest of the hill. “It didn’t matter,” John answered with soft certainty.

Sherlock blinked, his mental processes going mute under John’s blue gaze.

“You got help,” John continued, something Sherlock dimly registered as bitterness edging his tone. “That’s all that matters.” Pain tugged at the skin around John’s eyes, but Sherlock knew now was not the time to ask where the sympathy toward addiction was coming from. It wasn’t personal, certainly, but it was definitely there.

Silence stretched around them, broken only by the faint laughter drifting back from a group of rugby boys walking back toward the school, their arms slung around one another in shared, expected acceptance.
“Not going to the celebration, then?” Sherlock murmured, watching as one of the boys stumbled up the hill, the others pulling him upright with mocking guffaws.

“Naw,” John shrugged, and the lingering frost in the space between them dissipated as he stepped forward, ruffling a hand through his grass-flecked hair. “Thought I might help with that”—he waved a hand at the file on the ground at Sherlock’s feet—“if it’s alright.”

Sherlock lifted an eyebrow, searching for any hint of mocking. There was none. “You don’t mind?” he asked, just to be sure.

John smiled, shaking his head. “No,” he said, slipping his hands into his pockets as Sherlock gathered the file off the grass. “It’s kind of fascinating, actually. What you do.” He began ambling back toward the school, Sherlock falling into stride next to him. “And besides,” he continued with a smirk, “how will you ever find clues without me to conduct your brilliance?”

Sherlock chuckled down at his shoes, John’s higher laugh joining him as they pressed up the incline. “True enough,” he said, nodding as he lifted his head, smiling back at John’s grin. “True enough.”
Chapter Notes

A key was turning in the lock as he landed in his desk chair, spinning it quickly toward the window. The door opened, and he caught the reflection of a silhouetted figure in the glass in front of him. With a quick push of his foot, he spun the chair, hands folded in his lap as he straightened his back.

“Ah, Mr. Holmes,” John said, narrowing his eyes at the tall boy standing in the doorway, “I’ve been expecting you.”

Sherlock tilted his head, quirkling an eyebrow as he pushed the door closed behind him.

“Did you lock the door just so you’d know when to get in the chair?”

“Sherlock!”

The boy snapped his head up as John entered the lab, closing the door with a quick click as he balanced his laptop awkwardly on his palm.

“You’re in the paper!” he said excitedly, kneeling down on the edge of the detritus of Sherlock’s thought process that was spread out over the floor around him.

Sherlock raised a single, dark eyebrow. “I am?”

“Yeah! Well, sort of,” John mumbled, shrugging as he passed the laptop over.

Sherlock took it, cold fingers grazing against John’s at the handoff.

“Right there,” John said, delicately placing a hand in a gap amongst the photos and papers so he could lean forward and point at the proper paragraph. “Gravin was arrested after new evidence was uncovered by the Metropolitan Police, who were informed of the woman’s possible involvement by an anonymous tip,” John read, planting his other hand on the ground by Sherlock’s knee for better support. “You’re the anonymous tip!”

“Of course I am,” Sherlock muttered disinterestedly as he lifted the laptop back up. “I’m always the anonymous tip.”

John pushed off the floor, taking the computer and moving back to the edge of the mess. “Always?” he repeated, his eyebrows furrowing as he glanced down at the phrase on the glowing screen. “You mean, they never give your name?”

Sherlock shook his head, his hands pressed together beneath his face as he stared intently over the documents.

“Do you ask them not to?”

“No,” the dark-haired boy answered, and John could tell he was rapidly losing patience with the questions.
John didn’t particularly care though. “Then why don’t they use your name?”

Sherlock sighed, glaring as he lifted his head, but John stared firmly back. “I don’t know, John. Perhaps they are embarrassed that a teenager can do their jobs better than they can.” He narrowed his eyes even further for a moment, and then went back to his work, a clear implication that he wanted the conversation to end there.

John still didn’t care. “Well, that’s stupid,” he scoffed, thinking Sherlock would at least be receptive to that sentiment. “What you do is incredible! People should know.”

“You know, you’re eventually going to run out of adjectives,” Sherlock muttered, but the slight smirk curling his mouth as he looked up out of the tops of his eyes took the insult out of it. “People wouldn’t care, John. No one wants to hear about some genius sociopath who spends his free time chasing murderers; my entire life is testament to that.”

John was grateful for the fact that Sherlock had looked away, because he certainly would have rolled his eyes at the expression John could feel on his face. In spite of the fact that Sherlock had said it like it was nothing, that was one of the saddest things John had ever heard, and so horrifically untrue.

“Sure they would,” John said earnestly. “They would!” he pressed as Sherlock snorted. “And you’re not a sociopath.”

“I could point you to several, prominent psychologists who would vehemently disagree,” Sherlock replied, sounding almost amused, but John frowned.

“I don’t care; you’re not,” he challenged, surprised at the fierceness in his tone.

Apparently, Sherlock was too, because he lifted his head, his eyes wide and curious. They quickly narrowed into searching him, however. “Then, what am I, John? A vigilante? Some sort of modern-day hero?”

John said nothing, but his frown deepened as Sherlock smiled at him, a pitying edge to it.

“Don’t make people into heroes, John,” he said, firmly holding John’s gaze. “Heroes don’t exist, and if they did, I wouldn’t be one of them.” Silver-green eyes clung to him for a moment longer before Sherlock looked away, a heavy pall hanging over them in the resulting silence.

John glared at a dark curl that hung over Sherlock’s forehead, obscuring his eyes, and gradually grew more and more frustrated until he burst up from the floor, unable to be in the room any longer. He tugged the door open, balancing his laptop on his right forearm, and was just about to storm across the hall and leave for breakfast when something stopped him.

“Ya know, Sherlock, you might be right about everyone else,” he said softly, turning back to find the boy in question looking up at him, puzzled, “but you’re wrong about you.”

Sherlock blinked, his mouth parting slightly, and John saw something uncharacteristically open wash across the grey eyes before he shut the door between them.

Their dormitory was open, and he walked inside, quickly snapping his laptop shut and sitting it on his bed. He sighed, gripping the bridge of his nose between his fingers as he breathed deeply. He liked Sherlock, he did, but there were times when he could understand why so many people had trouble with him. And it was only their third day as roommates!

John lifted his head, letting his fingers slide from his nose. Had it really only been three days? Not even, considering it was Tuesday morning and he had moved in Sunday afternoon. It felt like so
much longer than that, but, then again, they had crammed a lot of...well, everything into yesterday. In a strange way, it was comforting to have someone already know everything about you; you got to skip that awkward, small talk phase. Of course, he still knew next-to-nothing about Sherlock, but he suspected that would be the case for a long time.

Checking his watch, he grabbed his book bag up off the floor, sliding his mobile off his desk and opening the front pocket to toss it inside. He paused, looking down at the phone in his hand, and then glancing back over to his laptop.

Sherlock was wrong, John knew it, and there had to be some way to prove that to him.

Idea firmly in place, he slung his bag over his shoulder, closing the dormitory door behind him as he text with his opposite hand. “It’s 8:30, Sherlock. I’m heading down to breakfast,” he shouted through the laboratory door. A faint grunt of response reached his ears through the wood. John smiled, shaking his head. “Don’t forget we’ve got Chemistry at 9.” There was a loud, exasperated groan, a rustling sound, and then the door snapped open in his face.

Sherlock stared down at him, as if he alone were responsible for the necessity of academia.

“How up. The buffet might still be out for another few minutes,” John said, checking his watch.

Sherlock huffed, but did go into the dormitory, emerging a few seconds later with his backpack dangling off one shoulder. Still no tie, but John thought better than to mention it, knowing Sherlock was probably willfully ignoring the dress code rather than just unaware.

“Ready?” he asked, and Sherlock shut the door harder than necessary in response.

They walked in silence out the main door, exasperation flowing out of Sherlock in almost visible waves.

“Did you make any more progress on that homeless case after I went to bed?” John said, knowing that was the source of Sherlock’s distress.

“No,” the taller boy growled, shoving his hands in his pockets in a dramatic sulk, and John ducked his head before his smile gave him away.

“Well, we have a free after English, right?” John offered, looking sidelong up at him. “And then nothing after lunch. Maybe we can take another look at it then?”

Sherlock made an irritated sound in his throat, but it appeared to be a sort of resigned agreement, and John smiled at the small victory as they entered the dining hall.

The buffet was indeed still up, much to John’s delight, and he quickly piled a plate with eggs, potatoes, and breakfast meat before weaving his way over to the table that Sherlock was already seated at. He flopped down on the bench, separating his things from Sherlock’s as he pulled them off the tray. A bottle of orange juice was slid across first, and then John pulled the spare plate he’d grabbed from beneath his mounded dish and began separating out the hot food.

“What are you doing?” Sherlock muttered, and John looked up to find grey eyes, tinged with blue now in the artificial lights, watching him intently.

“Giving you your half,” he said, chuckling slightly at the obviousness of it as he finished splitting the potatoes and plopped the plate down across the table.

Sherlock looked down at it as if it would bite him. “I don’t...eat,” he murmured, eyeing an
overhanging piece of bacon.

“What are you talking about, ‘you don’t eat’?” John chuckled, chewing on his scrambled eggs. “I saw you eating yesterday.”

“That was before I started working on the homeless murders,” Sherlock said, pushing the plate back from him a few inches. “I don’t eat when I’m on a case. Digestion slows me down.”

John tilted his head at his ever-stranger roommate, wondering just how many more oddities would come out of Sherlock before he got used to it. “You need to eat,” he chided, sliding the plate back.

“I ate yesterday.” Sherlock answered, shoving the plate against John’s hand before he’d even completely withdrawn it.

“Funny thing about eating: it’s kind of a daily thing,” John chirped with false cheer. He tried to press the plate back toward Sherlock, but the boy’s hand remained firm on the other side, a stubborn wall of resistance. John narrowed stubbornly unblinking eyes, his mind playing Western showdown music as the childish standoff continued. “If you don’t eat, I won’t sit next to you in Chemistry,” he said, glaring into steely blue.

“What makes you think I care where you sit?” Sherlock raised an eyebrow, but the smugness dissipated as John only smirked.

“You probably don’t,” he taunted, savoring this rare moment of Sherlock clearly having no idea what he was about to say, “but I bet Molly would.”

Sherlock’s reaction was impressively controlled, but John still saw the minute widening of his eyes.

Silence fell, even the music in John’s head grinding to a halt, and he slowly lifted his eyebrows, prompting Sherlock to a decision.

He sighed with the air of someone who would be getting even, and wrenched the plate from John’s grip. “Fine,” he growled. He picked up a long-cold piece of bacon with his fingertips, snapping the end off with a flash of pristine teeth. “Happy?” he sneered as he chewed, and somehow even something that wholly unattractive managed to make John smile.

“Toast too,” he said, plucking a triangle from the pile still on his tray and blanketing Sherlock’s eggs with it. “You should get some carbs in.”

“You’re not a doctor yet, you know,” Sherlock grumbled, stabbing a straw through the metallic seal of his orange juice with unnecessary ire.

“No, but I’m closer than you are,” John replied, smiling over the top of his lukewarm tea, “and only a fool argues with his doctor.”

Sherlock’s glare could’ve melted the ice caps, but the only thing John noticed was that he was eating his eggs.

*****

The test tube was fixed at a slight angle, suspended by the apparatus on the front table. Professor Keller held the blue flame of the Bunsen burner beneath it for a few moments, liquefying the potassium chlorate, and then took a gummy candy in his tongs, dropping it into the test tube and tapping it along as it stuck to the sides. The moment the candy hit the clear, molten liquid, it exploded in a burst of brilliant, pink-tinged fire as the sugar met its noble death, white steam billowing away
out the open end of the tube.

Chemistry made sense. Not to John, obviously, who was leaning precariously forward on the edge of his seat as he watched with wide-eyed awe, clearly perplexed as to how an innocuous, bear-shaped candy could cause such chaos.

Sherlock rested his chin on his folded arms, his elbows spread out across the table, threatening to impale anyone who leaned too close.

“Did you see that?” John breathed, tapping his shoulder lightly with the backs of his fingers. “A gummy bear. Can you believe it? A gummy bear!”

Sherlock rolled his eyes, returning to following the loops and swirls in the wood beyond his wrists.

John didn’t know, didn’t see it was the sugar. He didn’t understand that simple things were often the most destructive.

A phone buzzed against a stool, and Sherlock looked to see John shift slightly, moving so his pocket was not pressed against the wood. He narrowed his eyes, watching as John pressed a hand against an unseen button to silence it; a call, then.

John looked down at him, clearly checking to see if he’d noticed. Of course he’d noticed, John, don’t be daft. John smiled, slightly guilty. He had been receiving regular text messages throughout breakfast and Chemistry, replying to them surreptitiously under the table, careful to angle the screen away from Sherlock’s prying eyes. It was all terribly suspicious.

In the mayhem of packing up books and bags at dismissal, Sherlock seized the opportunity of John’s pocket stretching open as he stood from his stool to pluck the phone from its cloth confines. He had just made it to the inbox when quick, tan fingers snatched it back.

“Hey!” John bleated, and then looked self-consciously around before lowering his voice. “Don’t do that! If you want to know, you can just ask.”

“You would lie.”

“You would know.” He smiled, tucking his phone back into his pocket.

“True,” Sherlock replied, smiling back as he grabbed his own belongings and swept out the door just ahead of John, “but knowing you were lying wouldn’t help me figure out the truth.”

“Process of elimination,” John suggested with a playful shrug.

“Illogical,” Sherlock dismissed with a shake of his head. “There are simply too many possible options. I would need more data in order to make a reasonable assessment.”

“You mean you couldn’t even begin to guess,” John said, no question in it.

“I didn’t say that.”

“I’m translating.” John beamed up at him, all mischief and…something.

“I don’t guess,” he spat, hissing over the loathsome word.

“Yes, you do,” John snorted.

Sherlock glared down at ashy-blond hair. “When? When have I ever guessed?”
"You guessed I wouldn’t want to sit with you yesterday morning."

Sherlock blinked, momentarily stunned with the realization that it really had only been that long. "I didn’t guess, I assumed," he snapped.

"You know what happens when you assume," John chided in a sing-song voice, raising his eyebrows up at him.

"You make an ass out of you," Sherlock muttered as they left the science building, walking along the pavement back toward Kingsley House.

"And me, Sherlock. You make an ass out of you and me."

Sherlock grunted as he shrugged. "I've heard it both ways."

John laughed, throwing his head back into the sun, and Sherlock could not help that his lips twitched in contagion.

"John!"

They both stopped and turned at the voice, though Sherlock already knew who it was.

"Oh, hey!" John called back, beaming and waving at Mary Morstan.

Sherlock’s eyes narrowed down at him, a slight leaking out of the sudden, unfathomable fury boiling up in his chest. His clasped his hands tightly behind his back, pinching his fingers together.

"I’ll catch you up in English, yeah?" John said, half over his shoulder, as he had already started walking away.

The muscles in Sherlock’s forearm twitched slightly to grab for him. Instead, he nodded, albeit curtly.

John smiled back, and Sherlock had a rare moment of wishing someone else was as observant as himself. John wouldn’t leave if he could see the stiffness in Sherlock’s body, the tightness around his eyes, the artery in his neck pounding against his skin. But John didn’t see any of these things. John saw Mary, and Sherlock saw his retreating back.

Break was only thirty minutes, but Sherlock went back to his room anyway. Here, he could at least completely melt down in peace.

"Mary!" he hissed, pacing the alley between their beds. "Even her name is boring!"

His skull stared back at him, silently sympathetic.

"And he’s wasting time, valuable time. We have a case! There are lives at stake!"

The skull seemed to concur that this was terribly selfish of John.

"There is a- a madman running around London, and he’s…flirting!" Sherlock spat, flinging his arms into the air. He stopped pacing, his body wilting as he sighed heavily and stared down at the floor.

"Why would he choose her over me?"

He wasn’t aware of his brain forming the words until they were there, falling from his lips in a weak whisper. He rounded on the skull, wide-eyed and frantic, but it couldn’t tell him where that had come
from either.

****

John had almost given up on Sherlock coming to English at all when he strode in, his bag swinging violently out from where it banged against his legs. It almost hit John’s shoulder, but he dodged at the last second, pulling away from his conversation with Mary to twist awkwardly in his chair. He shot a glare back at Sherlock, but the boy merely flounced down dramatically into his desk and began rummaging through his bag.

“Sorry,” he said brightly, turning back to Mary, “you were saying?”

“Yes, well then-then- Where was I?” she muttered, her eyebrows furrowing.

John laughed, marveling at how endearing even her confusion was. “You were talking about moving to London,” he reminded gently.

“Oh, right,” she chuckled, shaking her head to clarity, and John thought he heard a faint, pained groaned from behind him through her laughter, but he wasn’t sure enough to glare again. “Yeah, we moved when I was 11,” she said, smiling as she tuck a strand of hair behind her ear. “For my dad’s job. Not right to London, mind you. Not far from here, actually. My parents like the privacy.”

“Would you have wanted to live in London?” John asked, tilting his head.

“Oh, no,” Mary laughed, shaking her head. “I don’t really like big cities. Too busy. And all that noise!” She sighed, as if she could not fathom anyone subjecting themselves to such a life.

John tried not to be affected, but he felt the small stutter of disappointment in his chest. It was stupid of him, he knew it was, but John always started considering what his life would be like with a girl shortly after taking an interest in her. Would their jobs be compatible? Would they be able to make enough money? Where would they live? Would they agree on takeaway? TV shows? It was ridiculous, absolutely ridiculous, but he couldn’t help it any more than he could help that he had wanted to live in London ever since his family’s first trip there when he was nine. But John had never let these little disappointments keep him from seeing where something could go, and Mary was too incredible not to give that chance to.

“Yeah, it can get pretty hectic,” he replied, smiling back at her, and this time he was positive he heard an amused chuckle over his shoulder. He opened his mouth to continue talking to Mary, when Mr. Tyson came in, and he settled for giving her a quick nod of assurance that they would continue later. He narrowed his eyes briefly back at Sherlock, and received a smug half-smirk in return.

Shaking his head, he turned back to the front.

As if he needed Sherlock’s opinion on his love life. Please.

They continued going over The Vanity of Human Wishes, but John still didn’t understand any of it by the time Mr. Tyson released them 45 minutes later.

Sherlock, predictably, left like the starting gun had just gone off at the Olympics, and John waited for Mary to finish packing her bag before following her to her Maths class again. It might have been becoming a tradition, and John decided he really wouldn’t mind that at all. Waving goodbye to her at the door, he headed back to his dormitory, assuming Sherlock would be there until music.

When he arrived, however, the room and the lab were empty, and John dropped off his school supplies and grabbed his mobile before going out in search of him.
Where are you? he tapped out on the screen.

He held the phone in his hand, expecting the usual, immediate response, but nothing came. He had another message half-typed before realizing that was a little overbearing, and erased it before stowing the phone in his pocket. He was just about to push out the doors to the sunlit grounds outside when a harried voice called him back.

“Mr. Watson!”

John turned to find a familiar face walking toward him, and his mind tripped over itself for a moment of panic before placing the name. “Mr. Parish,” he said, letting his hand fall from the door, and it closed with a dull thump.

“Hello, Mr. Watson,” the housemaster said, giving him a quick nod. “I trust your experience here at Langley is going well?”

“Very well, sir, thank you,” he answered, smiling politely.

Mr. Parish cleared his throat. “I noticed I don’t have a roommate agreement from you and…Mr. Holmes yet,” the man said, muttering over Sherlock’s title.

“Oh, sorry,” John said, dropping his gaze. “I’d forgotten. I’ll—I’ll get it to you right after lunch, sir.” He smiled apologetically, nodding in promise.

Mr. Parish raised an eyebrow at him. “Be sure you do,” he murmured. “And don’t let Holmes bully you into anything. Remember what I said, Watson. If you have any problems, any at all—”

“I’ll be sure to let you know, sir.”

Mr. Parish’s eyes widened at the interruption, and John’s chest tightened with his own shock.

He would never normally have spoken to his housemaster like that, but there was something in the way he talked about Sherlock, something in the way everyone talked about Sherlock, that singed John’s nerves.

“Thank you for the concern,” he added softly, attempting to soften his rudeness.

Mr. Parish was still looking at him curiously, but seemed placated enough. He nodded, turning on his heels and walking back down the corridor.

John sighed, the tension in his body relaxing as he burst out the door. He glanced side-to-side as he walked down the pavement, scanning the lawn, but there were no glowingly pale, exposed forearms to be found.

We have to fill out that roommate agreement before lunch is over. Parish just cornered me

This time, the response was immediate, which only served to make John wonder why he was previously ignored.

Surely you can check boxes without my assistance.

John glared down at the screen after searching a new stretch of lawn and coming up empty again.

We both have to sign it

Forge my signature.
I have no idea what it looks like

So look at a writing sample and form a convincing reconstruction.

John growled down as he mashed at the screen, earning himself a few odd looks.

Will you just fill it out with me over lunch?

A minute passed while John rounded the edge of the sciences building, continuing to search benches and tables.

Fine.

SH

John rolled his eyes. Sherlock signing some of his texts at all was odd, but a single word? Was that really necessary? It was probably intended to be a dismissal, but his question had been left unanswered.

Where are you anyway? John text, hoping to get an answer this time.

He heard an electronic chime out ahead of him, seemingly around the back of the building. It sounded exactly like Sherlock’s text alert, and John drew closer, angry already even though he knew that, logically, it could be anyone.

His heart leapt as his own phone went off just seconds before he would reach the corner of the building. With a glare down at the offending piece of plastic, he rushed the last several paces, whirling around the brick wall.

There was no one there, just a vast expanse of empty wall stretching out in front of him. He sighed in frustration, looking back down at his phone to read the latest message when something caught his eye. A small cluster of cigarette butts lay in the grass at his feet, all smoked down to the filter except for one, which was barely used and still sending up wisps of grey. His grip tightened on his phone as he stared down at the litter, unreasonably upset by the image. Oh, they would definitely be talking about this.

With angry swipes, he unlocked his phone and read the text message that had betrayed his approach.

Thinking.

SH

John scoffed. Thinking around the back of the sciences building with cigarettes? Yeah, that sounded terribly productive. He chose to ignore their previous conversation altogether, opting for bitter condescension about the latest development.

Real mature Sherlock.

There was no reply.

John turned around, returning to the dorm to wait for Sherlock. He had to come back after music, and there was no way John was going to find him before that when he clearly didn’t want to be found.

Sitting on the edge of his bed, his eyes loosely focused on the tower of incomprehensible papers and books on Sherlock’s desk, he wondered at just how much he didn’t understand about his roommate. The way his moods could shift so drastically was alarming, an out of control rollercoaster, apparently
entirely dependent on the progress of his latest case. He wondered if the disappearing was going to be a habit as well, in which case John would have to get a better handle on his natural propensity for worry.

Shrugging that off for now, he pulled his phone out of his pocket, resting an arm behind his head as he lay down on the bed.

“Sergeant Lestrade,” the phone snapped.

“Sergeant? It’s John Watson. Sherlock’s roommate?”

“Oh, right, John,” Lestrade said, much friendlier now, although he still sounded exhausted. “Sorry, I didn’t check the caller ID. What’s going on?”

“I just wanted to call about what we were talking about earlier,” he replied, no idea why he was bothering to be cryptic when Sherlock wasn’t even in the room. Although, he wouldn’t put it past him to lurk outside the door.

“Right, right. Well, I don’t see a problem with it, so long as ya clear ‘em with me first and never post anything before charges have been filed,” Lestrade said, growing more and more official as he progressed.

“Of course,” John answered adamantly, as if this had all occurred to him already.

“Basically, you don’t get anythin’ out ‘til the papers do,” Lestrade added with an audible shrug.

“Right,” John said after realizing his nodding wasn’t visible. “And I’ll send you everything beforehand, just to be sure.”

“Sounds good,” Lestrade muttered, and John heard a phone ringing loudly in the background. “Look, John, I gotta go, but send me whatever ya got when you’re done with it, and…let me know how it goes,” he added. “I’m kind of curious how the internet’ll take to Sherlock Holmes.”

John chuckled. “I’ll be sure to let you know. Thanks, Sergeant.”


“No problem. See ya around,” he signed off cheerfully, and was gone with a muffled click.

John looked down at the phone, his eyebrows furrowing curiously. Apparently Greg had taken his presence at future crime scenes for granted, if the ‘see ya around’ was literal, which John quickly stopped thinking too hard about because he was strangely thrilled by it.

Laying his phone beside him, he stretched forward onto his hands and knees, awkwardly lifting his laptop off the foot of his bed with one hand and pulling it back with him. He shoved a pillow beneath his back and propped himself up against the wall, opening the computer on his lap and opening a blank document. Hovering his fingers over the keyboard, he stared at the black bar blinking at him, daring him to begin.

After several minutes, he started typing, the words coming in rushes and lulls at first, and then flowing, a steady stream of recalled details. He got up at one point to lock the door, a habit he was trying to set for himself in spite of the unlikelihood of intruders all the way down here, and fetched a notebook and pencil from his backpack to jot down the things he thought of before he got to that
point in the narrative. Before he knew it, the door handle was rattling, and he started, snapping his laptop shut as he leapt from the bed.

A key was turning in the lock as he landed in his desk chair, spinning it quickly toward the window. The door opened, and he caught the reflection of a silhouetted figure in the glass in front of him. With a quick push of his foot, he spun the chair, hands folded in his lap as he straightened his back.

“Ah, Mr. Holmes,” John said, narrowing his eyes at the tall boy standing in the doorway, “I’ve been expecting you.”

Sherlock tilted his head, quirking an eyebrow as he pushed the door closed behind him. “Did you lock the door just so you’d know when to get in the chair?”

“No,” John muttered, and Sherlock chuckled skeptically as he let his bag slide off his shoulder onto the floor beside his bed.

“So,” he sighed, collapsing sideways to land in an indelicate heap on his bed, “let’s get this over with.”

John raised his eyebrows, looking up his roommate’s body to the bottom of the boy’s chin, the closest to looking him in the eye he could get when Sherlock was staring at the ceiling, his arms folded behind his head. “Which part? The roommate form or the lecture on smoking?”

Sherlock didn’t say anything, and that was by far the strangest silence John had ever experienced.

“Where are they?” John demanded, emboldened by the lack of argument.

Only Sherlock could make a sigh so clearly patronizing. “Are we really going to-?”

“Yes,” John interjected, calm but firm. “Where are they?”

Sherlock didn’t look at him, but John watched a swallow move down his throat.

John sighed, leaning forward over his knees toward Sherlock’s feet. “I’ll make you a deal, okay?”

Sherlock didn’t move, but he wasn’t immediately shooting him down yet either.

“You quit- No, hear me out,” John blurted as Sherlock groaned, rolling his head toward the wall. “You quit—we’ll get you the nicotine patches and everything—” John began, sliding forward across the floor on the wheels of his chair so he was level with Sherlock’s thighs, “and I’ll give you free reign with all your…”—he trailed off, waving vaguely toward the lab across the hall—“science,” he finished with dramatic flair.

Sherlock chuckled, still looking at the wall, and then grew disconcertingly still. “Free reign?”

“Mhmm,” John hummed affirmatively.

Speculative silver-blue eyes turned to look at him. “You’re not worried you’ll wake up covered in radioactive slime or something?”

John laughed down at his knees for a moment before looking back up at Sherlock, shaking his head as he smiled. “No, you wouldn’t do anything that would hurt me.”

Sherlock’s eyes stuttered through a blink, his mouth falling loose for a moment before he abruptly sat up, perching his elbows on his knees as he folded his legs. “Why do you care?” he nearly snapped, his forehead furrowing.
John leaned back in his chair, tilting his head as he pouted in confusion. “What- Whadya mean?” he murmured.

“What does it matter to you if I smoke?” Sherlock answered, sounding inexplicably frustrated. “Why do you care?”

“Because I don’t want you to get lung cancer?” John said, slow and questioning, confused by having to explain this, and to Sherlock Holmes of all people.

“But I couldn’t possibly develop any serious complications in the next ten months, so what does it matter to you?” Sherlock muttered impatiently.

John blinked. And then again. And then once more, and only then did it start to make a small amount of sense. “Wait, ten- ten months?” he clarified, and Sherlock rolled his eyes at the repetition. “That’s when school ends.”

“Oh,” he breathed, dropping his eyes to the duvet draping over the edge of the bed as he swallowed through a wave of nauseous embarrassment. “Right. Good to know.” He stood, only slightly shaky, and wiped his mobile off his bed as he made his way to the door.

“Dammit, no, John! Don’t-Don’t go.”

John turned, concerned at how much that did not sound like Sherlock Holmes, but that was the person he found staring back at him, looking considerably lost. It was disconcerting and comforting all at the same time to see him so…human.

“I didn’t mean it like that,” he continued, some of the haughty snap in his tone returning. “I just- I’m not- People don’t often-” He closed his mouth with a sigh, dropping his gaze to the pillow in front of him, but he didn’t need to say anything more.

John could feel a palpable crack fissure across his heart as he watched a dozen Sherlock Holmes’ swim in front of his mind’s eye. He wasn’t sitting on his dormitory bed anymore, he was on the playground in primary school, in a desk in the far corner of a classroom, looking out the back window of a car, on the floor between the shelves in a library, at a table in the dining hall, and always, always alone. For all his amazing powers of perception, Sherlock had no idea what to do with a friend. Surely not all his insensitivity could be attributed to that, but it explained some things, and it was enough for John to understand this.

He smiled, letting the stiffness in his body drip away, and Sherlock tilted his head at him curiously, obviously taking notice. “Come on,” John said softly, jerking his head toward the door, “let’s get you those nicotine patches.”

Sherlock’s smile was barely a micro-expression, quickly blending into a distasteful grimace, but he did rise off the bed. “What about that ridiculous form you were talking about?”

“I’ll bring it along,” John replied, opening the door ahead of them as Sherlock grabbed his coat, although it was far too warm for it in John’s opinion. “We can grab lunch in town and do it then. You can bring that case file too, so we can solve a murder and decide who’s taking the trash out all at once.”

“While we eat?” Sherlock questioned as he stepped out the door behind John and clicked it closed.
John lifted his eyebrows up at him as they started down the hall. “Why, you squeamish?”

Sherlock shot him a snide look, and John laughed heartily as they pushed out into the sun. Sherlock’s coat spreading a wide, winged shadow out in front of them.

~~~~~

“So, let me get this straight,” John said over his chicken tikka masala, swiping some naan bread through the red sauce. “You think these four murders have all been committed by the same person for some sort of…personal reason?”

Sherlock nodded as he pushed rice around his plate. “The murders are too violent to not be motivated by rage. The latest victim had 27 stab wounds; that’s overkill by any scope of the imagination.”

The waitress gave them a horrified look as she passed by their table, apparently aborting her effort to ask how they were doing.

John smiled at her apologetically, trying to assure her that neither of them was the serial killer in question.

“The killer is a man between the ages of 20 and 25, physically strong, that much is obvious from the force of the stabbings. His victims were all found in areas well-known to the homeless community as somewhere to purchase drugs, which is fitting, considering all of the victims were dealers.”

It wasn’t actually any quieter than it had been, but the pressure of the silence increased on John’s ears for a moment, and he stopped chewing as Sherlock fidgeted in his seat.

“So, you think their deaths are drug-related?” John asked, clearing his throat pointedly to diffuse the tension.

“It’s likely the killer has some connection to the industry,” Sherlock continued, nibbling on the same piece of naan he’d been holding for the past five minutes. “Not a user, that’s obvious, but there’s some connection, something that ties the killer to the drug industry in that area, to these particular dealers.”

John nodded thoughtfully down at the remaining bites of chicken swimming in their red broth, and then jumped as Sherlock let out an aggravated sigh.

“I need more data!” the boy snarled, his curls bouncing as he rattled his head. “The victims are too random, too scattered. There’s nothing that connects them except their occupation and their living situations, which still leaves far too wide of a suspect pool.”

“And victim pool,” John added gravely.

Sherlock hummed in agreement, his eyebrows furrowing as he stared out the window, as if the answer were written in the glass if he just looked hard enough.

“Why don’t we go back to the roommate agreement for a bit? Change of pace could help.”

Sherlock sighed dramatically, but turned back, folding his hands in front of him on the table. “Go on, then.”

“Okay,” John said, pushing his plate aside and pulling the white form in front of him. “What’s our policy on guests?” he read from the spot they’d stopped earlier.
“What do you mean, ‘guests’?” Sherlock replied, hissing over the last word like a loathsome disease.

“Like, people coming to stay with us; friends staying in our room or whatever,” John muttered, hovering his pencil over the blank space beneath the question.

“I suppose I could sleep in the lab if you ever wanted anyone to come over,” Sherlock said with a shrug.

“That’s stupid; I wouldn’t want you to do that.” John shook his head, frowning across the table. “What about if you have guests? What would you wanna do then?”

“I won’t have any, so there’s no point worrying about it,” Sherlock dismissed with a wave of his hand. “I have no friends, and it’s not as if Mycroft or Mrs. Hudson will be popping in for a weekend.”

John’s grip slackened on the pencil, and it nearly fell from his fingers as he stared at Sherlock. The boy was looking away, back to rolling bits of chicken around the perimeter of his plate, and John wondered how he could say something so personal casually, as if he were merely reminding John of something he already knew, something obvious. And, now that he thought about it, perhaps that’s exactly what it was.

“Well, I won’t have any either,” John murmured, lowering the pencil to the paper, “but I guess we’ll just put some tripe about checking with one another first or something.”

Sherlock only hummed, but he sounded amenable enough, so John scratched some drivel out in the space.

“Okay, noise levels. Do you prefer to study in a quiet environment, or-”

“John?” Sherlock interjected, draping over the table as he leaned toward him. “Why don’t you just tell me what will bother you, considering we both know my activities are likely to be the most intrusive.”

John considered arguing, but it really was far too true to try, so he merely chuckled. “Alright. I’m not too concerned about the noise thing; that’s never really bothered me.”

Sherlock nodded, the wild embers of his pale eyes focused solely on John’s face, and he was suddenly hyperaware of what his hands were doing.

“I’m a pretty sound sleeper too, so I don’t think your experiments will be a problem. Unless something explodes…” He raised his eyebrows at Sherlock, who huffed and rolled his eyes, but John clearly noted that wasn’t in any way an assurance. “And I can always help you, so at least I’ll know when to duck.”

Sherlock barked a brief laugh, smiling at him over his naan bread before taking another, larger bite. If nothing else was sorted here, at least Sherlock would have eaten. “You want to help me with my experiments?” he asked, chewing thoughtfully.

John shrugged. “Sure, why not? I might even get superpowers from a bad reaction or something,” he said with a smirk.

Sherlock snorted derisively.

“Try to make it something cool though, like super strength,” John added, grinning.
“Perhaps expanding your intelligence would be more practical,” Sherlock taunted. “I’m sure I could formulate some sort of experiment to-”

“Hey now! That’s another one of my roommate conditions,” John interrupted, suddenly firm, holding a finger out toward Sherlock’s face. “No experimenting on me or my stuff. Not without my knowledge.”

Sherlock blinked, his lips falling in a wounded pout. “I would never- Are you actually writing that down?!?”

John lifted his head from the page, his pencil stilling as he met Sherlock’s incredulous eyes. “Yes. And you’re actually going to sign it.”

“Parish will think you’re mad,” Sherlock warned, an eyebrow lifting.

John’s lips twisted mischievously. “Perfectly sound assessment.”

Sherlock’s grin was blinding.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

“If it’s any consolation, I doubt I’ll ever be required to murder you.” He said it as if it were the most sincere compliment in the world, the Sherlock version of a Valentine’s card.

“Comforting,” John replied, smiling down at him, “but make sure it’s impressive if you ever do. Not just cutting my brake lines or something like that.”

“I made the team!” John exclaimed, bursting through the laboratory door with his hands held aloft. He had been waiting all week for the list to be posted, and finally, during Friday’s lunch period, it had been pinned to the house bulletin board, and he’d taken off down the corridor as soon as he’d caught sight of his name on the roster.

Sherlock grunted in acknowledgement from where he lay on the floor, staring at the photographs he held over his head, his feet crossed and elevated on a chair.

John’s hands slapped against his sides as he wilted with disappointment. “Okay, let’s try this again,” he muttered, backing out of the room and closing the door with a pointed crack. He walked to the end of their corridor, purposefully stepping loud enough for Sherlock to hear his progress. When he reached the corner, he turned, stomping in long strides back toward the door.

“Sherlock, ol’ buddy, ol’ pal! I made- What the-!?”

Ripped shards of paper tumbled in front of his eyes, whispering over his cheeks as they fluttered to the floor.

“Congratulations,” Sherlock deadpanned, swatting his hands together to dislodge the last of the makeshift confetti over John’s head before walking back across the room and puddling down to the floor.

“Ya know, I know you’re only mocking me,” John chuckled, brushing his jumper free of debris, “but I still appreciate the thought.” He ran a hand through his hair, coming away with one of the larger strands of confetti. “Sherlock,” he questioned, narrowing his eyes as he twisted the torn image in his fingers, “is this one of the crime scene photos?”

Sherlock hummed and nodded to the ceiling.

John laughed, leaning back against the door for support, the slip of paper crumpling in his hand as his fist closed around it.

“What?” Sherlock muttered, tilting his head backward to peer upside-down at him, and that only made John laugh harder.

“Nothing,” he finally managed to chuckle. “That’s just...so appropriate.”

Sherlock tilted his inverted head at him, his curls pressing flat against the tile.
“Just never mind,” John muttered, swatting a hand at him as he drew closer, dropping his backpack to the floor and folding down next to it. “Here,” he said, pulling out the apple he’d grabbed from the dining hall at lunch, something he had grown fairly certain over the past week that Sherlock would never accompany him to.

Sherlock glanced at it out of the corner of his eye and scoffed, and John sighed tiredly, his hand dropping a few inches in the air.

“Will you just take it? I don’t think you ate at all yesterday.”

“I can’t eat until I solve this case!” Sherlock snarled, his hands shaking slightly as he held the photographs over his face.

John lowered the apple back to his lap, watching the progress of small tremors run through Sherlock’s arms. “When was the last time you slept?” he asked quietly.

Sherlock stilled, his eyes growing unfocused.

“Sherlock?” John pressed, adding a touch of his rugby-captain-at-my-old-college voice.

The boy sighed, collapsing his elbows and letting his hands fall to his chest. “Tuesday evening. Possibly a little Wednesday afternoon.”

“That was three days ago!”

“I said possibly a little Wednesday afternoon, and that was only two days ago.”

“You only say ‘possibly’ when you’re humoring me,” John snapped, remembering all his theories of the murders being dismissed with that same word. He thrust the apple out to hover centimeters from the pale nose. “Eat.”

Sherlock rolled onto his stomach, bringing his shoulder to rest against John’s knee as he peered up at him. “John, I have never said this to another person in my entire life,” he began, sounding equally irritated and fond, “but, sometimes, you are too clever for your own good.”

John stared at him, aghast, and Sherlock swiped the apple out of his hand with a half-hearted glare before turning back to the ceiling, his shredding bite deafening in the silence.

“I called Lestrade,” he said, swallowing the chunk of granny smith. “Told him to send over the files on anyone who had been hospitalized for complications from drug use in the year leading up to the first murder.”

“That’s gotta be hundreds of people,” John breathed, discouraged. There had been another body discovered Wednesday morning, and neither of them were taking it well, although it was manifesting very differently. John thought bleakly about another family getting a notification, and Sherlock apparently just stopped sleeping.

“It won’t be as difficult to narrow down as you think,” Sherlock said, reading his mind. “For someone to start hunting down drug dealers, the complications must have been severe. They are likely permanently damaged in some way to show that much rage toward the people they see as being at fault.”

“So that’s why you think they’re doing it? Something happened to them because of…bad drugs?” John hesitated in implying that there was such a thing as good drugs, but Sherlock seemed to understand his point, and much more, as always.
“Yes, why?” He sat up, crossing his legs and staring intently across at John. “You have another idea?”

The honor of being asked didn’t escape John, but he had to look away from those eyes. It was impressive when they were turned on crime scenes, picking up the most minute of details with awe-inspiring accuracy, but it was another matter when that gaze was turned on him.

“Yeah, well, I had a thought…”

“Idea, thought, notion, inkling, whatever you want to call it, just tell me!” Sherlock looked positively rabid, and John vowed to make him sleep that night, even if he had to slip sleeping pills into his water.

“Well, we’re thinking it’s personal because something happened to the killer, right?” John began, and Sherlock nodded impatiently. “But what if it wasn’t him? Not directly, anyway. What if it was someone he knew?”

“How many people would you go on a homicidal rampage for, John?” Sherlock muttered, rolling his eyes. John looked at him, a former-rugby-captain stare to go with his former-rugby-captain tone. “A few.”

Sherlock blinked, his eyes narrowing slightly as they softened, and then they shot wide, his mouth forming a loose circle. “Sentiment!” he exhaled, twisting on the floor to spread the photos out in front of him. “Of course! No wonder it didn’t make sense! Bitterness, bitterness is a paralytic, but love. Love is a much more powerful motivator.”

A shiver ran up John’s spine at the monologue, the tender, awed tone of Sherlock’s voice disconcerting in ways nothing else about the boy had ever come close to. He wasn’t horrified, he was impressed, and that horrified John.

“Father? No, parents wouldn’t seek revenge, not when the dealers are so young themselves. Brother, perhaps. Older, definitely older. Younger brother? Sister? Impossible to say; I’ll need them all.” He was muttering to himself, pulling his phone—Wait.

“How did you get my phone?” John exclaimed, grabbing at it, but Sherlock tugged it out of reach as he dialed. John sighed, shaking his head. In all honesty, the only thing that surprised him about it was that he wasn’t surprised.

“Lestrade? I need every file you have on drug-related deaths that occurred in the past year. … No, not those; that would be useless! The ‘so young, so tragic, whole life ahead of them’ ones. … We’re looking for a sibling, older, mid-to-late twenties. … If it doesn’t specifically say no older siblings, send it. … Yes, I’m sure. … I can run through them. … You really think I can’t get access your system remotely? … With your password, obviously. … You can lecture me, or you can help me catch a killer. Now, will you send over the files or not? … That’s the best you can do? … Fine, fine, a few hours. I’ll meet you outside. Make sure the car’s unmarked.”

John’s phone was tossed back to him, enthusiastically hitting him in the chest before he fumblingly caught it. “Careful!” he shouted, brushing across the screen with the sleeve of his jumper, but it didn’t look any worse for wear. “Ow,” he hissed, the pain setting in now that the anger was abating, and he rubbed firm circles over his sternum. “That’ll smart later.”

“Why?” Sherlock muttered, stopping in the nervous pacing he’d started to narrow his eyes down at John. “Why later?”
“Because I have rugby later,” John answered, slipping his phone back into his pocket, where it would hopefully stay. “First official practice is tonight. 5 o’clock.”

“That’s when Lestrade will be getting here with the files,” Sherlock replied, as if that settled the matter, but John wasn’t exactly sure what was supposed to be settled.

“Oookaaaay,” John stretched, raising an eyebrow up at him. “I’ll look over them with you after. Should be done around 7.”

“You’re going to go?!” Sherlock exclaimed, his eyes wide and scandalized as they flashed with silver indignation.

“Of course I’m gonna go,” he answered incredulously, shaking his head. “First official practice, remember? I can’t miss it.”

Sherlock exhaled pure disgust, and John ducked his head to hide his amusement at the dramatics.

“You could come, ya know. Bring the case files down to the pitch.”

Sherlock shook his head, forehead creasing. “No, there’d be no point. You’ll be nearly done by the time Lestrade gets here.”

“Then I’ll help you after, like I said.” John smiled reassuringly, but Sherlock merely scoffed, his pacing resumed. “Practice should be wrapped up by 7, and then I’ll just have to shower and change, and I-”

“Yes, about that,” Sherlock interrupted, perfectly official, as if he hadn’t just been having a tantrum. “Why do you use the communal bathroom instead of mine?”

“Yours?” John asked, his face pinching with confusion. “There’s no bathroom in our-”

Sherlock interjected by walking across the room and wrenching open a door on the left side, which John hadn’t even noticed due to the fact that there was a large poster of the periodic table plastered over it. “It’s much more convenient for my experiments,” he said with a shrug.

John got up, peering open-mouthed into the room. They already had practically their own wing of the dormitory house, and now a private bathroom!? Was there anything the name Holmes couldn’t accomplish?

“Why didn’t you mention this earlier?” John snapped, turning back to glare at his roommate. “I’ve been showering in those god-awful stalls, and you had a private bathroom!?” His eyes narrowed, his glance flicking back into the bathroom for a moment. “It is…safe, isn’t it?”

“Of course it’s safe,” Sherlock grumbled, rolling his eyes. “The cleaning staff cleans it just like everything else.”

“You let them in here?” John asked, shocked.

“They know not to touch anything,” he answered, his tone only hinting at the threat John could see smoldering in his eyes.

“Right. Well, thanks,” he said, taking one last glance at the seemingly harmless bathroom before taking the door from Sherlock’s hand and closing it.

“No need,” Sherlock muttered with a quick rattle of his head. “It’s only logical.”
John was going to insist that it was nice all the same, but Sherlock fluttered away, leaving the laboratory with a bang of wood on plaster. “You’re gonna put a hole in the wall one of these days,” John chided, pulling the door away from its victim and running his hand along the impact cracks in the paint.

“I already have. Several, in fact,” Sherlock said, his voice slightly muffled coming from the bedroom.

“What? Where?” He looked around the lab before closing the door behind him, and then proceeded to survey the dormitory walls as he came to stand behind Sherlock’s desk chair.

“I filled them in myself,” Sherlock said, shrugging as he pushed some of the piles on his desk around.

“Did a good job of it,” John muttered, impressed as he scanned the flawless, unbroken surface of paint around their room.

“Is it really that surprising that I can accurately duplicate plaster, John?” It didn’t matter that Sherlock’s back was turned, the eye roll was audible.

“No, not really,” he replied, his shrug probably audible too. “I’m just making a mental note not to give you cause to murder me. You’d clean up all the evidence.”

“No, not really,” he replied, his shrug probably audible too. “I’m just making a mental note not to give you cause to murder me. You’d clean up all the evidence.”

“John, please.” Sherlock swiveled in his chair, looking up at John with a patronizing tilt to his head. “I wouldn’t leave any evidence to clean up.”

John laughed, leaning back against his own desk, his fingers clenching around the wooden lip. “I don’t know why I’m laughing; that should be terrifying,” he chuckled, shaking his head.

“If it’s any consolation, I doubt I’ll ever be required to murder you.” He said it as if it were the most sincere compliment in the world, the Sherlock version of a Valentine’s card.

“Comforting,” John replied, smiling down at him, “but make sure it’s impressive if you ever do. Not just cutting my brake lines or something like that.”

Sherlock made a disgusted sound, but his eyes sparkled with a smile. “God, no. Far too dull.”

“Maybe a nice dismemberment,” John mused fondly, the corner of his mouth twitching with the effort to gaze seriously out the window. “A nod to my medical ambitions. And then you could just drop me in pieces all over London.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Sherlock scoffed, but they were clearly both nearing their limits of forced solemnity. “Where’s the sport in that? I would gradually mail you to the Yard, of course.”

“First-Class?” John asked with a smirk.

Sherlock shook his head, beaming back at him. “Priority.”

Their facades fell apart, John nearly slipping from his position against the desk as Sherlock struggled not to tumble out of his chair.

“Good thing we didn’t include that in the roommate agreement,” John wheezed as Sherlock clutched at his stomach, sucking in deep, heaving breaths.

“Parish would’ve had me committed!” he panted.

“You?” John blurted. “I would’ve signed the damn thing too! Maybe we could get our own ward in
the asylum.”

Sherlock bent over his knees, gasping as he groped at his ribs. “I’m sure my brother could have something arranged.”

Their laughter slowly devolved to chuckling, punctuated by wracking heaves of air.

“God,” John sighed, his abdominal muscles finally loosening enough to permit speech. “Why am I actually flattered that you’d send my dismembered limbs Priority?”

“You should be,” Sherlock huffed. “Can you imagine how expensive it would be to ship your torso?”

That time, John did fall off the desk.

~~~~~

Bodies collided, sweat and dirt intermingling in a cloud of limbs and grunts. chunks of grass flew up from boots, shards of green clinging to blue, uniform shirts as clods of dirt disintegrated behind racing legs. Slices of red cut through the brown film of grime on scattered knees and elbows, and some were already covered with twisted, would-be-white bandages.

Rugby was brutal, and John loved it. Their positions weren’t exactly set as the first practice came to a close, Coach Powles wanting to make sure everyone got a chance at everything first, but John could make an educated guess. Coach seemed to favor him as one of the second-row forwards, but John wondered if that might be because Mike was the other one, or at least he had been last year. They worked together as a team better than any other pair out there, constantly anticipating and communicating in cross-field glances and gestures formed through years of secondary-school rugby. John had also been prompted to try out halfback, center, and, to his great surprise, hooker, but he was under no disillusions that he could jump right into a position as important as that when he had only just arrived at Langley. His teammates hardly even knew him; they certainly weren’t about to start taking orders from him.

“Good work out there, Watson,” Coach Powles called, nodding over his clipboard as John walked past, wiping his forehead with a small, white towel.

“Thank you, sir,” he replied, trying not to sound too winded.

“Coach will do just fine, son,” the man said, his brown eyes kind as he smiled, and John was grateful to see at least one area of his life here at Langley wouldn’t be so painfully formal. “What position did you play in secondary?”

“Little bit of everything, si- Coach,” John muttered, smiling apologetically as he wiped at the back of his neck. “Mostly second-row forward or center, but I was hooker on my college team last year. Hooker and Captain.” He was only bragging a little, and really, he had earned it. He had been the best player on that team. Not that his college’s rugby prowess was anything remotely remarkable at all, but still, he had been hooker, and they’d nominated him captain after only a few practices. That was worth something, wasn’t it?

Coach Powles certainly seemed to think so, his eyebrows rising as he nodded, clearly impressed. “Interesting,” he said, scratching a note on his clipboard, and, with that familiar word, John suddenly remembered Sherlock was waiting for him. “Well I’m sure we’ll find a place for you. Best hit the showers before all the hot water’s gone,” he added with a flash of teeth.

John smiled back at him with a short nod. “Right. See you Monday, then, Coach.”
Coach Powles waved his pen at him in goodbye, and John headed over to the bench, gathering what belongings had managed to be scattered and shoving them back into his athletic bag. He slung it over his shoulder, his muscles tired and aching, and headed toward the main path. The locker room would no doubt be a muddy mess at the moment, and John was inexplicably grateful for the privilege of a shower back at his dorm.

The lawns were painted with the setting sun, the grass an unnatural green, and the shadows stretched long and reaching around him as he walked. Ahead on the pavement, a figure rose over the top of the hill, and John squinted against the blinding, silhouetting light to find it was a familiar woman.

“Constable Donovan!” John spluttered, surprised and humiliated. He had no idea what he looked like right now, but if the state of that towel he’d used to wipe his face was any indication…

“John,” she said stiffly, nodding as she stopped, standing just in front of him, the height difference all the more irritating with her slightly elevated position on the hill.

“Sherlock’s not here;” he supplied hurriedly, feeling very exposed under the intense look Donovan was giving him without Sherlock’s tall, black-cloaked figure beside him. She seemed so much more intimidating without him here to sneer at her.

“I know,” Donovan replied, her tone clipped and official, “I wanted to talk to you. Sherlock said you’d be down here. Not all that readily, mind you,” she added bitterly, crossing her arms across her chest.

John felt a flicker of fond pride in his chest, glad and grateful that Sherlock had at least tried to avoid putting him through this ambush. “Me?” he questioned, his eyebrows furrowing. “Why would you want to talk to me?”

Donovan gave him a pitying look, the same look Sherlock had when John was missing something terribly obvious, but Sherlock pulled it off so much better. Donovan just looked rude. “Sherlock, what else?” she muttered irritably, looking past his shoulder and out over the school garden.

John’s stomach clenched, his fingers following as they encircled the strap of his bag. “What about him?” He managed to keep the rising anger out of his voice, enough to fool Donovan, at least.

“You’re getting pulled in by him,” she said, and, as John’s teeth clenched, he realized how annoying that tone was coming from someone other than Sherlock. “Don’t. He’s dangerous, John. He’s not like us. He’s…wrong.”

John’s nails were digging into his palms, and the only reason he didn’t say anything was because he couldn’t pick which thing to yell at her about first.

“He doesn’t get paid for this or anything, ya know,” she continued, her deductive skills apparently not registering John’s furious glare. “He likes it. Gets off on it.” She was nodding, as if her argument were reaching its now-irrefutable crescendo. “Mark my words, John”—he winced at the attempt at camaraderie in such a discussion—“one of these days we’ll all be standing around a body, and Sherlock Holmes will be the one who put it there.”

John didn’t dare breathe for a moment, not trusting himself to allow his body the oxygen to speak.

Donovan merely continued to stare at him, a calm expression developing over her face, as if she believed her point made and no further argument was necessary.

John couldn’t allow that. “Thank you, Constable Donovan,” John said slowly, his tone low and devoid of emotion, “I’ll keep that in mind.”
Somehow, she was surprised, her eyes widening, her mouth opening as if to speak, but John brushed past her, cutting off any further interaction.

“You can’t trust him, John!” she called after him, and he counted his steps to keep from whirling around at her. “He’s not your friend! He’s not anyone’s friend!”

345 steps later, he threw open the laboratory door, physically shaking with restrained rage.

Sherlock had clearly been pacing, but he froze now, his chrome-green eyes wide as they looked over John’s, shock and a flicker of concern flashing through them. He was standing across the room, half-turned to the doorway, one arm crossed over his body, the other hovering where his hand had just slipped off his chin in aborted thought. The window was directly behind him, the bright lights inside the laboratory reflecting the interior scene against the dark glass, and, as John caught sight of his reflection, Sherlock’s expression suddenly made much more sense.

“I’ve decided,” John began, the bang of the door he swatted closed behind him punctuating the silence, “I don’t like Donovan all that much.” He shook his head, a quick, jerky rattle, as he met Sherlock’s eyes.

Sherlock blinked, searching for something a second longer, and then the tension visibly pooled from his body. He turned fully to face John, his thumbs tucking into his pockets as he rocked back on his heels, chuckling down at the floor for a moment. “Standard Post for her, then,” he muttered, nodding seriously.

John blinked, his eyebrows reaching together, and then he laughed, his anger easing out in the soft exhales. “Definitely,” he agreed, his head bobbing lazily as he smiled across at his friend, because Sherlock Holmes was his friend, no matter what Donovan or Parish or even Mycroft said. “Alright, well, I’m gonna shower,” John sighed, jerking a thumb toward the bathroom to his left before opening the door again and moving across to the dormitory to get a clean change of clothes.

“Probably for the best,” Sherlock clipped with a single, official nod. “You appear to be wearing most of the pitch.”

John laughed tonelessly from his bureau, tugging out a pair of navy track pants and a ratty, white t-shirt, careful not to touch them to his uniform as he walked back across the corridor, heading straight into the bathroom as Sherlock sat back down at his desk. He pressed the center button on the door handle, clicking the lock into place and immediately ripping his unnumbered, practice jersey off, the white undershirt still clinging to him, coldly damp with sweat. Watching the shiny, blue material glide through his hands, dirt-smeared and grass-littered, John’s lips lifted into a slow smile, blooming along with the ember of contentment that settled warmly over his heart. Maybe, he did belong here, like his aunt had said. Maybe, between Sherlock and rugby, he could carve out a place at Langley after all.

“Will you stop fawning over your new jersey already!? I can smell you from here!”

John glared at the door, letting his arm collapse to his side, a few strands of grass falling from the jersey with the motion. He watched them flutter to the grey bathmat, turning his palm up as he considered the uniform in his hand. With a wicked smirk, he quickly balled it, clenching it in his left hand as he jerked the door open with his right. Rugby-passing accuracy put to possibly the best use yet, John shot the shirt across the room, hitting Sherlock square in the face as he twisted his chair at the sudden reentrance.

If John never accomplished anything else for the rest of his life, he would die happy knowing he had been the cause of that ridiculous yelp.
“He doesn’t look evil. There’s nothing about him that ya just look at and it gives you the creeps.”

“There usually isn’t,” Sherlock replied, looking back at the man in question, who was currently stretching over the back of his chair.

“Then how are you supposed to know?” John nearly whispered.

Sherlock watched Ethan, taking in every detail of him: the unkept state of his jeans, the multi-colored samples of mud on his trainers, the dirt trapped under his fingernails, surrounded by jagged, bitten skin. “You don’t have to know,” he said, turning his head to meet John’s tight, worried eyes. “You have me for that.”

It was nearly ten in the morning, and Sherlock perched on the edge of his desk, his palms pressed together beneath his chin as he watched John sleeping.

He was lying on his side, one arm bent beneath his head, the opposite hand splayed immobile over the last file he had been going through. His breathing was slow and even, and the manmade breeze from the AC vent above them tugged at the tips of his blond hair, rolling waves of wheat shimmering in the sunlight that filtered through the ineffective blinds.

To his credit, John had managed to stay awake until nearly 4am, and Sherlock wondered briefly if, upon waking, he would have any recollection of Sherlock finding the right file and phoning Lestrade, considering he had continued talking to the boy’s sleeping form. Perhaps it would have permeated John’s dreams somehow, exterior stimuli seeping into the unconscious. It would make for a fascinating experiment, but, of course, that had been forbidden in the roommate agreement.

A smile tugged at Sherlock’s lips as he looked down at his grey-socked feet that rested on his desk chair in front of him. What he would have given to see the look on Mr. Parish’s face when he’d read that.

John sniffed suddenly, a hissing intake of breath through his nose as his head lolled side-to-side in the beginning throes of waking.

With silent agility, Sherlock slipped from the desk, grabbing a meaningless, decoy book off the top of a stack before settling onto his own bed. He opened to an arbitrary page and took on as uncalculated an appearance as he could, not wanting John to wake to being watched. Even he probably had his limits.

A half groan, half sigh scraped through John’s sleep-chapped lips as his eyes fluttered open, dark pupils contracting sharply within the blue as he ducked his head into the pillow with a wince. He looked across at Sherlock with half-lidded eyes, blinking as his irises adjusted. “What time is it?” he wheezed, the sleepy syllables desert-dry.

“Nearly ten,” Sherlock replied, resting the book over his thigh. “But you can go back to sleep if
you’d like; I solved the case.”

“You did?” John said, coughing as he croaked, propping himself up on an arm. “What happened? Who was it?”

“Ethan Carlisle,” Sherlock explained, stretching an arm down onto the floor to pluck up the appropriate file. He leaned forward, and John mirrored the gesture to meet him in the divide. “His sister died eight months ago as a result of toxins in her supply of cocaine. Arsenic, to be precise.”

“Jesus,” John breathed, now fully awake and horrified as he shook his head down at the file he was peeling through. “She was our age,” he said, pained and sympathetic. “17. How does someone get hooked on cocaine at 17?”

Sherlock watched the realization and regret shift through John’s eyes, his grip tightening on the file in his fingers. Sherlock knew that was not a mistake that awake-longer-that-two-minutes-John would have made, however, and felt the uncharacteristic need to assuage the guilt he could see creeping into the lines around his eyes with a small expression of trust. “14,” he said, answering the question that would never have been asked.

John restrained his shock remarkably well, all things considered, his expression quickly shifting through concerned pity to acceptance. He nodded almost imperceptibly before turning his attention back to the file, but the wrinkle between his eyebrows did not entirely disappear. That small, shadowed furrow contained so many questions, but they would, for the moment, remain unasked and unanswered.

“Lestrade said he was going to bring him in for questioning, and call when he had something,” Sherlock continued, checking the time on his phone.

“How long ago was that?” John asked, just as Sherlock’s mouth opened to tell him.

“Three hours. It doesn’t many any sense,” he hissed, frustrated, the book sliding forgotten off his thigh as he swung his legs over the side of the bed toward John. “Ethan Carlisle doesn’t see himself as a criminal, he sees himself as a hero, doling out justice where the justice system has failed. He’s unlikely to deny his activities for long, if at all. Even with Lestrade at the helm, the interrogation shouldn’t take nearly this long.”

“Maybe he got enough for an arrest and he’s getting the warrant and all that,” John suggested, closing the file as he shrugged.

Sherlock grunted a concession to the possibility, leaning forward as he rest his elbows on his knees, his fingers returning to press against his chin in thought.

“Did you sleep at all?” John asked, sliding his own legs off the bed and leaning forward to mirror Sherlock’s position, minus the steepled hands.

Sherlock swatted back his concern and scoffed.

John smiled warmly, a response to his gruffness Sherlock still wasn’t used to. “You should try and get some at least,” he advised, rising to his feet with popping knees. “You’ve done all you can for now, and Lestrade’s phone call will always wake you up when it comes in.” He walked to his bureau, opening the drawer of his uniform clothes before hesitating and turning back. “We can wear our normal clothes on the weekends, right?”

Sherlock nodded with an indistinct grunt.
John just smiled again, closing the drawer and opening the one below it. “I’m gonna get dressed and head over to the dining hall, see if breakfast is still up,” he said, pausing in the doorway he opened, jeans and a green t-shirt tucked under his arm. “Want me to bring you back anything?”

He shook his head, glancing up at John briefly out of the corner of his eyes.

A patient sigh whispered through the room. “Let me rephrase,” John muttered, taking a couple steps back to stand at Sherlock’s side. “I am going to bring you back something regardless, so you might as well tell me what you’d prefer.”

Sherlock lifted his head from the tips of his fingers, twisting to look up at the boy smirking down at him.

His hair was ruffled with sleep, sticking up aggressively on one side, and Sherlock could imagine he would spend some time in the bathroom trying to wet it down into submission. His navy track pants were pulled low over his waist, white-socked feet sticking out from the bottoms, toes showing through in spots where the cotton had worn to transparency. There was a hole in the white shirt—probably moths, but he couldn’t rule out tumble-dryer burns—about halfway up his torso, revealing a small patch of the shadowed, tan skin beneath.

Sherlock’s throat tightened, but he managed to glare naturally enough.

“You sure you don’t want to tell me what you’d like?” John hung off the doorframe, leaning half into the room as he tossed a bundle of used sleepwear onto his bed.

Sherlock pushed his head backward on the pillow, sliding his arm down to below his chin as he peered over the top of his bed at a smiling, upside-down John. His stomach rolled, and even he couldn’t entirely convince himself it was just hunger. “I suppose the blueberry waffles are tolerable…”

John beamed. “One order of blueberry waffles, coming up,” he said with a nod, brilliant azure flashing with amusement before he ducked back around the doorframe, his footsteps gradually fading away.

Sherlock sighed, letting his eyes flutter shut as his breath left him. He probably had half an hour before John returned, knowing his propensity to find someone to talk to. Half an hour and then he would call Lestrade, demand an update. Just half an hour to refresh his mind, that was all he needed. He felt the tension leaving his muscles, trains of thought drifting off the tracks, swept away by the pulling waves of exhaustion, and if the imagined sea was the color of John’s eyes, Sherlock didn’t dwell on it.

~~~~~
He heard his sharp, waking inhale before he realized he had made it, his eyes shooting open as he made to bolt upright. He knew instinctively he had slept much longer than intended, but any further assessment of the situation was aborted by a blinding spike of pain in his head, swiftly accompanied by nauseous dizziness. He moaned, falling back onto an elbow as he lifted his other hand to grind at his head, willing the swooping feeling away.

“This is what happens when you don’t eat.”

He wanted to glare, but he could not yet open his eyes, so he settled for hissing vehemently in the direction of John’s voice.

John chuckled, and there was the sound of him rising from his bed and walking across into the lab as Sherlock lay back down, pressing his fingers hard against his eyes. After a few minutes of rustling and clanking, John’s sock-muffled footsteps returned, coming to rest beside Sherlock’s head as the shadow of his form crossed over his face.

He opened his eyes, squinting up to find John holding a plate, the metal handle of a fork protruding over the edge. His hunger rose with a vengeance, and he sat up, pointedly slower this time.

“Waffles à la Watson!” John said grandly, lowering the plate down in front of Sherlock’s face.

A faint odor of methane drifted up his nose, and he surveyed the crisp, browned edges and ridges across the blue-speckled waffles with narrowed eyes before looking up, one eyebrow lifting with amused curiosity. “Did you reheat these over my Bunsen burner?”

John grinned, bending to sit the plate beside his hip on the bed. “A chef never reveals his secrets,” he answered with a wink before returning to his own bed, flopping down against the pillows he had propping him up against the wall.

“I thought that was magicians,” Sherlock said, crunching off a triangle of waffle with his fork.

“I’ve heard it both ways.” He said it casually enough, but smirked when Sherlock looked at him questioningly, recognizing the mocking repetition. Reaching out, he grabbed a sheet of white paper from where it rested beside his knee, pulling it back up in front of his face, obviously what he had been in the middle of when Sherlock woke.

“What’s that?” Sherlock asked between bites, nodding toward the paper in John’s hand. It was high-quality paper, likely a school document, but the print was too small for him to read at this distance.

“Assignment sheet for English,” he answered, turning it toward Sherlock as he looked up. “I was trying to pick what two texts I wanted to read off the list. Ya know, the ones we have to compare to A Midsummer Night’s Dream?”

Sherlock nodded, mouth full of whole grains.

“They’re all really…er…” His forehead furrowed down at the paper as he hesitated, biting at the corner of his lower lip.

Waffle scraped down Sherlock’s throat as he swallowed. “Female-centered?”

John laughed. “I was gonna say chick-lit, but female-centered works.” He shrugged, resting the page in front of him as he turned onto his side to face Sherlock.

“What looks least inane?” Sherlock asked, craning his neck, but still unable to read more than a handful of words upside-down.
“There’s a lot of Austen,” John murmured with a grimace, his eyes surfing over the words. “Pride and Prejudice, Sense and Sensibility, Emma,” he recited, his finger grazing the page. “Then there’s Rebecca, Jane Eyre, Madame Bovary.”

“Have you read any of them before?” Sherlock interrupted, picking up the remaining half of his last waffle with his fingertips. The crunch echoed around his skull as he bit, and he chewed hastily in order to be able to hear John’s response.

“I think I read most of Pride and Prejudice in secondary school,” John muttered, smiling with shy guilt, “but none of the others sound familiar.”

“Pride and Prejudice is probably one of the easier ones with which to draw parallels.” He broke off another bite before continuing. “Mrs. Hudson read quite a large portion of Rebecca to me a couple years ago; that would also correlate well.”

“Alright,” John clipped, nodding down at the page, “we’ll do those two, then. Assuming you don’t mind doing the same ones,” he added, looking up with an uncertain lift of his eyebrows.

Sherlock shook his head, mute until he swallowed. “It’s the most logical decision. Mrs. Hudson has both of those books at her flat; I’ll stop by at some point and borrow them.”

John nodded his agreement, picking the page up between his fingers and stretching forward down his bed to flick it onto his desk. “You got a text a bit ago, by the way,” he said as he fell back onto the pillows.

“Lestrade?” Sherlock asked hopefully, popping the remaining waffle in his mouth and setting the plate on the floor beside his bed.

“I dunno,” John shrugged, looking at him curiously. “I didn’t check it.”

“Why not?” he muttered, leaning over the edge of the bed to peer into the shadows beneath, snatching his phone from the cold tile with a deft swipe of his hand.

“Because it’s your phone,” John replied as if it were obvious, his forehead furrowing in confusion.

Sherlock scoffed, shaking his head as he opened the latest message. “That hardly matters. No one will be texting me anything you couldn’t read, and some of it will be rather time-sensitive.”

“So I should just…read your text messages if you’re not here?” John asked skeptically.

Sherlock nodded with an affirmative mumble, reading quickly through Lestrade’s message as he scrolled.

“Well…alright,” John agreed, still sounding hesitant, “but don’t think this means you can go through mine.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” Sherlock muttered, exiting out of the message and looking up to see John rolling his eyes, clearly unconvinced. “There’s been an interesting development,” he began, and John seemed to temporarily forgive the obvious lie about invading his privacy in favor of satisfying his curiosity. “Ethan wants to make a deal. Apparently he has received some very useful information from the dealers he’s killed; a last ditch effort for him to spare their lives, I imagine. Lestrade wants to get a team together for a raid tonight, but Ethan refuses to confess to anything involving the murders until the deal is finalized.”

John blinked, his gaze dropping as he processed. “Okay… But what’s that got to do with you?”
He smirked a little, allowing himself a moment to be smug. “Lestrade doesn’t want to make a deal if the information isn’t good. He wants me to come down and watch the interview, see if Ethan is lying or not.”

“Oh alright,” John said distractedly, his forehead still slightly wrinkled.

Sherlock rose from the bed, his knees cracking with disuse, and he winced faintly as he raced to his wardrobe, pulling a pair of black trousers and a grey, button-down shirt off their respective hangers. He bolted into the bathroom, hastily changing from his school uniform into the comfortable, tailored clothing before returning to the dormitory, snatching his suit jacket and slipping it over his shoulders before firing off a quick text to the cab company.

“Little overdressed, aren’t you?” John asked with a smirk, leaning back on his palms on the bed.

“What do you usually wear to catch a murderer?” Sherlock retorted, buttoning his cuffs.

John smiled, making a grand, sweeping gesture down his body with one of his hands.

“Well, come on then,” Sherlock snapped, jerking his head toward the door, a curl bouncing across his forehead with the motion.

“You want me to come with you?” John looked up at him, his eyebrows wrinkling together in bewilderment. “To Scotland Yard?”

Sherlock rolled his eyes. “Really, John, don’t be so obtuse,” he muttered with an impatient glare. He had let John come along to a crime scene, was it not obvious to him that he had a standing invitation to these excursions now?

In spite of the insult, John beamed, scrambling up off his bed. He grabbed his jacket and his mobile before rushing out the door ahead of Sherlock’s waving hand.

The cab ride was quiet, full of anxious excitement, and Sherlock’s nerves were buzzing by the time he entered the Met.

John was looking around, awed by the gaping lobby of glass and metal, but Sherlock walked briskly forward, forcing him to tear his eyes away and keep up. He shifted uncomfortably between his feet in the lift, clearly feeling out of place, but Sherlock wasn’t concerned. John was probably smarter than most of the people in this building, he had no reason to feel intimidated, but Sherlock had no way of telling him that. Saying it was absolutely out of the question.

“Sherlock,” Lestrade greeted as they stepped off the lift, turning them right back around and guiding them back onto it again. “Thanks for comin’ down so quick. We’re in interrogation B. John,” he added with a nod and brief smile.

“Sergeant,” John replied, mirroring the gesture.

Lestrade raised his eyebrows at him, a private joke Sherlock was not privy to.

“I figured, because we’re here and all…” He trailed off with a shaky shrug, and Sherlock fidgeted in his coat, anxious by association.

Normally, he loved making people uncomfortable, thrived off their wide eyes and shaking fingers, but seeing that uncertainty on John’s features made his skin crawl.

“I could just wait in the lobby or something,” John suggested, quiet and hesitant, and Sherlock’s jaw
stiffened.

An uncomfortable John was thoroughly unacceptable. Something would have to be done.

“Nonsense,” Sherlock huffed, opting for domineering rather than encouraging, which would probably have given Lestrade a coronary. “You’ll watch from the observation room with me. I may need a second opinion.”

Lestrade rounded on him, eyes gaping with shock. Evidently that had almost given him a heart attack as well.

“Well…alright,” John said, still soft, but a little brighter, and Sherlock’s chest swelled with satisfaction.

The interrogation rooms were just below ground level, windowless boxes of concrete and shining, metal furniture. Everything about the entire floor said trapped. It also said ‘prison’ quite clearly as well, which was, of course, entirely the point.

Lestrade opened the door to observation room B, dark except for the one-directional light coming in through the two-way mirror.

Ethan Carlisle sat before them, leaning back in his chair across the paper-littered table. He was 22 or 23, average height, with short, brown hair and dull, green eyes. His posture was relaxed, and it wasn’t a front, that much was obvious. There was nothing guilty about him; he was every bit the picture of smug.

Sherlock sneered unseen at him.

“Here,” Lestrade said, handing him some sort of radio. “Hold down this button”—he tapped a black protrusion on the side—“to talk; it’s connected to my earpiece. Don’t overdo it though. I gotta be able to do my job too.”

“Basic confirmation of truthfulness, names, places,” Sherlock rattled off, waving his hand listlessly through the air as he did. “I do know the drill, Sergeant.”

Lestrade smiled almost imperceptibly before nodding, all official authority once again. “These rooms are mostly soundproof, but try to keep it down all the same. He’ll probably assume someone’s in here watching him, but no need to make it obvious.”

Sherlock merely nodded, rolling his eyes.

Lestrade sighed exasperatedly. “John,” he said, stepping back toward the door, “make sure he behaves himself, alright?”

John chuckled. “Why you think I’m capable of that, I have no idea.”

Lestrade smiled, shaking his head as he closed the door behind him, and Sherlock’s lips quirked up at the device in his hand.

John came to stand beside him, both of them waiting in silence and watching Ethan. “Doesn’t exactly seem the homicidal maniac type, does he?” John said quietly, his arms crossing across his chest.

“What did you expect? A hook for a hand?”
John huffed in weak amusement, dropping his head for a moment. “No, nothing like that. I guess I just thought… Ya know how people say they can see evil? Like there’s just something about a person that they know is off, even if they can’t quite put their finger on it?”

Sherlock turned his head toward him, his forehead wrinkling in inquiry.

“He doesn’t look evil. There’s nothing about him that ya just look at and it gives you the creeps.”

“There usually isn’t,” Sherlock replied, looking back at the man in question, who was currently stretching over the back of his chair.

“Then how are you supposed to know?” John nearly whispered.

Sherlock watched Ethan, taking in every detail of him: the unkept state of his jeans, the multi-colored samples of mud on his trainers, the dirt trapped under his fingernails, surrounded by jagged, bitten skin. “You don’t have to know,” he said, turning his head to meet John’s tight, worried eyes. “You have me for that.”

John blinked, his eyes softening for a moment, and then he smiled, giving Sherlock a quick nod before they both turned back to the window at the sound of the door opening.

“’Bout time,” Ethan snapped, collapsing his chair forward onto all four legs as he folded his arms on the table. “I was beginning to think you’d forgotten about me.”

The interview was tedious, meaningless banter and power-struggling between Lestrade and Ethan, and Sherlock was beginning to wonder why he had been called in at all.

John, however, watched the whole thing with rapt attention, and Sherlock had to grip the sleeve of his coat and pull him back from the window more than once, muttering a reminder about the slim possibility of being seen. John would be good for a while after that, hovering at Sherlock’s shoulder and making affronted noises as Ethan laid out his demands.

His lawyer must have advised him, because Ethan wasn’t asking for too much, really. He would give a full statement and plead guilty in return for serving his likely considerable time in a minimum security prison. Vengeance for his sister being his only motive, it was unlikely he was a danger to society, and Sherlock could see the same thought pass through Lestrade’s head as he agreed.

Now the real fun could begin.

“There’s a lot of talk about a new supplier out on the streets,” Ethan began, leaning across the table as if he and Lestrade were trying not to be overheard in a pub. “No one knows his name, no one has ever even seen him, but word is he’s pretty much running the whole drug scene now, eliminating his competition.” Ethan smirked, swinging one arm over the back of his chair in smug triumph. “That’s why he got in touch with me. Said he’d give me the guy who sold my sister her drugs if I took care of a few others for him first.”

“Jesus,” John hissed beside him, pulling Sherlock out of the scene for a moment to look at his friend. His blue eyes were closed, his face pained as he dropped it down and to the side.

“He doesn’t see them as people, John,” Sherlock said softly, trying to be comforting without any idea how.

“Clearly,” John huffed, full of disgust as he looked back to the interrogation.

“From what I’ve heard though,” Ethan continued, raising his eyebrows in self-importance, “he works
out of an abandoned warehouse is Wandsworth. Or at least his people do.”

“So your information is that there is a warehouse somewhere in Wandsworth that is used for drug trafficking,” Lestrade summated, clearly frustrated. “I could go knocking on doors at random and find one of those. What’s so special about this one?”

“I already told you,” Ethan snapped, the temper Sherlock knew flared beneath the surface making a brief appearance. “This guy, he’s a heavy hitter. And, with the dealers I took out,”—he smiled in satisfaction as John snarled—“there’s not much else standing in his way. He’ll be the only guy to catch soon enough.”

“If this guy’s as important as you say he is, why would he need you?” Lestrade muttered, clearly an attempt to rile more information out of Ethan by wounding his ego, and it would most likely work. “You’re just a Uni dropout. Why not get someone more qualified to take out his competition, someone smart enough not to get caught?”

Ethan gripped the edges of the table, his fingers turning white as his eyes sparked.

“But I suppose you were convenient,” Lestrade shrugged. “You were gonna go on a murder spree anyway, can’t blame the guy for manipulating you into doing his dirty work too. He gets his competition out of the way, and you get to go to prison for a few extra counts of murder,” Lestrade said, smiling mockingly. “Sounds like a sweet deal to me.”

“He didn’t manipulate me!” Ethan spat through bared teeth, and Sherlock could feel the shift in the air. “He approached me! He needed me! I didn’t care if I had to kill a few more of those fucking snakes to get your addict detective’s attention, so long as the bastard who murdered my sister-”

“What did you say!?” Lestrade interjected, his chair flying back into the wall in front of them as he leapt up from it, his back blocking Ethan from view.

Sherlock swallowed stiffly, but it did nothing to relieve the sudden dryness of his throat. He hadn’t realized he’d taken a step back until John was moving in front of him, an unconscious gesture of shielding as his shoulder overlapped Sherlock’s body.

“I-I-” Ethan’s stammer filled the room, the panic evident in his voice even though Sherlock could no longer see him. “That’s what he told me. In his texts. Sher- Sher-something.”

“Sherlock?” John questioned, breathless as he looked back with concerned, blue eyes.

Sherlock shook his head dimly, staring at the fear-stricken form of Ethan as Lestrade moved and left the room.

“What the hell was that?” Lestrade spat as he burst into the observation room, and it was obvious he would have been shouting if not for the potential fault of the soundproofing. “How does this- this… new supplier know who you are? Because, I swear to god, Sherlock, if you’ve started using again-”

“I haven’t!” Sherlock interjected, so fervently that Lestrade leaned quickly back. “I don’t know how he knows me. The only person I ever had contact with was Victor, you know that. And even if I had lied to you, Mycroft wouldn’t have.”

“Victor?” John said, stepping to Sherlock’s side to complete the rather narrow triangle. “The guy I saw-”

Sherlock made an affirmative grunt, swatting a hand in his direction and waiting for the inevitable.
“You saw Victor? Where?” Lestrade blurted, his eyes flicking urgently between John and Sherlock.

“Langley,” John answered briskly, sounding as eager to get back to the issue at hand as Sherlock was. “He was hanging around the rugby pitch. We took care of it.”

“You sure about that?” Lestrade muttered darkly, narrowing his eyes.

“He was with me the whole time,” Sherlock snapped, surprised to hear John’s “I was with him the whole time” intertwining with him.

He spared him a second of a glance. It wasn’t entirely true, seeing as how John had walked in on the altercation, but Sherlock had expected him to go along with the lie if he said it. Lying all on his own, however, was a bit of a surprise, but there was nothing in John’s eyes that suggested he believed anything suspect had happened before his arrival. He was right, of course, but his confidence in Sherlock was illogical, and Sherlock was torn between being touched and annoyed at the naivety.

Lestrade scrutinized the two of them, and Sherlock hoped John was better at suppressing his tells than he was at reheating waffles. “Fine,” Lestrade said finally, and Sherlock internally sighed in relief. “Then how did he know?”

“Impossible to say,” Sherlock answered, shrugging as he looked back at Ethan, who was now notably more nervous. “I doubt Ethan knows; it was likely only mentioned to him in passing, or perhaps in the hopes that it would be revealed.”

“You think the supplier wanted you to know he knows you’re investigating?” John asked, tilting his head.

Sherlock twitched up his lips, glad to be proven right yet again about John Watson: he was certainly more astute than the average, dull person. “It wouldn’t be unprecedented; criminals taunt the police all the time. This one’s just chosen me.”

“Yeah, but this is different, isn’t it? You’re not the police. They’re much more likely to get caught challenging you- No offense,” he interjected offhandedly to Lestrade, who merely shrugged in concession, “so is that what they want? To get caught?”

Sherlock would have grinned in a slightly different setting. Yes, John Watson was definitely more astute than most people, and Sherlock was rapidly growing something close to fond to him. He might even let him stick around. “Perhaps. Or maybe it’s more about the game than the victor; maybe he just craves a challenge. Either way,” he said, nodding back toward the window, “he can’t tell you anything. Not about that, anyway. He knows something more specific about the warehouse, but I don’t think you’ll have to push him too hard for that.”

They all turned to look then, just as Ethan’s leg began rattling against the floor, his heel tapping the tile rapidly in perfect display of Sherlock’s point.

“Alright,” Lestrade sighed, clearly shelving the matter, but not tossing it entirely. “I’ll go get it out of him and finish putting the raid together. Should be ready to roll around 7. Can you be here after? ‘Round 9? I’ll text you with the specifics as it gets closer.”

Sherlock nodded, stepping out the door as Lestrade opened it, sensing John following in his wake.

“Cheers,” Lestrade murmured, jerking his head in a quick bob before disappearing back inside the interrogation room.

They stood there in silence for a moment, John’s fingers scraping against his palm in anxiety.
“What time is it?” he asked, even as he fumbled in his coat pocket for his mobile.

“Approximately quarter past 3,” Sherlock replied, turning in the corridor and heading back toward the lifts.

“You didn’t even look,” John bleated as he followed, shuffling through the sliding, metal doors and leaning against the back railing beside him.

Sherlock rolled his eyes, sighing with forced dramatics as he pulled his phone out of his suit jacket, hitting a button and thrusting the illuminated screen toward John’s face.

“3:17,” John said, smiling amusedly as he shook his head. “Lucky guess.”

“I never guess,” Sherlock countered, wondering why John kept insisting he did such a thing as he dropped his phone back into the interior pocket.

“Oh, really?” John taunted, turning toward him as he folded his arms, leaning on his right hip. “What about last week when you tried to predict my fortune cookie?”

“I was right about that.”

“That doesn’t mean you didn’t guess.”

Sherlock glanced over out of the corner of his eyes, unable to entirely keep himself from smiling as John smirked up at him.

“So, whadya wanna do for the next six hours?” John asked, twisting to press his back against the lift wall again.

Sherlock shrugged, his fingers tapping impatiently against his thigh as the lift scraped painfully upward.

“Doesn’t Mrs. Hudson live somewhere in London?” John questioned rhetorically. “I’m sure she’d like to see you. And we have to get those books from her anyway.”

Sherlock huffed, but he knew he couldn’t get out of it now that John had mentioned it.

John would feel guilty if they did anything else in London for all this time, knowing that Mrs. Hudson was so nearby, and Sherlock suspected guilty John would be just as unbearable as uncomfortable John.

“I suppose we can stop by and pick up the books,” he conceded, his stubborn pride still intact, but there was something about the smile John gave him that suggested he knew Sherlock wouldn’t dare rush out as simple as that.

*****

“Mrs. Hudson, you really don’t have to-”

“No, no, I insist,” the elderly woman tutted at him, batting a hand as she bustled around her small, linoleum kitchen. “I’m sure you could use some tea after the day you’ve had. Interrogating a murderer! Really, Sherlock, you shouldn’t be dragging John around to these things.”

“I don’t mind,” John said the very instant Sherlock muttered, “He doesn’t mind.”

Mrs. Hudson paused, hovering the white kettle over the range as she looked curiously between John
and Sherlock, who was draped exasperatedly over the small, dining table. Then she smiled, shaking her head amusedly as she lowered the kettle with a small clank of metal on metal. “Still, you should take better care of him. Probably hasn’t eaten all day, trailing after you.”

“He’s right there,” Sherlock sighed, jabbing his finger toward John, as if to say ‘Please bother him instead’, “and John can take of himself.”

John smiled, his chest heating with that weird sort of pride that mediocre compliments from Sherlock Holmes inspired. “I’m fine, Mrs. Hudson, really,” John assured, adding a nod for extra effect as Mrs. Hudson raised an eyebrow. “I went to breakfast pretty late, and Sherlock had waffles,” he added, smiling to himself briefly as he considered that this would not be a noteworthy accomplishment with anyone else.

“Sherlock went to breakfast?” Mrs. Hudson asked, her eyes widening down at the scowling boy.

“Well, I brought him back waffles,” John amended with a shrug.

“And reheated them over my Bunsen burner;” Sherlock murmured darkly, directing it out the window.

“Ya know what, next time you get cold waffles, how’s that? Cold, soggy, useless waffles. Happy?”

“Ecstatic!” Sherlock hissed, an exaggerated grin on his face.

John rolled his eyes as he turned away, catching Mrs. Hudson’s dewy smile in the shift of his eye line.

“Sherlock?” she said a-little-too brightly, and Sherlock’s eyes narrowed with the suspicion John only felt. “Why don’t you give John a tour of the rest of the flat? The one upstairs, I mean.”

The conflict within Sherlock was visible, torn between obeying the suggestion and getting out of the room, but he quickly swooped off his chair, apparently opting for escape rather than stubbornness.

“That’s a good lad,” Mrs. Hudson praised, and Sherlock winced, unnoticed by the woman who had turned back to the tea-in-progress.

Without introduction, John followed him, smiling down at the steps as Sherlock pounded up them with childish force. He opened the door gently enough, however, and John closed it behind him before following Sherlock down the small corridor into the living room.

“I assume I don’t have to go through the rather tedious rhetoric of typical tours,” Sherlock muttered, waving his hand vaguely around the room.

“I don’t know, I might get lost,” John teased, smirking as Sherlock glowered.

“Fine,” he snapped, huffing out an irritated breath, “but do keep up. And please keep your arms and legs inside the tour at all times.”

John laughed, but ultimately nodded as Sherlock raised his eyebrows for confirmation.

“This is the living room, obviously. Sofa,”—he waved to his left—“chairs,”—he waved to his right —“fireplace”—he lifted his hand slightly to gesture to the mantel.

It was an inadequate description, and John lingered for a moment to take in the additional features as Sherlock brushed past him.
The mentioned sofa and one of the chairs were dark leather, and John’s fingers twitched with the urge to confirm his suspicions on their softness. The opposite chair was large, covered in patterned, red fabric, and looked like it would be hard to leave if you ever sunk down into it. The room was flanked in two different wallpapers, both swirling designs in brown and crème, but the otherwise garish contrast somehow worked in the room. Directly in front of him was what appeared to be the skull of some sort of bull, hanging on the wall in all its macabre glory. The bookshelves surrounding the fireplace were full of dusty, leather-bound volumes, as well as an odd contraption John assumed had some vital, scientific purpose. The tables and other surfaces of the room were littered with cardboard boxes and papers, and John knew without being told that Sherlock had stayed here at some point, although it could have been for anywhere between two days to two months, knowing how quickly he could make a mess of a place.

“The tour doesn’t stop just because you’re not listening!”

John sighed, turning to trudge after Sherlock into what turned out to be the kitchen. It was simple enough, with adequate cupboard space and a glittering, glass, blue and green backsplash that looked freshly installed. A long, wooden table took up the majority of the room, lit by an overhanging fluorescent light which glinted off the beakers that still remained on the surface, no doubt remnants of a past experiment.

“Kitchen,” Sherlock said redundantly, rolling one of his hands in a circle, “and down there’s one of the bedrooms and the bathroom,” he continued, pointing down a shadowed corridor. “The other bedroom’s upstairs.”

John briefly considered pushing for a better tour guide, but a sharp narrowing of emerald-edged silver stopped that jest in his throat. “Nice,” he murmured instead, nodding appreciatively as he looked away from the glare. “Is this where you’d stay then? On leave?”

Sherlock raised an eyebrow at him.

“Mrs. Hudson mentioned it,” he supplied, shrugging.

Sherlock nodded, apparently satisfied with that explanation of why John knew something he hadn’t been told. The irony was bone-crushingly immense. “Yes, she has suggested it,” he said, shrugging as well.

“You’re not going to, then?” John asked, tilting his head up at Sherlock’s coffee curls.

Sherlock blinked, his forehead wrinkling with faint uncertainty. “I- I haven’t-”

“Oh, in here, dear!” she said from somewhere behind him, and he poked his head back out the door to find her sitting on a sofa in the living room.

He sat down in the upholstered chair beside her, folding his hands in his lap as he looked around at the pink-plastered room. Or was it mauve? His mother would know.

“I didn’t really need your help with anything,” Mrs. Hudson said, smiling at him over the tea she was
pouring into two of the mugs, leaving the third empty for now.

“Oh?” John replied, trying to sound like that was unexpected.

Mrs. Hudson chuckled at him, apparently not fooled, but she didn’t seem to take her failed deception personally. “I won’t take too long or Sherlock will get suspicious, if he isn’t spying on us already,” she added, and they both took a moment to raise their eyebrows at the ceiling. “I just wanted to say how great it is that you two are getting along. He’s never really had…” She trailed off, pausing midway through handing John a biscuit. “Well,” she continued with a small, guilty smile, “it’s just so good that he has someone. Has you, John.” She patted his knee, her eyes warm and grateful.

John didn’t know what to say, didn’t even see a readily-available comment or question to form a response to, but he wasn’t uncomfortable, so he just nodded and tried to convey that as best he could with a smile.

“Oh, look at me! Nattering on like some sappy old maid,” she chuckled, shaking her head as she retracted her hand, brushing at her hair. “You must be hungry. I’ve collected some takeaway menus for when Sherlock comes to stay. How does Thai food sound? There’s a place down the road that’s supposed to be excellent, or so Mrs. Turner told me,” she added with a shrug, rising to her feet and prompting John to do the same.

“Um, yeah, sure,” John replied, making a mental note to ask Sherlock who Mrs. Turner was later. “Thai sounds great.”

Mrs. Hudson beamed at him, beckoning him to follow her into the kitchen. She pulled a fan of takeaway menus out of a drawer, scanning through the titles before plucking one free and dropping it into his hands.

He unfolded the panels, scanning the series of italicized descriptions. “I’ll just have the veggie pad thai, I think,” John said, turning the menu back around toward Mrs. Hudson.

“You’ve never tried anything else either?” she muttered, looking down at the menu warily.

John laughed, retracting his hand and letting the menu fall to his side with his arm. “No, ‘fraid not.”

“We’ll make it two veggie pad thai, then,” she said softly, adding a conspiratorial wink, and John chuckled.

“What does Sherlock usually get?” he asked, lifting the menu to scan down the columns again.

Mrs. Hudson shrugged. “I don’t know. We never eat out when I’m with him.”

John’s brow furrowed, trying to summon up the conversation he’d had with Sherlock earlier that week, when they’d bypassed the Thai place in town in favor of the Indian one. Blah blah, pompous condescension, blah blah, insult of innocent bystander, blah blah, ‘No, we’ll go to the Indian restaurant. The only thing remotely authentic about most Thai places is the pad thai, and I’m not in the mood for it at the moment.’

“Oi, Sherlock!?” John called, taking a few steps to yell out the flat entrance, his head angled upward.

“Chicken or veg?”

“Chicken!” shouted a muffled voice from overhead.

“He’ll have the chicken pad thai,” John said, walking back to Mrs. Hudson, smiling as he handed her the menu.
She took it hesitantly, her eyebrows reaching together in confusion. “But, you- you didn’t even ask him-”

“He knows,” John interjected, nodding as he smirked up at the ceiling.

Mrs. Hudson still looked decidedly skeptical, brushing past John and walking to the foot of the stairs. “Sherlock?” she beckoned softly, her hand on the base of the railing as she leaned forward, those extra few inches apparently making all the difference in propelling her voice to his ears. “We’re going to get Thai food. Would you like-”

“Pad thai? Yes. Chicken. You heard me,” Sherlock’s irritated mutter cut in.

John smiled down at his shoes for a moment, looking up to find Mrs. Hudson staring at him incredulously. He merely shrugged, equally at a loss to explain Sherlock Holmes.

“I wasn’t sure you knew where-”

“Of course I knew,” Sherlock barked. “You’re concerned about us being hungry, so you’d want to get food as expediently as possible. The Thai place is less than a-”

“Oh no,” John interrupted, stomping to the foot of the stairs with Mrs. Hudson. “You don’t get to do that from a floor away. If you wanna throw your deductions around, you at least have to come down here and mingle with us common folk while you do it.”

Mrs. Hudson’s mouth dropped like a cartoon character, and absolute silence rang around the building.

Finally, there was a loud, exasperated sigh, following by heavy, dragging footsteps.

There was the sound of a door opening, and, a moment later, Sherlock appeared at the top of the stairs. His arms were crossed, his lower lip pushed out slightly in a pout as he glared glittering, silver daggers down at John.

John crossed his own arms and stared right back, lifting an eyebrow with slow deliberation.

Sherlock’s eyes narrowed even further, and then he released his stance, his arms dropping limply to his sides as he sighed yet again, rolling his eyes to the ceiling. His hastily descended the stairs, more flopping than walking, and landed on the foyer floor with a colossal thump, having leapt the last few steps in one bound. He had around five inches on John, and was attempting to intimidate him with every single one of them as he straightened up.

John rolled his eyes, sighing exasperatedly as he turned back toward Mrs. Hudson’s flat. “Come on, let’s get the order together,” he said, pausing in the doorway to allow Mrs. Hudson through first before promptly cutting ahead of Sherlock, tossing an innocent smile over his shoulder.

Sherlock huffed in irritation, but followed without comment.

The Thai food arrived promptly, and was eaten even faster, helped along by John periodically poking Sherlock in the ribs with his wooden chopsticks when the boy would drift away from them, staring listlessly out the window as his forehead creased.

“Ow! Will you STOP that!” Sherlock blustered, his hand covering his side as John jabbed him again. “You’re not even holding them correctly!”

“Only you would whinge about the technique of someone stabbing you with chopsticks,” John
chuckled, shaking his head as he turned back to picking at his pad thai.

“Oh, for the love of-” Sherlock muttered, rolling his eyes as he dropped his own chopsticks, grabbing John’s hand and pulling it up from his food.

“What are you-”

“You put this one here,” Sherlock said, shifting the chopstick around in John’s fingers so he was holding it somewhat like a pencil. “And the other one goes here, against your ring finger,” he continued, gripping John’s left hand as he slid the second instrument into place, “and you brace it with the base of your thumb.”

Sherlock’s touch was soft against John’s skin, his long, skeletal fingers looking even paler contrasted with John’s under the green-hued, fluorescent lights. John wondered whether he had poor circulation, but knew better than to suggest anything about Sherlock was below average, or even below exceptional.

“You’re cold,” he said instead, his tone coming out just slightly softer and more concerned than he’d intended.

Sherlock stilled, meeting John’s eyes with his own mix of granite and sapphire. He was suddenly very, very close, the Thai food blending with the smell of formaldehyde and forest—cedar, maybe? —that John hadn’t realized he identified with Sherlock until now.

The boy retracted his fingers with a jerk, nearly pulling the chopsticks from John’s hand as he did. “There,” Sherlock muttered, and John must have imagined the slight strain in his voice, because his face remained entirely impassive. “Maybe now you’ll be able to pick something up in less than three tries.”

John sneered at him, laughing tonelessly as he went back to his pad thai. It was a lot easier to eat now, but he wouldn’t give Sherlock the satisfaction of saying so. The smirk on Sherlock’s face suggested he already knew, however, so John just resolutely avoided eye contact as he dropped noodles into his mouth.

The night disappeared around them, a text from Lestrade at around 8pm suggesting it would be a later night than anticipated, and Sherlock had grown progressively antsier at the lack of news. He was sitting on the top of one of Mrs. Hudson’s chairs, his feet on the seat, after ignoring her repeated warnings that he could fall.

John was half-hoping he would, only because he couldn’t imagine Sherlock Holmes doing something as graceless as falling. But, knowing him, he’d probably manage to do even that with style, the debonair bastard.

“Sherlock,” Mrs. Hudson fussed, frowning as she looked over at the glowing 9:47 on the clock in the range, “it’s getting late. Are you sure Sergeant Lestrade-”

“He’ll call,” Sherlock interrupted sharply, although he didn’t take his eyes off some unseen point outside the kitchen window. His index fingers tapped together in rapid rhythm beneath his chin, one of his feet bobbing along.

“Alright,” Mrs. Hudson placated, shooting a skeptical look at John, who was sitting in his chair beside Sherlock like a normal person, “but it will be so late by the time you’re done. I don’t much like the thought of you taking a taxi at that hour.”

“We’ll be fine,” Sherlock muttered, flapping a hand at her in disinterest.
“No, Sherlock, I mean it.” Mrs. Hudson’s back straightened in her chair, her expression unyielding, and John could finally see how she had survived Sherlock Holmes all these years. “Two young boys like yourselves. You can’t be wandering ‘round London at that hour.”

“We wouldn’t be wandering around, we’d be in a cab,” Sherlock groaned, long-suffering and juvenile, as his head dropped forward dramatically.

Mrs. Hudson’s eyes flashed, her fingers tightening around her tea, and John leaned forward across the table, throwing himself into the line of fire.

“I have an idea,” he said hastily, looking between the two of them.

They stared resolutely at one another for a moment, John holding his breath in the middle, feeling more and more like a sheep among wolves. Finally, Mrs. Hudson sighed, turning her eyes to him in invitation to continue.

“How about we come back here after we’re done at the Yard?” John suggested, looking back at Sherlock for any last minute, ‘Abort mission!’ looks, but was greeted with only a curious, lifting eyebrow. “We don’t have school tomorrow or anything. We’ll stay in the flat upstairs and get a taxi back to Langley tomorrow.”

There were a few beats of tense, deliberating silence before Mrs. Hudson nodded. “I think that’s a brilliant idea,” she said, beaming at him. “Sherlock?” she asked, but it was clear he had no room to disagree.

“Fine,” he said, as though agreeing to donate a kidney, but John would swear he saw a glimmer of a smile tug at his lips as he looked back to the window.

A moment later, Sherlock’s mobile lit up on the table, and it was in his hands before the alert tone had ended. He tapped the screen anxiously, his forehead furrowed, and then his expression went suddenly slack, eyes blinking with shock.

“What?” John asked fervently, stretching over the edge of his chair. “What is it?”

Sherlock looked up from the screen, and John’s insides froze. He looked so young, so fragile, and utterly bewildered. When he spoke, it was weak, and his lips trembled faintly. “Ethan Carlisle is dead.”

~~~~~

A tight-lipped Greg met them at the door when they entered the Met, jerking his head firmly for them to follow. The lift ride was silent, and John didn’t dare attempt to break it, still feeling more like an outsider than a part of the team. Red letters formed in glowing dots over the door as they descended downward: L, LL, B. They bounced to a stop, the cheerful ding startlingly loud in the thick stillness between them.

John allowed Lestrade and Sherlock to go through first, hovering behind as they walked side-by-side. With no one offering any explanation, he took to surveying his surroundings for some hint as to what they were doing down here.

They were in the basement, that much was obvious, considering the plain, white-painted, cement blocks that lined the walls of the long corridor. The lights were motion-activated, providing the rather eerie effect of igniting as they walked, making the corridor seem endless and inspiring all kinds of horrible imaginings as to what lay just beyond the aura of light.
His first thought was morgue, but after the initial, uncomfortable leap of his stomach, he realized the Met wouldn’t have a morgue, and instead cast his mind out to catch any other, plausible use for a cold, concrete level beneath Scotland Yard. They passed a door labeled “Evidence Room”, the man sitting behind a desk just inside looking up curiously as they crossed in front of the windows, but they did not make any move to stop there.

Lestrade finally halted at a door at the very end of the corridor, opening it with sharp precision before John could get a look at the label. It became obvious as soon as they stepped inside, however.

He was staring down a long row of stalls, walls stretching to the ceiling to separate them. The fronts of the stalls were closed off to about waist height, where they expanded into a ledge, and the expanse ahead stretched out several meters, ending in a row of black-and-white-patterned papers suspended from a system in the ceiling. The shooting range. They were in the shooting range of The Scotland Yard. How was this now his life?

“We can talk in here,” Lestrade said, walking over to a stall around the middle and pulling his gun from his waist holster. “I had the camera feed turned off, and the place is entirely soundproof.”

“What happened?” Sherlock snapped, standing against the wall to Lestrade’s left.

“Raid was a bust,” Lestrade muttered, shaking his head bitterly as he checked the magazine of his gun, stroking down the line of bullets. “Obvious we just missed ‘em, which means—”

“Someone tipped them off,” Sherlock finished, frowning down at the floor.

Lestrade nodded grimly. “Went to question Ethan when we got back; found him dead in his holding cell. Anderson”—Sherlock snorted—“said it looks like poison. He had an injection mark in his neck,” Lestrade explained, tapping a spot just above his right collarbone. He cocked his weapon in front of his chest before turning to Sherlock, and while John couldn’t see his face, his voice was chilled. “I doubt I have to tell you what this means.”

Sherlock shook his head, slow and grave. “You have a leak. Someone here at the Yard.”

John barely managed not to gasp. “Here?” he hissed, looking around earnestly.

Sherlock nodded, still looking at what appeared to be Lestrade’s shoes.

“I’m currently putting together files on all the new hires, everyone added in the last couple years, but it’s gonna take some time ‘cause I gotta do it myself. Don’t know who else to trust,” Lestrade muttered, plucking a pair of earmuffs from underneath the ledge.

“That’s a waste of time,” Sherlock snapped, grabbing a pair himself, and prompting John to do the same. “Going through all those files will take weeks.”

John snapped the headgear on just as Lestrade leveled his pistol, firing a couple shots into the target ahead.

“How would you suggest we do it, then?” Lestrade barked, peeling free one of his ears.


Lestrade set his gun on the ledge, removing his earmuffs to ring around his neck. “Was that a compliment?”
Sherlock scoffed. “No. It was, at best, not an insult.”

“That’s the best a bloke can hope for from you,” Lestrade murmured, flashing John a quick smile. “Alright, I’ll go through ‘em and send the potentials on to you, yeah?” he asked, and Sherlock nodded. Lestrade reached back out toward his gun, but his hand paused, hovering over the metal. “You know how to fire a gun?”

Sherlock blinked. “Interesting segue.”

“I’m serious,” Lestrade replied, turning his back entirely to John as he spoke to Sherlock. “The amount you get shot at, you should know how to shoot back.”

“You got shot at!?” John blurted, leaning around the sergeant.

“One time,” Sherlock sighed, rolling his eyes.

John couldn’t speak, settling for shaking his head blearily, his mouth hanging open.

“To answer your question,” Sherlock said pointedly, shooting John a brief glare, “yes, I know how to fire a gun.”

Lestrade shifted the gun toward him on the ledge. “Give ‘er a go, then,” he said, nodding his head toward the target, his tone slightly taunting.

Sherlock caught it too, of course, and his eyes narrowed sharply.

“Or can you not do it?” Lestrade teased.

“I will not entertain your juvenile tactics,” Sherlock snarled, shoving his hands in his trouser pockets to further his point. “Send me the files when you have them,” he added, moving out past Lestrade and toward the door.

John made to follow when Lestrade’s voice stopped him. “How ‘bout you, John?” he asked, his eyes sparkling mischievously as he smirked down at him. “You know how to shoot?”

John opened his mouth to reply, but Sherlock’s biting laugh interrupted.

“Really? You’re going to try and bait me with that? Honestly, Lestrade, we’re all far too old for this, and there’s no way John can-”

“I know how to shoot,” John snapped, crossing his arms as he glared.

Sherlock’s head rattled in momentary surprise before his eyes narrowed, searching John’s face before his expression settled into confused shock. “Those ridiculous air guns don’t count.”

“I know how to shoot a real gun, Sherlock.”

Sherlock raised his eyebrows skeptically.

John’s fingers dug into his biceps. “Give me the damn gun,” he muttered, turning away from the mightier-than-thou consulting detective and picking up the pistol Lestrade slid toward him. With his left hand, he quickly tugged the earmuffs back onto his head, flicking the safety off the gun with his right. Half-hoping Sherlock hadn’t put his protective headgear on yet, he leveled the gun, bracing with his other arm and emptying the remainder of the clip.

Ripping his earmuffs off, he laid both them and the gun on the ledge, folding his arms as Lestrade hit
the button to drag the targets closer. No one spoke as the fluttering, black specters approached, but he could hear Sherlock’s breathing get closer at his back.

“Well, I’ll be damned.” Lestrade leaned against the opposite wall, his hands folded behind his back, shaking his head with an amused smile.

John smirked, feeling more accomplished than he ever had in his life, and turned around to throw a smug, ‘I told you so’ comment at Sherlock, but the look on the boy’s face erased it from his mind.

He was looking at John’s perfectly clustered target, everything about his body screaming stunned. His arms were hanging limp, his mouth was gaping, and he would have looked completely catatonic if not for the fact that his eyes were blinking, albeit rather slowly. His eyes then flicked down to John, wide and dark, and he let out a stuttering exhale that John could actually feel, causing a shiver down his spine and a sharp, warm clenching in his stomach.

And then, before John could so much as blink, it was gone, and Sherlock was all sharp angles and haughtiness once again.

“Mrs. Hudson will be worried,” Sherlock muttered, flashing Lestrade a glare before turning and storming off toward the door, leaving John reeling in his wake.

He hadn’t imagined that, had he? No, he couldn’t have. He’d still be able to feel his legs if he’d imagined it.

“Where’d you learn to shoot like that?” Lestrade asked, pulling him away from watching the progress of Sherlock’s bouncing curls.

“Er, my—my dad taught me,” John murmured, turning back to the sergeant, but not before he noticed Sherlock freeze halfway out the door. “Put me through self-defense too. Wanted to make sure I could defend myself. He was in the military,” he added by way of explanation, shrugging and hoping Lestrade wouldn’t notice his discomfort.

If he did, he let it go, nodding as he looked back at the target. “Well you’re damn good,” he chuckled, shaking his head again in disbelief.

A door clicked behind them, and John turned to see Sherlock had left him behind.

“You’d better go,” Lestrade said, nodding toward the exit. “He won’t wait.”

John smiled. “Right. Thanks,” he added with a wave as he departed, not entirely sure what he was thanking the sergeant for, but feeling he should say it anyway.

“Any time,” Lestrade called after him before the door closed between them, and John’s forehead furrowed, wondering if he had just received an open invitation to the Scotland Yard shooting range as he rushed to catch up to Sherlock.

“You alright?” he asked as they waited for the lift, looking up at Sherlock’s profile.

“Hmm?” Sherlock hummed, as if he were removing himself from deep thought to frown down at John. “Yes, yes, I’m fine. Thinking,” he muttered before returning to his unfocused staring, his eyebrows growing closer together throughout the silent ride back up to the lobby.

The cab ride was no better, and he tossed a wad of bills at John before darting through the door of 221B, leaving John to pass them along to the cabbie before following. When John reached the living room, he was pleasantly surprised to find a fire roaring in the hearth, no doubt Mrs. Hudson’s doing,
and it was fending off the evening chill of late autumn in London quite nicely. The rest of the room was dark, and the flickering, orange shadows revealed it was also empty.

“Sherlock?” John said softly, his eyes narrowing against the dim as if the boy would materialize.

“In here,” came Sherlock’s terse reply, and John spun to find him in the kitchen, his back to John where he sat at the table. How he had managed to get settled in behind a microscope in the minute it had taken John to get up here, John didn’t know, but there he was, head bowed as he nimble fingers spun at dials on the side.

“Oh,” John muttered, not knowing quite what to do with himself. Another glance around the living room revealed a plate of sandwiches sitting atop a couple stacks of books on what was probably supposed to be the dining table, considering the one in the logical place—the kitchen—was overtaken by science. “Mrs. Hudson left us food,” John said, grabbing the glass plate and reading the scrawled, black writing on the paper wrappers. “One roast beef and one ham. You have a preference?”

“Not hungry,” Sherlock murmured, pulling away from his microscope to jot a note down in a book to his left.

John frowned at the back of his head, but, upon realizing he wasn’t that hungry yet either, merely walked past him to the fridge. “I’ll leave ‘em in here. We can eat la- WHAT THE HELL!?”

He nearly fell over one of the wooden chairs in his haste to back away from the large, freezer bag full of what looked disturbingly like-

“Are those…fingers?” he hissed, pointing back at the bag as he stared incredulously at Sherlock.

The boy barely glanced over the top of his microscope. “Mr. Hooper refused to remove the fingernails for me.”

John blinked at him, unable to believe he was just offered that as an explanation. “So you had to take the whole damn phalange!?”

“Your medical vocabulary emerges at the oddest of times,” Sherlock answered, twisting at another dial. “How else was I supposed to measure the levels of toxins retained in fingernails after death?”

“Google!” John fiercely suggested, slamming the refrigerator door. “You could Google it, Sherlock. Like a normal per-” Sherlock cut him off with a haughty snort, and John rolled his eyes, pinching at the bridge of his nose as he felt the beginnings of a tension headache. “Wait,” he muttered, lifting his head from his palm, “Mr. Hooper? As in-”

“Molly Hooper, yes. Her uncle works in the morgue at St. Bart’s.” He made another notation in his notebook before returning to staring through the lens, not looking at John at all in the process.

“So you…what? Just call in and order some fingers?”

“Sometimes I add in some chips,” Sherlock murmured, shrugging down at his sample.

John stared. Just stared. And then he burst into laughter, collapsing back against the fridge in his mirth.

Sherlock finally looked up at him, alarmed and curious, one eyebrow lifting toward a wayward curl.

“Chips,” he repeated, high-pitched with the laughter shaking his body. “Interviewing murderers,
firing guns, finding fingers in the fridge,” he listed, his hands waving out with every new item. “Just a typical day in the life of John Watson.” He threw his hands into the air as he fell into laughter again, clutching at his ribs as he fought not to collapse to the floor.

“You didn’t have to come.”

He choked on a laugh, taking a couple steadying breaths as he looked up at Sherlock, the amusement draining from his body in a rush of cold. “W-What?” he stammered, straightening up against the fridge.

“You didn’t have to come,” Sherlock repeated, his expression drawn and borderline angry.

“I know,” John said softly, confused by the sudden shift. “I-I wanted to.”

“Then why are you complaining?”

“I’m not,” John blurted, striding the couple steps to Sherlock’s side. “It’s just all…this”—he gestured widely around the kitchen—“is kind of new to me. Exciting,” he added hurriedly, “but new. Ya know?”

Sherlock looked up at him through narrowed, flint-green eyes that sparked with searching uncertainty. “I suppose,” he said, slow and skeptical, casting his eyes around John’s face in one more sweep before focusing back down at the instrument.

John hovered, his fingers scraping against the wooden table just above Sherlock’s notebook.

“Mrs. Hudson left the books on the table,” Sherlock muttered, jerking a thumb behind him.

John followed the trajectory to see two volumes sitting on the small table beside the closest armchair. He lifted the largest one, which turned out to be *Pride and Prejudice*, turning it over in his hands in the wavering light of the fire, the gold gilded pages glittering in rhythm with the flames. “Might as well start reading them, I guess,” he said, shrugging as he turned to Sherlock, a pointless gesture considering he was talking to the boy’s back.

Sherlock only hummed, and John smiled, shaking his head as he hung it.

“Which one do you wanna start with?” he asked, holding up both books in an unseen demonstration.

“Doesn’t matter,” Sherlock muttered briskly.

“We could read ’em together,” John offered. “I read one, give you the important details, and you read the other one.”

“Mr. Tyson would be so proud,” Sherlock answered with exaggerated emotion. “Fine. You might as well do *Pride and Prejudice*; you said you read some of that in secondary school anyway.”

“Alright,” John agreed, replacing *Rebecca* on the table as he flopped down into the armchair, the left armrest warmed in proximity to the fireplace. The leather-bound book creaked as it opened, and he wondered how long Mrs. Hudson had owned it, making a mental note to make sure every page of *Pride and Prejudice* remained unwrinkled, unstained, and, considering he was living with Sherlock, unincinerated.

They sat like that for some time, the only sounds breaking the dark quiet the occasional popping of the fireplace, punctuated by John’s turning pages and Sherlock’s scratching pencil.
“Hey?” John called softly, twisting around in his chair.

Surprisingly, Sherlock turned, his legs shifting over the side of his chair as he leaned over the back of it. “Hmm?”

“Listen to this,” John said, pulling the book up in front of him. He opened his mouth to read the passage, but stopped as Sherlock brushed past him, sitting into the opposite chair in what could only be described as a flounce.

He tucked his legs up in front of him, perching his heels on the edge of the seat, pale fingers loosely hugging around his black-socked ankles. The firelight cast shadows across his face, making the sharp angles of his cheekbones even more pronounced, and reflected off the glassy surface of his eyes, a brilliant green in the warm light.

John watched the orange glow flashing through his curls, adding an umber hue to the otherwise chocolate hair, and his mind went entirely blank, hypnotized by the movement.

“What?”

John blinked, a rough breath of air shooting into his lungs as he was jolted back to 221B, which was so much warmer than it had been a moment ago. “Nothing,” John muttered, clearing his throat as he looked back down to the book. “I just wanted to read you this one bit,” he explained, reacquainting himself with his intended purpose as much as he was Sherlock. “It reminds me of you.”

Sherlock raised his eyebrows, and John smirked as he pulled the book up closer to his face.

“I have faults enough, but they are not, I hope, of understanding. My temper I dare not vouch for. — It is I believe too little unyielding—certainly too little for the convenience of the world. I cannot forget the follies and vices of others so soon as I ought, nor their offences against myself. My feelings are not puffed about with every attempt to move them. My temper would perhaps be called resentful. —My good opinion once lost is lost forever.” He lowered the book back to his lap as he finished, smiling uncertainly at Sherlock’s thoughtful expression.

“What?”

“Mr. Darcy,” John answered, stroking his thumb against the edge of the page as he glanced down again. “He’s talking to Elizabeth.”

“So I remind you of Mr. Darcy?” Sherlock questioned, and John hoped the heat rising in his cheeks would be written off to the fire.

“In that particular spot, yeah,” he answered as nonchalantly as possible. “Sort of sounds like you. The intolerance of stupidity, that comment about his good opinion being lost forever.”

Sherlock nodded, but it seemed more musing than agreeing, and his eyes glazed over as he stared into the fire. “So, I suppose, if I’m Mr. Darcy,” he said, half of his mouth curled in a smirk as he looked back to John, “that would make you Elizabeth.”

John snorted derisively. “How do ya figure that?”

“Because you’re always bothering me when I’m trying to work,” Sherlock said haughtily, but he was smiling as he disentangled himself from the chair, striding back to his experiment.

John chuckled faintly, shaking his head as he looked over his shoulder, watching Sherlock sink back into his chair in the kitchen. He stared at him awhile longer, the faint glow from the hearth reaching
his gossamer curls even from that distance. John watched the light dance across the back of his neck, traversing down his perfectly-tailored silhouette, and smiled to himself as he turned back to the book in his lap.

Perhaps he’d been wrong about Mr. Darcy. Sherlock would fit much better in a Brontë novel.
“Oh, Sherlock!” he called, stopping just before he reached the edge of the stands.

The boy turned back to him with a dramatic swirl of his coat, and John almost snorted, certain he had been reading far too much Austen with the visuals he was conjuring in his mind right now. Sherlock tilted his head, curls twisting as they were caught by the wind.

“Thanks for coming,” John said softly.

“Oh, of course,” Sherlock replied with all his usual, brisk nonchalance, but the half-smile on his face carried some warmth.

John was beaming as he ran onto the pitch, the muscles pinching in his cheeks.

“What are you so happy about?” Mike chuckled, lifting his eyebrows curiously.

John shrugged, his eyes shifting involuntarily to the stands. “Nothing.”

Sherlock didn’t have much experience with people staying over at his place—he adamantly refused to refer to it as a sleepover, even in his mind—which is why he found himself in the rather awkward position of staring down at a sleeping John Watson without any idea of what to do with him.

The blond boy was curled up on the sofa, the farthest he was willing to go so long as Sherlock wasn’t going to sleep, and none of Sherlock’s insistences that he just go upstairs to the spare bedroom already had had any effect whatsoever. So, there he lay, curled up with a ratty blanket draped over him, Pride and Prejudice lying on the floor beneath his outstretched hand. That arm was most certainly dead, but Sherlock didn’t want to move it and risk waking him. Although, perhaps he should wake him, in case John wanted to get back to Langley before the day got away from them. How did one even go about waking someone up without being rude? And John could be having some sort of nightmare or something, so surely Sherlock shouldn’t touch him and risk falling victim to whatever monsters he was fending off in his dreams.

Sherlock groaned, turning away from the sofa and walking to the other side of the coffee table, pacing the empty expanse of floor between the half-open, glass doors that closed off the kitchen and the makeshift dining table in the living room. Unbidden, but not unsurprising, his mind turned back to the day before, which had all become somewhat hazy apart from the single, should-be-unremarkable incident at the shooting range. That’s what he was calling it, an incident, because that sort of negative connotation most definitely applied to any situation in which Sherlock Holmes experienced something he could not explain.

He sighed again, hating himself for how bad he was at denial. It was far too common a frailty of consciousness for him to bother with normally, but he dearly wished he could delude himself now, because he knew exactly what had happened in that shooting range.

John Watson—calm, kind, unassuming John Watson—could shoot, but shoot seemed too weak a
word for it. He could fire a gun with the kind of calm precision that’s innate, born, unable to be
achieved through any amount of acclimation or training, his blue eyes dilating as he zeroed in on his
target, sending the faint smell of disintegrating gunpowder into the air when his tanned fingers
compressed the trigger and holy hell it was driving Sherlock mad!

He growled, a feral, snarling thing that usually only emerged when he hit a wall in a case, and stalled
his pacing, bringing his hands up to tangle in the curls at the back of his head. Automatically, he
looked over at John, who was still sound asleep, undisturbed by the outburst. He clutched a hand to
his chest, inhaling sharply as that warm, almost painfully tight feeling bloomed in his lungs, a
sensation he was growing ever-more-accustomed to the more time he spent around John. Last night
had been by far the most absurd, and Sherlock cringed at the memory.

What had possessed him to leave an experiment, and at a critical stage no less, to go sit with John by
the fire was beyond him. Why he had actually allowed himself to be read to like a child was even
further unfathomable. And, perhaps most disturbingly, why on earth had he liked it so much?

“Does John know you watch him sleep?”

Sherlock jumped, rounding on the entrance to the living room to find Mycroft standing there, leaning
gloatingly on his umbrella. He hadn’t heard him come in. This John problem was really getting out
of hand.

“What are you doing here?” he hissed, checking on John out of the corner of his eye as he pushed
Mycroft back out the door, closing it behind them.

Mycroft raised an eyebrow at him, glancing exactly where he would see John sleeping on the sofa if
there wasn’t a wall between them, and Sherlock valiantly fought down a blush. “Grown rather fond
of our Mr. Watson, have you?”

“He’s not your anything, Mycroft,” Sherlock spat, and then bit down firmly on the inside of his lip as
he realized that was exactly the wrong thing to say. “And I’m not ‘fond’ of him. He’s…tolerable,” he
added, shrugging as he crossed his arms over his chest.

“I see,” Mycroft murmured, smirking at him, and Sherlock’s blood boiled.

“How’s the diet?” he snapped, narrowing his eyes.

“Fine, thank you,” Mycroft replied, nodding politely, but his grip on his umbrella tightened.

“You’ve gained four pounds.”

“And you’ve lost three,” Mycroft countered with the small, dangerous smile he favored. “I didn’t
come here to argue with you-”

“No, you just came to stick your nose in. Why don’t you put it to better use and go sniff out a
patisserie or something?” Sherlock glared venomously, counting out his pulse as it rose.

Mycroft sighed tiredly. “I just wanted to check in on you after what happened at the Yard, that
business with that Carlisle fellow. Terrible, just terrible.”

“How do you even- Never mind,” he muttered as Mycroft gave him a pitying look. “And stop
hacking into the Yard’s security. That’s illegal, you know.”

“Having assisted in the drafting of many of the recent amendments to our cyber security laws, I am
perfectly aware,” Mycroft replied, twirling his umbrella in the limited space provided on the landing.
Sherlock rolled his eyes. Leave it to Mycroft to find any occasion to show off.

“I will always make an exception for you, though, baby brother.”

“Don’t call me that!” Sherlock snarled, jabbing a finger into Mycroft’s fat, red face.

“Settle down,” Mycroft sighed, pushing Sherlock’s hand down with his own, thick-fingered one. “I only wish to convey my concern for your wellbeing. A mole in Scotland Yard is serious, Sherlock. You don’t want to go getting in over your head.”

“I’m not in over my head,” he said through bared teeth, fingernails digging into his palms.

“Maybe not yet,” Mycroft said sternly, taking a half step forward that put him most certainly within the boundary of Sherlock’s personal space, “but this is going to turn out to be drug-related, Sherlock, you know that as well as I do. Are you sure you can handle the temptation?”

He didn’t respond, didn’t dignify that question with the effort, and glared white fury the inch up to Mycroft’s eyes.

Mycroft sighed, official façade breaking for a moment to worry, but Sherlock couldn’t be sure that wasn’t an act. “I know Victor Trevor visited you at Langley last week.”

“He didn’t give me-”

“I know that too,” Mycroft interrupted, stretching a hand out toward Sherlock’s shoulder before stopping and hesitantly withdrawing it back to his side. “All I’m saying is: Be careful.”

“I’m always-”

“Who are you trying to lie to right now?”

Sherlock glared at him, but Mycroft stared stubbornly back, and he dropped his eyes after a moment, knowing it had been a rather feeble attempt.

“Just keep your eyes open, okay?” Mycroft asked.

“I’ll certainly be checking more thoroughly for CCTV cameras in the future,” Sherlock muttered, and Mycroft sighed in frustration.

“Sherlock, I am trying to-”

“Sherlock?”

By the time he thought to suppress it, it was too late. Something leapt in his chest—but it was most certainly not his heart, because that was biologically impossible—and his pulse quickened at the sound of the groggy voice.

“Tolerable indeed,” Mycroft murmured, and Sherlock’s fingers twitched with the urge to push him down the stairs.

“Sherlock?”

“Out here,” he answered, turning his head toward the door even as his eyes remained on Mycroft. “I’m being kidnapped.”

Mycroft rolled his eyes, which was only slightly more irritating than the fact that John’s footsteps
weren’t hurried.

“What are you- Oh,” John said, his face instantly hardening as his eyes settled on Mycroft. It would have been much more intimidating if he wasn’t so rumpled, but there was still an impressive amount of malice in his glare as he opened the door fully, crossing his arms across his chest. “What do you want?” John spat, his eyes narrowing even further over the pronoun.

Sherlock barely contained his grin.

“I was just leaving,” Mycroft said with a tight-lipped smile, giving up the pretense once his eyes left John. “Take care,” he called over his shoulder as he descended the stairs, waving his umbrella in the air in farewell. “Remember what I said, Sherlock,” he added as he opened the door, closing it behind him without looking back.

“What was that about?” John demanded, the residual anger enough to make Sherlock prompt with the truth.

“He found out about what happened at the Yard with Ethan,” he explained, John’s expression shifting to shock. “Mycroft sees everything, and trust me when I say I am not being at all overdramatic. He has access to every CCTV camera in the United Kingdom, and I have my suspicions about America.” He brushed past John into the living room, hearing quick footsteps following him as the door clicked shut.

“How can he do that?” John asked, standing beside the leather chair as Sherlock perched on the top of it.

“He works for the government,” Sherlock brushed off with a wave of his hand. “More precisely, he is the government. Any organization with an acronym, Mycroft’s somehow involved.” He tapped his fingers together at the pads as they steepled beneath his chin, his feet alternating in beating against the cushion as he vented his lingering frustration.

“But he’s, what? 25? 26?” John asked, his forehead furrowing, and Sherlock nodded. “How could he already have that much power?”

“He’s very good at his job,” Sherlock growled, begrudging saying anything good about Mycroft at all, “and our family has a lot of connections.”

John shook his head, running a hand through his hair as he blew out a breath. “Geez, perhaps I should be a little nicer to-”

“Never be nice to Mycroft,” Sherlock interrupted, realizing he’d probably said that a little more aggressive than intended as John stepped back, his eyes widening in alarm. He drew in and released a single, calming breath. “You don’t have to worry about Mycroft. He’s only dangerous to people who get in his way.”

“And I’m not in his way?” John said, skeptical. “I did turn down his offer to spy on you.”

“That’s hardly enough to get you on his list,” Sherlock assured, shaking his head. “Although I would expect him to be surveilling you, so try to avoid doing anything particularly humiliating in front of a camera.”

John blinked, and Sherlock watched him out of the corner of his eye, wondering if this was the straw that broke John Watson’s back.

He would have to put laxatives in Mycroft’s secret cupcakes again if it was.
“Right,” John said after a beat, nodding briskly. “No more picking my nose on street corners. Got it.” He smiled, and Sherlock returned it, once again pleasantly surprised. “So when you wanna head back to Langley?” John asked, moving away to fold the blanket where it was crumpled on the sofa.

Sherlock shrugged. “Any time, I suppose. I finished my experiment last night, and the fingers should keep in the freezer for next time.”

John laughed, and Sherlock found the corner of his mouth lifting in automatic response. “Things that will only ever be said once,” he chuckled, shaking his head as he tossed the now-folded blanket over the arm of the sofa.

“I think you are seriously underestimating mankind’s propensity for violence,” Sherlock muttered, smiling more broadly now. “You might want to…” He trailed off, waving a hand over his hair, and John touched at his own in the indicated spot.

“Right,” he chuckled, his fingers brushing over the gravity-defying sections as he stepped around the coffee table and headed toward the bathroom. “How do you manage it?” he asked, stopping to turn in the doorway to the kitchen.

Sherlock tilted his head.

“I look like I slept under a bridge, and you always look like you just stepped out of Vogue,” John said, his arm waving up and down Sherlock’s body.

“I…sleep very still?” Sherlock speculated, filing that away for further study. How had he never thought to research his own sleeping habits?

John laughed, swatting a hand at him as he ambled down the corridor and disappeared into the bathroom.

Sherlock slid down the back of the chair, coming to rest in it properly, and tapped his fingers in waves on the armrests. All the time he had been alone, the years and years of practice, and now a few minutes without John had his teeth on edge. He was bordering on sentiment, and he knew it, and he gripped the leather firmly as he mentally vowed to get a handle on himself.

It was nothing, really. Just an infatuation, and that was perfectly natural. John was the only friend he’d ever had, after all, and he frequently praised Sherlock’s deductions with a litany of exclamations. Of course he was going to grow fond of John when he was constantly throwing around compliments, boosting his ego. The fact that he could fire a gun so efficiently was just a bonus, an interesting piece of the puzzle, and that was the only reason it had captivated Sherlock so entirely. He was only attracted to the puzzle of it. It had nothing to do with John, nothing at all. Infatuation, that’s all it was. Temporary. Fleeting. It would fade soon enough. He just had to wait it out.

*****

It was Friday before Lestrade got the files to Sherlock, and John felt fairly confident in saying those would forever be the longest five days of his life. The first few had been manageable, with Sherlock only slightly more anxious than usual, but Wednesday and Thursday had been absolutely absurd. He had been inconsolable, fluttering about in a whirlwind of snarls and spitting rants, and John now had a rather impressive list of synonyms for “idiot”. Sherlock had nearly reduced the woman refilling the buffet to tears on Wednesday morning, John only managing to rescue the situation by bodily pulling him away by the sleeve of his jumper, muttering apologies to the rattled victim. Wednesday evening had found John sitting in the dormitory, frustrated from an all-day headache that Sherlock was only
making worse by tossing a ball against the wall with infuriatingly even timing, and it was then that
John had discovered the only thing that had kept him from attempting homicide the last 48 hours.
Sherlock Holmes liked being read to.

Well, perhaps liked was too strong a word, and John couldn’t be sure he was even listening to a
word of *Pride and Prejudice*, but it at least seemed to calm him. He would abandon whatever book
he was in the process of throwing and lay down on his bed, usually facedown with an eye-rollingly
dramatic sigh, interrupting John’s reading periodically to insist that the characters’ behavior was
moronic.

“She’s being unreasonable,” he had insisted of Elizabeth’s refusal of Mr. Darcy’s proposal. “His
logical was perfectly sound.” But John had merely rolled his eyes, continuing valiantly on.

Thursday had only been survived through this technique, John carrying the heavy, leather book with
him in his bag the entire day. When Sherlock had grown worryingly irritated by a squirrel sitting in
the tree above them, John had pulled it out, picking up with Elizabeth reading Mr. Darcy’s letter.
Gradually, the squirrel was forgotten, and Sherlock spread out over the grass on his back, his body
speckled in the wavering light of the sun filtering through the branches above as he absentmindedly
plucked green blades and tossed them into the breeze.

Now, it was Friday afternoon, and John nearly cried with relief when Lestrade handed him the files
—because Sherlock was far too busy sulking to walk out to the gate and get them his damn self—as
he had much more important things to worry about that appeasing Sherlock.

Tonight was the first rugby match of the season, a home game against Leamington College, and
though John had no idea if they were any good, he was nervous all the same. Most of his anxiety
probably came from the fact that he had no idea what position he would be playing, Coach Powles
moving him around quite often through the last week’s practices. He seemed to favor second-row
forward, but John had been asked to play hooker—something Sherlock chuckled juveniley about
every time John mentioned it—more times than he was comfortable with, not feeling prepared to take
on such an important position on a team of people he barely knew. His teammates had given him no
reason to feel self-conscious, mind you. They had been nothing but encouraging, bestowing
numerous slaps to his back after a particularly well-formed play, but John would still rather play
second-row forward with Mike. Not that he would be given much of a choice in the matter.

“Here,” he snapped, dropping the open, cardboard box at the foot of Sherlock’s bed, where it rattled
the whole mattress, as well as the boy sitting on it. “Now, if you don’t mind, I have to get down to
the pitch.”

“Why?” Sherlock murmured, already elbow-deep in the files as he leaned on his knees over the box.

“First game of the season. I’ve only told you this a dozen times,” John spouted, his hands waving
through the air in built-up frustration.

“That’s this evening?” Sherlock asked, not looking up, but his forehead creased.

“Yes, Sherlock,” John sighed, his patience straining painfully. “Tonight. 6 o’clock. Leamington
College. Any of this ringing a bell?”

Sherlock paused, tilting his head at him over the file he had opened on his crossed legs. “Yes,” he
said tentatively, one of his eyebrows lifting. “You’re the team hooker or something, right?”

“Oh my god,” John sputtered, throwing his hands in the air as he turned, grabbing his athletic bag off
the floor. “I’m-I’m leaving. I’m going now.”
“John!?" Sherlock shouted after him, laughter rippling through his voice. “Don’t be mad! You’ll be a great hooker! Best damn hooker the school’s ever had!”

“GOODBYE, Sherlock!” John bellowed over his shoulder as he continued down the corridor, but he was sure Sherlock could somehow hear his smile.

John was still smiling to himself as he entered the locker room, slamming his bag down on a bench and beginning to unpack.

“Hey,” Mike greeted as he leaned against the locker beside John’s. “How ya feelin’?”

“Pretty good,” John shrugged, placing his folded fresh t-shirt and jeans into the locker for after the game. “Little nervous, I guess. First game and all.”

“Yeah,” Mike chuckled, kicking his feet against the grey-grouted, tile floor. “Only natural.”

“Right,” John agreed with a nod, swallowing hard as he pulled out his uniform. He stared down at it for a moment, the silence thick with tension.

“Guess we should get dressed,” Mike murmured, pushing off the spot he was leaning.

“Guess so,” John replied with a stiff smile, and Mike’s returned one didn’t look any less anxious.

“Watson! Stamford!”

He jumped, embarrassingly so, and turned to see Coach Powles’ large figure approaching. “Yeah, Coach?” he replied, Mike echoing him.

A jersey was tossed to each of them, numbers 11 and 12. Second-row forwards it was, then, and John inwardly sighed with relief.

“Suit up!” Coach Powles bellowed, directing it around the entire locker room as he continued dispensing jerseys.

“He’s certainly much louder today,” Tom Kenley muttered, tugging on his number 9 jersey as he threw his bag into the locker to John’s left. He was small, just the right build and speed necessary for his position as a scrum-half, with flaming red hair and neon-blue laces on his black boots.

“Yeah,” John chuckled back, kicking off his trainers and tugging off his coat as he prepared to change.

“Forward, huh?” Tom said, nodding at the number on the blue jersey in John’s hand. “Thought for sure you’d get hooker.”

John heroically managed not to laugh as Sherlock’s words floated through his mind. “Naw, I’d rather leave that to Taylor,” he answered, nodding toward their tall, brunette captain, number 2 emblazoned in white across his chest.

“Yeah, Taylor’s alright,” Tom shrugged, following John’s gaze. “Bit of a showboat though, if ya ask me.”

John smiled politely, dropping his eyes to his shoes as he backed away. “Well, I’m gonna go get changed,” he muttered, lifting his bundle of clothes into the air as evidence.

Tom hummed, dismissing him with a jerk of his head, and John hurried out of the open, locker area and into the bathroom stalls, where he could change without feeling like he was in a spotlight.
A quick, cramped maneuver later, and John was walking toward the sidelines of the pitch, his heartbeat pounding in his ears, and there was a slight tremor in his fingers that had little to do with the chill in the late-autumn, evening air.

“John!”

He turned, surprised to see a familiar, black-cloaked figure striding toward him from beneath the stands.

“You came,” John marveled, fully aware of the stupid grin he couldn’t seem to keep off his face.

“Astute observation,” Sherlock muttered, rolling his eyes and burying his hands in his pockets.

“I just thought, because of the case…” He let it drift away, not entirely sure how to suggest he didn’t think Sherlock would care without making him sound heartless.

“I brought a few of the files along,” Sherlock shrugged, turning slightly so John could see the folders tucked under his arm.

He chuckled, shaking his head. “Obviously,” he said with a smirk.

Sherlock smiled, a soft huff of laughter pushing through his teeth as he looked down at his shoes.

“’Fraid you’re out of luck though,” John sighed dramatically. “I’m just one of the forwards tonight. No hooker for me.”

“Shame. That was the only draw for me, to be honest,” Sherlock muttered, and John laughed, stifling it quickly so as not to alarm anyone sitting above them.

“I should go,” he said, waving a hand toward the pitch, which was filling up with his teammates running drills.

Sherlock nodded, taking a small step backward.

“I’ll find you after,” John added, not entirely sure why that felt so important to impart.

“Don’t worry about it,” Sherlock dismissed with a shake of his head. “I’m sure there will be some sort of inane celebration afterward, and your attendance will be expected.”

“Yeah, maybe,” John mumbled with a noncommittal shrug. “I’ll see.”

A whistle sounded from behind him, and he twisted instinctively to the sound.

“I gotta go,” he muttered, walking backward toward the pitch.

Sherlock smiled, giving him a single, reassuring nod before they both turned their backs, heading their respective directions.

“Oh, Sherlock!” he called, stopping just before he reached the edge of the stands.

The boy turned back to him with a dramatic swirl of his coat, and John almost snorted, certain he had been reading far too much Austen with the visuals he was conjuring in his mind right now. Sherlock tilted his head, curls twisting as they were caught by the wind.

“Thanks for coming,” John said softly.
“Of course,” Sherlock replied with all his usual, brisk nonchalance, but the half-smile on his face carried some warmth.

John was beaming as he ran onto the pitch, the muscles pinching in his cheeks.

“What are you so happy about?” Mike chuckled, lifting his eyebrows curiously.

John shrugged, his eyes shifting involuntarily to the stands. “Nothing.”

The game was brutal, and they were down by only a try as it ticked into the final minutes. They were in possession for another two tackles, but it was unlikely they would get another chance if they didn’t score now, and everyone knew it.

Taylor Jordan was being insufferable, flapping his finger in anyone’s face as spit flew with the blame from his mouth. “That was a terrible kick, Kendall!” he snapped after their latest play-the-ball, where Kendall Price had apparently not passed it back to him adequately.

It seemed to John that the problem was more that Taylor had tried to run nearly all the way down the pitch rather than pass it soon after he received the ball, but who was he to say as much?

Jordan passed it to Eli Caine eventually, but the poor boy was almost immediately tackled, and, with the ball hopelessly lodged in the resulting ruck, they were now lining up for a scrum. Taylor was in the middle of the front row, shouting threats John chose not to hear as he crouched down behind him, Mike at his side.

In the brief seconds the referee was shouting the familiar commands, John shared an exasperated glance with Mike under their arms, and then the mess of shouting, scraping, shoving bodies began, the pressure only alleviating as he saw the ball shoot out past his legs.

Devon Warrick, their loose forward, picked the ball up, running around the lot of them and starting up the field.

John chased after them, watching Taylor’s brunette head weaving through the bodies, approaching from Devon’s left.

Devon tossed him the ball, and Taylor took off, scrambling through defending players as he ran for the goal line. He glanced behind him, a smug smirk on his face, and the momentary slip in concentration made him oblivious to the defender that swooped atop him, crushing him to the ground in one of the most spectacular tackles John had ever seen.

The resulting ruck was a mess, a pile of flailing and kicking bodies, and John was not surprised at all when the referee rushed forward, whistle blowing madly. Players haphazardly removed themselves from the pile, and, as grass began to show through, one of them was very clearly not getting up.

The referee signaled to stop the clock, waving Coach Powles onto the field, but he was already halfway there, rushing forward with his clipboard tucked beneath his arm.

Taylor was on the ground, curled up on his side and clutching his thigh. His face was absolute agony, and John felt a rush of guilt fill his chest as he and the rest of the team crowded around.

Coach Powles was talking to him in hushed tones before looking up at the circle of them. “Help me get him to the bench,” he commanded, and John knelt automatically, tugging one of Taylor’s arms over his shoulder as Coach Powles took the other.

Together, they supported the limping boy’s weight, the remainder of the team hissing with concern
as they followed. Taylor let out a pained yelp as they gently deposited him on the bench, the school medic pushing through their group to his side a moment later.

“We’ll restart with a scrum. One minute,” John heard someone say, and looked up to see Coach Powles nodding. The man’s brown eyes then settled on John, and what had once been guilt was replaced with cold dread.

“Watson, take over for Jordan. Price? Take Watson’s shirt,” he commanded, and John’s stomach volleys against his sides.

With numb fingers, John peeled his jersey off, handing it to Kendall Price, who looked just as terrified as John felt. Someone handed him the number 2 jersey, and he stared at it, unable to fathom this was really happening.

Suddenly, a hand closed on his wrist, tugging him out of the circle of his teammates and nearly sending him toppling over the bench. His mouth dropped as he looked up, now entirely sure he was in some sort of bizarre dream.

“Sherlock?” he panted, wondering where all the oxygen in the atmosphere had gone.

“Stop panicking,” Sherlock muttered, scowling at him, and it was somehow comforting in its familiarity, “you’ll be no use to anyone if you faint. Put your jersey on while you listen.”

John’s muscles were obeying before his brain commanded them to, moving dully as nausea rolled through his stomach.

“As soon as you get out of the line, run left,” he began, his voice low and rapid, “then duck back in to the center and have Warrick pass the ball to you.”

“Left?!” John blurted, half through the blue fabric as he tugged it over his head. “Are you mad? I’ll be demolished! And this is our last tackle, if we don’t score on this run-”

“All the larger players will be in that…pile thing,” Sherlock interjected with a disdainful flick of his fingers toward the pitch. “You’ll get around them. Everyone will rush right when it breaks—it’s a natural impulse, and most plays are conducted that direction anyway due to the majority of people being right-handed—and you won’t have any problem outrunning the idiots on the left to the goal line.”

“What? Running? You want me to run a try?! Sherlock, I can’t run!” John sputtered, panic rising in a tight knot up his throat.

Sherlock rolled his eyes. “Of course you can. That’s only about 15 meters; it isn’t enough time for you to pass to anyone else, and they’ll all be caught up in the mess on the right anyway.”

“I can’t run it, Sherlock, I can’t!” John bleated, shaking his head emphatically. “I’m not fast enough! I can’t!”

Sherlock sighed, bowing his head for a moment, and John momentarily entertained the wild notion that he was praying. His eyes quickly lifted, however, and the entire world disappeared around them.

The screaming crowd, the frantic mutterings of his teammates, even his own pounding heartbeat vanished in the molten steel of those eyes, their unwavering fortitude leaving John with nothing but the calm certainty that, whatever Sherlock was about to say, it was immutable fact.

“The one with the acne sustained an injury in the last play and is favoring his left knee, but won’t go
off because it is, as you said, your last try. Neon-Orange Boots will substitute for Unfortunate Dye-Job, and he’s still suffering the effects of the marijuana he smoked earlier; his reaction time will be mediocre at best. Too-Short Shorts has a migraine coming on, Poor Attempt at a Mohawk has a previous, ankle injury that’s bothering him, and Bad Spray Tan is bordering on an asthma attack.” He rattled it all off in one breath, folding his arms across his chest when he finished, as if daring John to question him.

John blinked, dumbstruck. “As-Asthma attack?” he murmured, turning blearily over his shoulder to search for the defender who had looked rather orange, now that he thought of it. “Shouldn’t we- Shouldn’t we say some-”

“John, focus!” Sherlock barked, and John’s brain rebooted as fingers wrapped around his shoulders and shook. “You are perfectly capable of accomplishing this, but you have to go left, alright? You have to trust me. John!?”

“Okay, I trust you,” he said, the words carried out on a wobbly breath as Sherlock shook him again. He lifted his head to meet Sherlock’s eyes, which were wide and frantic as he searched John’s face. “I trust you,” he repeated, this time with hushed conviction, and gave Sherlock a slow, firm nod.

Sherlock’s brow furrowed for a moment more, and then he nodded back, his fingers sliding from John’s shoulders as he retreated back into the shadow of an aisle between the stands.

John wandered in a daze back to his team, his mind spinning around the information, and they turned to him expectantly as he joined their circle.

“What’s the play?” Devon asked earnestly, and the rest of them formed a tight circle of anxious silence as they waited for his response, and John realized with a fluttering jolt that he was effectively acting-Captain for the moment.

He took a deep breath, steeling himself as he looked down at their gathering of grass-stained boots. “You run it, just like before,” he answered firmly, chin high as he lifted his head. “When you get loose, look for me. I’m cutting left.”

The shouts of protest, the blurted disbelief, the insistence on another course, everything John had expected to greet this proclamation, never came. Only a handful of widening eyes met him before they all nodded determinedly, breaking away toward the pitch.

The world seemed to move in slow motion as they walked to their positions, and John wondered if this was how Sherlock saw the world. He watched as the boy in disquieting shorts lined up behind the player with the neon boots, both of them looking thoroughly miserable, and a defender with a flopping stripe of hair slicked up the center of his head winced as he crouched into a ready position. John stopped on the indicated line, his brain taking in the image of the defenders crouched before him as he waited for the whistle’s blare, but his mind was full of storm-grey eyes and he was—incredibly, inexplicably, ineffaceably—not afraid; there was no need. He believed in Sherlock Holmes.

A whistle sounded, a ball shot into the space between their bodies, and John watched the flurry of unidentifiable feet with removed calm, unable to say who was responsible for sending it flying back between their legs. Arms and legs dislodged, and he could see Devon in his mind’s eye, scooping the ball up off the grass and careening around them on the right. Unhindered, the teammate on that side jumping back to allow him through, John shot to the left, past the opposing forwards who barely had time to spare him a surprised glance as they pulled away from the scrum. The wings and centers Sherlock had eviscerated were just as incompetent as he had claimed them to be, and John was nearly entirely past them before they even considered him threat enough to chase. The center of the
pitch was bare around the back of the scrum, and he barreled forward into the gap, his eyes searching for Devon up ahead. He found him, a blurry shot of black hair, and pushed harder into his peripheral vision.

Devon’s glance was only a minute flicker in his direction, an almost imperceptible turn of his head, but John knew the moment that ball would leave his hands, soaring diagonally back through the air toward him.

The instant the leather hit his hands, all sound drained from the universe, his own heartbeat wailing in his ears as he willed his legs to give more than all. The world could be burning away behind him and he would not know; his focus narrowing solely onto that goal line getting closer and closer with every, burning meter. Movement flashed across the corner of his eye as the Leamington fullback charged toward him, the last sentry blocking his path. He took three, long, lunging strides, and then propelled himself forward, feeling a chunk of dirt come loose under the spikes of his boot. The line passed beneath him, a blur of white in the green, and there was the faint brush of a body against his calf before he was crashing to the earth. The ball was under him, an uncomfortable pressure against his stomach, and there was nothing but dark and dirt and echoing silence. He lifted his head to the pitch beyond him, raking his cheek against the grass until his eyes found a pair of black shoes.

Sherlock leaned against one of the metal supports of the bleachers, his ankles crossed out in the aisle in front of him, the smug smirk protruding from the upturned collar of his coat suggesting he did not for one moment think John would not be there, would not make it. If anything, he looked as though he’d been kept waiting, and that more than anything brought the world back to John like the first firework against the night.

The sound was deafening, cheers mingling with shouts of despair, and John barely had time to roll onto his back and push the ball away before bodies in blue jerseys were collapsing on top of him, all laughter and sweat.

“You mad bastard!” Devon shouted into his ear as he clenched his fists in John’s jersey. “You mad, fucking bastard!”

“Unbelievable!” a voice that sounded like Kendall said from above, and the pressure on his body grew.

“WATSOOOON!” came an approaching cry, and there was a particularly sudden addition of weight that had all three members of the existing pile huffing out air.

More and more voices and arms joined the maul, someone possibly even kissing his cheek at one point, before the referee’s whistle invaded their revelry, urging play to continue.

Devon was the last one up, and he offered John a hand as he beamed, both of them gasping in the air they had been deprived of at the bottom of the heap.

John beamed back and took it, another roar filling his ears as he stood, and he walked back toward the line being constantly ratted by pats to his back and repeated admirations. He stood, waiting for their kicker to make the conversion, and took the moment to look back, but Sherlock was gone. A red flash caught his eye, and he looked to see a mitten waving frantically in the stands.

Mary beamed at him, and he smiled back, glancing at Molly where she sat beside her, but it was likely too far away for either of them to be sure he saw them at all.

He made one last scan of the shadows, but there was no swirling silhouette of black waiting for him, and he turned back to face the last minutes of the game with a slightly duller glow in his chest.
There was really no hope for Leamington in the time they had had left, and the game ended with a 6-point victory for Langley, something John was very careful not to seem unduly happy about as he shook hands down the line of muttered ‘Good game’. Of course, as soon as they entered the locker room, all bets had been off, and it was even worse in the common area of Kingsley house, a location chosen seemingly solely because of its attachment to John.

“To Watson!” Tom Kenley announced, raising his can of coke.

“TO WATSON!” everyone chorused after, and John laughed as they drank, feeling the flush of attention rising in his cheeks.

The better part of an hour passed, John awkwardly fielding compliments from gradually drunker teammates (although how they were managing that with Coach Powles there, he had no idea) until he managed to hide himself in a corner, mostly obscured from view as he slouched down against the back of an armchair.

“Hey,” a soft voice said from behind him, and he nearly choked on his Sprite in alarm. “Sorry,” Mary chuckled, perching on the edge of the coffee table in front of him, “I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“No, it’s-it’s fine,” John stammered around his coughs, clearing his windpipe of citrus-flavored beverage. “So…how have you been?” he asked somewhat awkwardly, plucking at the tab on the top of his can. He hadn’t talked to Mary much the past week outside of classes, too preoccupied with making sure Sherlock didn’t burn the school down, and he suddenly felt shy with guilt.

Mary chuckled, looking down at her trainers as she kicked them against the carpet. “Fine. Busy. I started the reading for Mr. Tyson’s class. Persuasion by Jane Austen,” she said, smiling as if it were one of her grand favorites.


“I was thinking about reading Rebecca,” Mary replied with a bright smile. “Are you enjoying it?”

“Haven’t started yet,” he shrugged. “We’re almost done with Pride and Prejudice, though, so we will be soon.”

“We?” Mary questioned warily, her forehead creasing.

“Me and Sherlock,” John clarified in a rush. “We’re reading the same ones. Figured it’d be easier.”

Mary smiled shyly, her fingers tapping against the edge of the table. “You like him, huh?” she murmured, looking up at him through her lashes.

John blinked, tilting his head. “Sherlock?” he asked, and she nodded. “Well…yeah. I mean, he’s my roommate,” he muttered, shrugging.

“That didn’t help the others,” she chuckled weakly, smiling down at the carpet. “I mean, he is a bit…odd.”

“Not really,” John snapped, more tersely than he’d intended as irritation plucked at his chest.

Mary flushed, and John felt briefly satisfied at that before scolding himself for being so rude. “I-I didn’t mean it like that, I-I just-”

“It’s fine,” John interjected, smiling reassuringly. “I think I get it. He can be a bit…intense
“Yeah,” Mary chuckled, the iciness dissolving between them, “that’s exactly it.”

“What?”

John sat bolt upright, Sprite actually spilling onto his jeans with the sloshing momentum, but Coach Powles was smiling as he rounded to the front of John’s chair.

“Hey, Coach,” he said, smiling stiffly, the panic in his muscles slowly easing.

“Can I talk to you for a sec?” Coach Powles asked, giving Mary a small nod.

“Er, sure,” John muttered, flashing Mary an apologetic smile as he rose, following the coach until they were standing against the wall several feet away, out of earshot of anyone else.

“Who’s that guy you were talking to before the play?” Coach questioned, abrupt and direct.

“Er- Um- Guy?” John stammered, gripping his Sprite can so hard, it crinkled.

“Yeah, that bloke with the big coat,” the man continued, waving away John’s denial. “Who was he?”

“Oh, that-that was my roommate, sir- Coach!” John corrected with a snap, and Coach Powles laughed, shaking his head down at the floor. “It…it was actually his idea. That play,” John ventured, not wanting Sherlock to get into trouble for being on the sidelines.

“Really?” Coach Powles asked, nodding appreciatively. “How’d he think of that?”

“He just…notices things,” John explained with an easy smile. “Who’s not feeling well, who’s distracted, that sort of stuff,” he added with a shrug, not entirely comfortable revealing the marijuana detail, even when it was a stranger.

“Interesting,” Coach Powles mused, looking out over the room. “Jordan’s gonna be out for a while,” he said simply, still looking over John’s shoulder. “I’d like you to stay on as hooker, if that’s alright?”

John’s throat closed up.

“Be nice to have a guy like your friend around too. Think you could talk him into hanging around a bit?”

“Hanging around?” John repeated, nonplussed. Sherlock? Hanging around? What would that look that? Would he wear jeans?

“Yeah, ya know,” Coach Powles said, looking down at John as he rocked back on his heels, “sit in on practices, watch the games, travel with us.” He shrugged his shoulders, sliding his fingers into his pockets, his thumbs tapping against his legs. “Not often ya find a talent like that,” he murmured.

John blinked, considering the possibility that he had instead been brutally tackled on the pitch, and was now lying in hospital dreaming all this up in a coma.

“He’d get his own jacket,” Coach urged, smiling as he lifted his eyebrows, a clear attempt at persuasion.

John laughed, getting more out of control the longer he entertained that mental image.
“It could say ‘Assistant Coach’ on the back or something,” Coach Powles added, grinning as John’s chuckles waned.

TRIGGER WARNING: Aborted sexual assault. Nothing graphic, but there's emotional aftermath.

For all he had heard people talk about this—being paralyzed, unable to respond to what their mind was screaming at them to do—Sherlock had never thought it would happen to him, never thought it was possible it could happen to him, but, as twitching fingers crept toward him, he could do nothing but watch.

John sat in a wobbly, red-cushioned chair in Lestrade’s office, his elbows resting on his knees as he held his chin in his palms. His eyes shifted back and forth, watching the argument volleying between Sherlock and Lestrade.

“You should have called me in sooner,” Sherlock barked, pacing in front of the sergeant’s desk. “We could’ve found him before he went into hiding.”

“I can’t just call you in every case I get, Sherlock,” Lestrade snapped back from where he was sitting on the corner of his desk, watching Sherlock’s progress like a table tennis match. “I need a reason. The department—”

“Wants murderers captured, I assume,” Sherlock interjected, and Lestrade sighed, pinching at the bridge of his nose.

“We didn’t need you on this one,” he said tiredly, understandable considering he had already explained this numerous times. “It was obviously a domestic murder; we just had to collect enough evidence for a warrant.”

“In which time, your killer got away!” Sherlock bellowed, twisting in place on the carpet to glare down at Lestrade. “If you hadn’t waited until today to call me in—”

“But I did, so too bad!” Lestrade exclaimed, his arms spread out at his sides. “You’re here now, though, so are you gonna help us find this guy or what?”

Sherlock’s eyes burned across the room, his fingers balling into fists, and John held his breath in anticipation.

“Where’s the evidence?” he said finally, and John leaned back into his chair in relief.

“Incident room 8,” Lestrade answered, smiling faintly as he jerked his head toward the door.

Sherlock gave a curt nod as he turned. “John,” he beckoned, and John stood, pushing up off the arms of the chair.

“Are there vending machines here somewhere?” he asked Lestrade, Sherlock groaning in exasperation in the doorway. John shot him a silencing glare, and Sherlock rolled his eyes.

Lestrade chuckled lightly at the exchange. “Down that corridor, just before ya hit the lifts,” he said,
pointing through the glass walls of his office.

“Thanks.” John smiled, and they exchanged nods of farewell before he followed Sherlock out. “Where’s the incident room?” he asked as they headed toward the lifts, and, by extension, the vending machines.

“3rd floor,” Sherlock answered, not slowing his stride as John stopped in front of the machines, but he hadn’t expected Sherlock to wait.

“You want anything?” he asked as Sherlock hit the lift button, leaving it ringed in red.

“Not hungry,” Sherlock muttered, his foot tapping impatiently as he waited.

John shook his head amusedly, rolling his eyes at the crisps he was considering. “Alright, I’ll see ya down there.”

Sherlock grunted in acknowledgement, disappearing behind the lift doors as they opened.

John pulled his wallet out of his back pocket, fishing around in one of the flaps for change.

“No Bounty bars!”

He turned at the shout, but the doors had already closed Sherlock in the lift, and John smiled as he looked back to the snacks. He was tempted to get a Bounty just to provoke Sherlock’s hatred of coconut, but managed to restrain himself, settling on a Kit-Kat and two bags of sour cream and onion crisps. Not the healthiest of snacks, but he was tired after his Tuesday of chemistry and English, and Sherlock had whisked him away before he’d had time for lunch. He cradled the packaged food in his hand as he clicked the button, rocking his weight back on his heels as he watched the numbers dropping with the lift’s approach.

“Hello,” a gruff voice to his right said, and John shifted slightly to the side instinctively.

A tall, blond man stood beside him, dressed in the regular, black-and-white, work uniform of officers. He was smiling, but it did not reach his brown eyes, glittering with veins of gold.

John was unsettled immediately. “Er, hi,” he murmured, his manners innate regardless of his personal discomfort. “Sorry, have- have we met?”

“No. Not officially, at least.” The man turned fully toward him, extending a hand. “Rob Morgan,” he said with that same, forced smile.

“John Watson,” he replied, shifting the snacks in his hands to take the man’s hand.

His grip was firm, fingers rough and calloused as they wrapped around John’s. He was tall, somewhere around Sherlock’s height, and looked to be about the same age as Lestrade, perhaps a few years younger.

“Yeah, I’ve heard of you,” Rob said as their hands disengaged. “You work with that Sherlock Holmes guy, right?”

“Er…” John mumbled, but was momentarily spared responding by the lift doors opening. “You going down?” he asked as he walked forward.

Rob nodded and stepped into the lift after him, John feeling even more unnerved by the man as they shared the confined space.
What floor? John asked, punching 3 and hovering his finger near the panel.

2nd, thanks, Rob answered, and John pressed the corresponding button.

They were silent as the lift began its progress from the 6th floor.

So, what’s he like?

Sorry? John asked, looking to where the man stood opposite him.

Rob smiled, and maybe it was all the time he’d been spending with Sherlock, but John thought he saw a flash of irritated impatience cross the man’s expression. Sherlock Holmes, of course, Rob clarified with an odd, high chuckle.

Oh, John muttered, looking up at the display above the doors. Just one more floor. Well, I’m never bored, he joked, flashing a smile he hoped looked unconcerned.

Rob just continued smiling, but the amusement was gone from it now. No, I suppose not.

Mercifully, the doors opened, and John just stopped himself from lunging for them. Guess I’ll see ya around, he said with forced cheer, turning back to Rob as he stepped into the corridor.

Yeah, sure thing. Nice meeting you, the man replied, the last of the phrase just slipping through the doors as they rattled shut, the image of his parting smile still lingering in front of John’s eyes.

He huffed out a breath, giving his head a shake, and then started down the corridor, his eyes scanning the doors. He rounded a corner, staggering back to avoid colliding with a tall, dark body.

There you are, Sherlock snapped, glaring down at him, but his expression quickly shifted to the familiar, concerned search.

Not here, John murmured without moving his mouth, scanning the walls for cameras. There was one swiveling at the end of the corridor, and John looked for somewhere to duck out of view while it turned away. A door marked ‘Custodial Closet’ caught his eye, and he crossed to it, jiggling the doorknob to find it was not locked. Get in, he hissed, opening the door and surveying the corridor.

You can’t possibly be-

John grabbed the sleeve of his coat, pulling Sherlock past him and through the grey, metal door before following, closing them in just as the camera turned back toward their position. He fumbled for a light switch, finding it to the left of the door, and looked up to find a cross-armed detective glaring down at him.

I had to tell you something, John justified preemptively.

And that necessitates throwing me into a closet because…? Sherlock muttered, biting in spite of his low volume.

Is Rob Morgan one of the files Lestrade sent over?

Sherlock’s eyebrow lifted, and his arms untwisted to fall to his sides. Yes, he answered slowly. Why?

I just ran into him upstairs. There’s something He trailed off, brow furrowing as he looked down at the grey, tile floor, shadowed by their bodies in the tight space. I don’t know, he sighed, shaking
his head. “He’s just not quite right. I got a bad feeling off him.”

“Hmm,” Sherlock hummed, his eyebrows crinkling together as his gaze drifted away, staring unfocusedly into the corner. “I’ll look into him more closely,” he said finally, nodding as he looked back.

John blinked, his lips parting. “Really?” Sure, he had told Sherlock his suspicions, but he hadn’t expected to be greeted with anything beyond the usual, dismissive hum or muttered ‘Possibly’.

Sherlock let out a small sigh, evidently reading his mind. “John, you like everyone, you trust everyone, and it’s foolishly naïve of you-”

“Cheers,” John interjected tonelessly.

“-but,” Sherlock said pointedly, his eyes widening for a moment as his eyebrows rose, “that also means it is very difficult for you to think ill of anyone. You’re a fairly competent judge of character, and if even you find someone disturbing, there is bound to be something nefarious about them.”

It was hard to tell in the weak light, and Sherlock was making it even more difficult by tugging at his collar, but John thought he saw a faint hint of pink creeping in those pale, angled cheeks. “Thank you,” he said softly.

Sherlock nodded in one, quick snap. “Can we go now?”

“Already?” John whined sarcastically. “We’ve still got six minutes.”

Sherlock tilted his head, his lips rounding into a confused pout.

“You know,” John urged, rolling his hands. “People. In a closet. Seven minutes.”

Sherlock just continued staring at him blankly.

“Forget it.” He rattled his head, turning quickly and bolting out the door before Sherlock could ask any questions. Luckily, he was able to find the incident room on his own, pushing inside just as Sherlock appeared at his heels. The room was empty, however, and John swallowed thickly as he deposited their sustenance onto the table, hearing Sherlock close the door behind them.

“What does seven minutes have to do with closets?”

“Nevermind, Sherlock.”

“What could someone possibly do in a closet for precisely seven minutes?”

“Will you stop!?”

“Well, if you would simply explain it instead of-”

“Just Google it or something!”

“Why should I when you could just tell me?”

“Can you two finish your little domestic later? We have work to do.”

They stopped, turning from where they’d been arguing beside the table to see Donovan walking through the door, Anderson and Lestrade right behind her, and John thought ruefully that their timing could not possibly be worse.
Sherlock glared, sliding his hands into his pockets as he turned defiantly to face her. “You’ll forgive me if I don’t take advice on relationships from someone whose boyfriend just got engaged to someone else.”

Everyone froze, gaping in wide-eyed shock into the silence before John’s resigned sigh ushered in the storm.

“You asked her to marry you!?” Donovan shrieked, dropping the files she’d been carrying to the floor in a fluttering heap as she turned to glare at Anderson.

John sank down into the chair in front of Sherlock, who was still standing and looking disturbingly pleased with himself, and pulled one of the bags of crisps toward him. He opened it with a crinkling pop, spinning back to the scene as he shot one into his mouth.

“You said you were going to break up!” Sally was raging, hands on her hips.

“I-I was going to,” Anderson stammered, holding his hands in front of him as he leaned away, “but, when I told her we had to talk, she assumed it was about marriage-”

“So you figured you’d just do that instead!?”

Lestrade was backing away along the wall, carefully extricating himself from a conflict John wasn’t entirely certain wouldn’t come to blows. Did Donovan have her Taser on her? Oh, he would pay to see that.

“It’s in her desk,” Sherlock muttered, mind-reading abilities in top form as his hand batted John’s away from the bag to pluck out a crisp

“You have your own bag,” John snapped, careful not to be too loud at risk of interrupting Sally, who was screaming obscenities as she swatted an empty folder back and forth across Anderson’s arm.

“Yours is open,” Sherlock shrugged, popping the crisp into his mouth and crunching pointedly down at John.

He shook his head, smiling in spite of himself. “It’s a game,” he said, watching as Lestrade attempted to talk Sally down from wrenching Anderson’s tiepin (evidently a clandestine gift for his birthday) off him.

“Hmm?” Sherlock hummed, leaning back against the table beside John’s seat.

“The seven minutes thing,” John explained. “It’s a game called seven minutes in heaven.”

“And it’s played in closets?” Sherlock asked slowly, raising an eyebrow as he snatched another crisp.

John chuckled, shaking his head in disbelief that he was having this conversation. “Well, yeah. You throw two people in there and see how many bases they can round in seven minutes.”

“What!” Sherlock sputtered, choking on his crisp.

John laughed, kicking his feet up in amusement and drawing the collective attention of the scuffle in front of them. “Sorry,” he muttered, waving a hand, “so sorry.”

It appeared the fight had died down, however, and there were merely some final glares and fearful winces as the group progressed toward the table.
It was remarkably simpler going through things when Donovan and Anderson were fighting, Donovan far too focused on hating Anderson to make any rude comments about Sherlock, and John watched in awe as he poured over the files.

“This receipt,” Sherlock was saying, sliding the thin slip of paper across the table in front of Lestrade, “is for a café 30 kilometers from here.”

“Yeah, we know,” Lestrade muttered, frustrated. “We did check that much.”

“Congratulations,” Sherlock deadpanned, and Lestrade glared while John hid a smirk behind a segment of Kit-Kat. “Look,” he continued, slapping a finger down on a spot on the black-printed paper, “he ordered a medium coffee, a small, iced latte, and a cheese danish.”

“So?” Sally snapped, and everyone united momentarily to glare at her. “He wanted something hot with the danish, and something cold to wash it down on the way back. I do it all the time.”

Sherlock opened his mouth, the quirk of his eyebrow as he tilted his head indicating that, whatever he was about to say, it would be a bit not good.

Probably weight-related, if John were to guess, so he headed it off with a sharp, proactive mutter of: “Sherlock.”

Sherlock glanced down at him, pleading nonverbally for permission, but John only narrowed his eyes. With a put-upon sigh, Sherlock continued. “Liam Grant was lactose intolerant—he wouldn’t have ingested a latte or a cheese danish—and being that you only found a medium cup in his car, it’s obvious he wasn’t bringing it back to anyone here, so he must have met someone there. They ate in, obvious from the timestamp on the receipt compared with the time the traffic camera caught him reentering the city. He drives 30 kilometers out of his way and meets with someone at a café mere hours before he murders his wife? Definitely someone involved in the plan, most likely a mistress, and also most likely his current location. You’ll find a rental car leased in her name from the local airport this morning. Shouldn’t be too many to go through, considering the size of that town. Get her address off the rental form and you’ll have your killer.”

Lestrade blinked, Sally glared, and Anderson gaped like a gasping fish.

“Amazing,” John breathed, smiling dazedly as he shook his head.

Sherlock looked down from where he was leaning over the table, hovering above John. His forehead furrowed for a moment as he tilted his head, and then he blinked, a faint quirk of a warm smile lifting up his ridiculously shaped lips. What was that upper lip, seriously?

“I think you can take it from here,” Sherlock said, tugging his coat closed around him with a flick as he turned away.

“What, you’re just gonna leave?” Lestrade blurted, his arm waving out over the evidence on the table.

“I have plans,” Sherlock muttered as he strode past Sally and Anderson, and John rose from his chair to follow.

“Plans?” Sally snorted. “What plans could you possibly-”

“We have rugby practice,” John interjected as he drew level with her.

Sally froze for a moment, and then burst into laughter, Anderson quickly following suit.
Sherlock sighed loudly, pausing in turning the door handle to look back at the group, his eyes rolling up to the ceiling.

“You!? On the rugby team!?” Sally gasped. “As what? The mascot?”

Anderson leaned against the wall, clutching his stomach, and John’s blood boiled at the sudden camaraderie between them at Sherlock’s expense.

“No,” John snapped, folding his arms across his chest, unable to believe he was having this conversation in a room full of adults, “he’s just helping out. He’s the consulting coach.”

“The consulting coach?” Sally chuckled patronizingly as she raised her eyebrows at Sherlock. “Seriously?”

“Yeah, seriously,” John spat, stepping to the side to block her view, “and he’s damn good at it too. Now don’t you have something better to do, like—oh, I dunno—catch the killer he found for you?”

Sally spluttered, her mouth wavering around unsaid retorts, and John turned, bursting out the door ahead of Sherlock, but he could hear the boy’s footsteps directly behind him as he fumed toward the lift.

“I can’t believe her!” John snarled, mashing at the button long after it had lit. “You practically do her job for her, and then she just—she just—”

“John, it’s really not—” Sherlock was saying softly as they stepped onto the lift, but he was on a roll.

“And Anderson! Christ, how that pillock got this job, I will never know!” He gripped the railing at the back of the lift as he leaned against it, angrily huffing down at the floor.

Sherlock laughed—laughed!—throwing his head back to rest against the lift wall with a thunk.

“What?” John asked, confusion dulling his anger.

“Nothing,” Sherlock chuckled, shaking his head as he looked across at him, “it’s just surprising to hear you talk like that. You’re always so…”

“So what?” John snapped with misplaced aggression.


“Well, most people aren’t so bad. They aren’t!” John insisted as Sherlock groaned, rolling his eyes and sweeping out ahead into the lobby. “You just have to give them a chance.”

“I give people a chance,” Sherlock muttered sharply. “I just don’t give them subsequent ones.”

“So, what you’re saying is: your good opinion once lost is lost forever?” John said casually, shooting up a sidelong glance.

Sherlock glared as they pushed out the doors, and John ducked his head to smirk down at the pavement.

*****

“You’re not even listening to me, are you?”
Sherlock turned, looking up from his spot on the grass to where John was sitting on the bench above him. “I’m listening,” he answered, “I just don’t care about offside.”

“It’s an important aspect of the game,” John whined, but he had said the same thing about all the other things he’d attempted to explain, so his word wasn’t worth much on the subject at this point.

“But I’m not playing the game, so why does it matter if I understand it?” Sherlock groaned, closing his eyes as he tilted his head backward and let it drag him down to collapse on the grass.

“Are you even listening to yourself right now?” John chuckled, and Sherlock opened his left eye a crack to find a blurry head with blond hair smiling down at him. “You’re the consulting coach, Sherlock. You have to know something about the game.”

“No, I have to know something about consulting,” he snapped back, sighing heavily before sitting back upright, resting his elbows on his bent knees as he looked out onto the pitch. “How’s Kendall adjusting to your position?” He already knew, of course, but John seemed to like it when he asked occasionally.

“Pretty well,” John shrugged. “Mike and him are getting on okay, but they’re not quite…clicking. Ya know?”

Sherlock nodded, acquiescing to the common term. “Probably because Mike is bitter you’ve gained such a prominent position after only a month here.”

“He’s what!?” John blurted, spinning on the bench.

“Only a little,” Sherlock added with a shrug. “He knows he’s being ridiculous. He’ll be over it by the end of the week.”

“Agh! I should’ve noticed!” John cried, bowing his head and pressing a palm to his forehead. “He’s been quiet at breakfast the past few days, but I figured he was just tired.”

“He was tired too, if it’s any consolation,” Sherlock murmured.

“It’s really not,” John snarled, rounding on him. “Why didn’t you say something? I could’ve talked to him.”

“He doesn’t want to talk about it,” Sherlock explained carefully, not wanting to provoke John any further. “He knows it’s not rational. He would be embarrassed if you brought it up, not to mention offended that we were discussing him behind his back.”

John frowned down at the ground between his boots, his fingers tapping against the metal bench in anxious frustration. “He’ll really be alright with it?” he asked tentatively after a long moment. “I shouldn’t say anything?”

“Why do people phrase questions like that?” Sherlock snipped. “I can’t say ‘yes’ or it sounds like I’m telling you you should say something, and if I say ‘no’ -”

“Sherlock,” John cautioned firmly, but there was a hint of a smile tickling the corners of his lips.

Sherlock sighed. “Yes, he’ll be alright with it. No, you shouldn’t say anything.”

John held his gaze for a moment, and then nodded, turning back to the pitch. “Right then.” He rose, slapping his hands across his knees. “I’m gonna get showered. You gonna wait or go back to the dorm?”
“Don’t go yet,” Sherlock muttered, watching as the huddle of defensive players broke apart from where the coach had gathered them and began heading toward the bench.

“Why not?” John asked, eyebrows furrowing.

Sherlock said nothing, flashing his smuggest half-smirk as he stood, giving his coat a quick flick to dislodge any lingering grass.

“Watson,” Coach said as he approached, the rest of the team forming a semicircle around his back, “the team and I have been talking-”

John visibly tensed beside him, and Sherlock fought not to roll his eyes. Honestly, how could he possibly be worried? What was about to happen was so obvious, it was almost boring.

“-and, with Jordan out, we’re gonna need a new captain.”

Sherlock watched out of the corner of his eye as John blinked again and again, his eyes searching the faces of his teammates for the confirmation he could not read the signs of.

“You up for it?” Coach Powles finished with a confident smile.

“I-I-“ John stammered, his eyes lingering slightly on Mike. “Are you sure? I mean, I’ve only been here-”

“After that call you made last Friday?” Devon Warrick piped up, stepping forward to clap John’s shoulder, causing an uncomfortable twist in Sherlock’s stomach he promptly deleted. “You bet your ass we’re sure!”

The team rumbled in agreement, smiling and nodding, and Sherlock watched as John’s face softened at Mike’s smile in particular.

“You up for it?” Coach Powles finished with a confident smile.

“I-I-“ John stammered, his eyes lingering slightly on Mike. “Are you sure? I mean, I’ve only been here-”

“After that call you made last Friday?” Devon Warrick piped up, stepping forward to clap John’s shoulder, causing an uncomfortable twist in Sherlock’s stomach he promptly deleted. “You bet your ass we’re sure!”

The team rumbled in agreement, smiling and nodding, and Sherlock watched as John’s face softened at Mike’s smile in particular.

“Thanks, guys,” John murmured, nodding vaguely. “It’s- It’s a real honor.”

Devon groaned theatrically, the rest of the team following suit with similar, sickly sounds. “Don’t go gettin’ all soft on us, or we’ll impeach you!”

John laughed, nodding more firmly as he bowed his head. “Got it,” he said, smiling brightly at Devon first before passing it across the team.

The group dissolved with mumbled congratulations and encouragements, often accompanied with slaps on the back and shoulder that had Sherlock digging his nails into his palms, but John lingered.

“You knew they were gonna make me captain,” John said, a soft, glowing smile on his face as he turned. “How?”

Sherlock shrugged, slipping his hands into the pockets of his trench. “You were the obvious choice, even aside from the fact that you took over the position of the previous captain.”

“But that call, the one they were talking about…that was you. Not me.” He dropped his head, his eyebrows knitting together.

“It was only my idea, John,” Sherlock attempted to reassure, taking a hesitant step closer. “You’re the one who actually accomplished it.”

“Yeah, but-”
“Ideas are worthless without action,” he interrupted, enough of an edge to his voice that John snapped his head up, startled. “Besides, you had to make the decision to listen to me.”

“Well, that’s hardly impressive. It’s you!” John chuckled, swatting a hand toward him.

Sherlock tilted his head, his forehead creasing at the odd response.

“It’s hardly a leap to trust you, Sherlock,” John clarified, smiling fondly.

There was suddenly not enough oxygen in the air.

“Most people would disagree,” he managed, internally wincing at the hint of emotion that slipped through while he was preoccupied with not gasping for breath.

“Fuck most people.”

Sherlock’s mouth dropped open as he felt his eyes widen, his head literally snapping backward slightly in shock.

John was looking at him, perfectly casual, but then his lips slowly pursed together as he fought a smile, a battle he quickly lost. A few puffs of a chuckle hissed through his nose before his teeth flashed in the fading light as he laughed, his head turning away while he lifted a hand to his mouth. “Your face!” he spurt, his whole body shaking.

Sherlock’s expression quickly snapped into a scowl, but he could feel the corners of his lips betraying him. “Weren’t you going to shower or something?” he muttered bitterly, but John only laughed harder.

He may have actually wiped a tear from his eye at one point, but he calmed eventually, shaking his head down at the grass as he stood with his hands on his hips, collecting himself with deep breaths. “Remind me to curse around you more often.”

“I will do no such thing,” Sherlock scoffed.

John only grinned. “I’ll see you back at the dorm, alright?”

Sherlock nodded, watching as his mud-caked roommate retreated toward the locker room. Tugging his coat tighter around him, he turned, heading out between the stands. A crack of a twig to his left made him stop, and a second’s worth of deductions had him closing his eyes, steeling himself against the brittle rage that curdled his blood.

“I thought I made myself perfectly clear, Victor,” he spat, twisting to the dark figure that approached from beneath the bleachers. “Should I use smaller words?”

Something arched toward him, and he stepped back as he reached instinctively to catch it.


His hand was shaking as he looked down, the crystalline liquid in the vial sloshing with the erratic movement.

“Nice reflexes,” Victor said, the sly smile on his face revealed as he passed beneath a stripe of light. “I think you could do better, though.”

Footsteps crushed across the grass toward him, but Sherlock was frozen, his focus narrowed down solely to the container in his hand. It was so clear, so pure.
He staggered a couple of wobbly steps backward as Victor’s words from weeks ago washed over him, hazy in the dim world that existed outside of the liquid glistening within the glass. His breaths were coming in short gasps, the fact that he could hear them the only evidence that he was breathing at all. His lungs burned with the lactic lack of oxygen, and he wondered how the same sensation could feel so unpleasant now compared to when he had been with John.

John.

His grip tightened around the vial, obscuring the liquid from view with his white-splotched fingers. Blue eyes formed in his head, shattered with surprise and hardened with disappointment.

John would never understand. John would never forgive him.

John would leave.

“No.”

Victor stopped his advance, his brown eyes blinking stupidly as they widened. He then huffed a chuckle, and Sherlock’s stomach rolled as he watched the reveal of stained teeth when the man sneered.

“You don’t have to pay for it,” Victor purred, moving forward with confidence now.

Sherlock backed away, realizing too late he had run out of room as his body slammed against the maze of support beams.

Victor closed the distance between them, the stench of stale food on his breath making Sherlock duck his head, giving him a view down the line of their bodies, separated by only a few, precious, centimeters. Victor broke that barrier quick enough, though, a hand stretching out between them.

For all he had heard people talk about this—being paralyzed, unable to respond to what their mind was screaming at them to do—Sherlock had never thought it would happen to him, never thought it could happen to him, but, as twitching fingers crept toward him, he could do nothing but watch.

“I’m sure we can work…something out.”

A finger hooked through his belt loop, tugging him forward, and the stiffness that brushed against his thigh finally spurned his brain into action.

He planted his hands on Victor’s chest, pushing him so hard, the man stumbled back against the opposite stands, clattering against the metal as his limbs scrambled for stability.

Victor blinked up at him through a veil of his greasy hair, and if even half of the rage Sherlock could feel coiling through his veins was on his face, the current terror in Victor’s eyes was not nearly enough.

He threw the vial to the ground, crushing it firmly under his shoe as he crossed the aisle, wrenching the front of Victor’s shirt in his fist as he pulled the man up to his face, leaving his legs struggling for footing on the slick grass.

“Listen very, very carefully, Victor,” Sherlock growled, proud of the wince that passed across the dealer’s face. “If I ever see you again,” he paused, trying to force the threat of his words through his
eyes, “I will kill you. Without hesitation, without mercy, and without leaving anything large enough to identify your corpse, is that understood?”

Victor swallowed, his entire body shaking, and Sherlock ignored the growing ache in his arm as he held the man suspended. Victor nodded tremulously, his lip quivering in a failed attempt to speak.

Sherlock stood upright, pushing Victor down to the ground away from him.

His bleached hair shone greasy in the shafts of light that filtered through the bleachers from the large, pitch lights. His clothes were rumpled, the tips of his dirty fingers scarred from drug use, and a rush of bile rose in Sherlock’s throat at the sight of him, at the awareness of having this creature’s skin cells on his trousers and used breath in his lungs.

“Good,” Sherlock snarled through bared teeth, twisting away and pushing up the hill as fast as he could, his calves burning with the urgency. As soon as he was over the top of the hill, out of the reach of Victor’s gaze, he broke into a run, gasping through clenched teeth as he willed control into his body.

There was no one in the corridors as he sprinted into Kingsley, and he ignored the few startled sputters from the common room as he barreled past. He fumbled with the door handle of his laboratory for a moment, his hands shaking in rebellion against his commands. After an endless second, the door opened, and he stumbled inside, collapsing back against it to close it with a bang. His legs were failing as he crossed to the bathroom, hanging off the doorknob to swing inward with it, falling to his knees with a stab of dull pain against the hard, tile floor. There was barely time to get the lid up on the toilet before the vomit he had been suppressing for dignity’s sake rose in his throat, wracking his body with a choking shudder.

Acid burned in his nose, but his stomach could hardly summon anything but singeing spit, empty from not eating since breakfast, and he was not sure if he was thankful or not for that now. His body trembled again, passing up from the base of his spine to leave gooseflesh across his skin, and his eyes watered as he choked.

“Sherlock!”

John.

Sherlock’s mind scrambled to find something to do, something to say, somewhere to hide, but John was already there at his shoulder, Sherlock’s window of opportunity closed now that his dulled senses had failed to identify his approach.

“What happened? What’s wrong?” John’s voice was frantic beside him, and Sherlock shirked away from it, shifting his arm to cover the side of his face.

This was not brilliant. This was not amazing. This was weak and petty and painfully ordinary, and John could not see him like this.

Even in his compromised state, he could feel the shift in the air, could practically see John’s muscles tensing against the bathroom floor as his mind put together the only logical conclusion.

“Sherlock, look at me.”

He winced. There was no room in that tone for anything but swift compliance.

Slowly, he turned his face away from the water, avoiding meeting John’s eyes for as long as he could. It could not be avoided forever, however, and a shiver ran through him that had nothing to do
with his still-writhing intestines as he met the ice-blue orbs.

John leaned forward, and Sherlock forced himself to maintain eye contact as he was scanned. John was cataloging everything, the mental checklist of symptoms of drug use practically visible in his eyes as he went through it.

It was so efficient, so clinical, so clever. So, so clever, John.

He searched Sherlock’s eyes, his own narrowing, and then moved over his forehead, no doubt looking for a sheen of sweat. The gaze then shifted to the pulse point in Sherlock’s neck, and John leaned so close, Sherlock could feel his breath ghosting across the skin, prompting a tremble that had little to do with the nausea he suddenly didn’t feel nearly as much.

“You cold?” John presumed incorrectly, but Sherlock didn’t have any better explanation—not one he was willing to part with, anyway—so he nodded. “Stay there. I’ll be right back.” John stood, the scent of him carried with the shift of air. He had forgone the shower, for whatever reason, and the night air still clung to him, mingling with the smell of broken grass and damp dirt.

Sherlock sucked in a long draw of air—for the nausea, of course—and slid his arms off the toilet to fall limply in his lap. He pressed his forehead against the lip of the porcelain bowl and closed his eyes, the smooth surface comfortingly cool.

John reentered the room behind him, a rustle of clothing and faint impact tremor signaling his kneeling. “Here,” he murmured, and a soft pressure fell against Sherlock’s shoulders. “You had books all over yours. Hope you don’t mind.” He folded his duvet around Sherlock’s body, his arms wrapping around Sherlock’s own for a moment before he withdrew, and Sherlock clutched tightly at the edges of the blanket, tugging it firmer around him.

“It’s fine,” Sherlock mumbled, trying not to be too obvious about inhaling its scent: the faux after-rain of fresh laundry and a musky sort of spice. John.

“You should eat something,” John said softly. “Maybe drink some tea. I-I think you’re in shock.”

Sherlock scoffed instinctively, but his brain slowly crawled to the same conclusion as he huffed a haughty retort. “Shock? That’s absurd. Why would I be in shock?”

John’s face was thoughtful and also a little sad as Sherlock looked over at him, and the odd expression caught him off-guard for a moment before John spoke. “I don’t know,” he whispered with a soft shake of his head. “If I ask what happened”—he swallowed, looking to the floor briefly before lifting his eyes with confidence—“will you lie to me?”

Sherlock blinked, his lips trembling apart in shock. His eyebrows twitched as he read John’s face, trying to understand.

John knew he could lie to him, that much was obvious in the worried creases of his forehead, but there was also a confidence there that he could trust Sherlock’s word if told he would be truthful. The dichotomy of it strained against all logic, an unprecedented act of unfounded faith, and it stirred something—he would say it was his heart if he was prone to such clichés—in Sherlock that negated any thoughts of deception.

“No,” he breathed.

John held his gaze, blue eyes shifting between grey ones, and Sherlock’s inside squirmed with nerves under the skeptical scrutiny. “Did you take anything?” he asked finally, his fingers twitching against the tile.
Sherlock shook his head, forcing himself not to look away, however hard it made his heart pound.

John’s posture relaxed slightly, the tension in his muscles slackening. “Did you…see anyone?”

It was a brilliant assumption, however vaguely John had stated it, and Sherlock may have been more inclined to lie and avoid the follow-up questions if not for being mildly impressed. As it was, he nodded, but could not help but drop his gaze to the floor between them as he did.

There was a small, sharp intake of breath and then silence, time John was obviously using to formulate his next question.

“Did-Did he- Did you-” he stammered, swallowing hard enough to be audible. “What happened?”

Sherlock looked up through his eyelashes, the nausea that had abated with John’s presence returning with the memory. “He-He gave me…some. A vial,” he added quickly, realizing the possible misinterpretation.

John’s face hardened, eyes shadowing with slate, but it was not directed at him. It was anger—fury, even—but protective, not accusatory, and Sherlock slowly continued, filling in the answers to questions he didn’t want to make John ask.

“I threw it away. Well, crushed it, technically,” he amended with a jerky shrug, hardly as nonchalant as he’d intended. His voice was too high, too fast, barreling out of his control and ahead of his mind. “I imagine they’ll find the glass when they go to mow the pitch for the game on Friday, but it may be advisable to clean it up before Thursday’s practice so no one cuts themselves if they happen to-”

“Sherlock,” John broke in, his tone flat and stern.

He shut his lips, staring unseeingly at the wall a comfortable two feet or so to the right of John’s eyes. In his peripheral vision, he watched John shift closer, the clean, grey track pants he had changed into scraping across the floor. Even blurry, he saw the intent in John’s eyes, saw his arm raise, hand outstretched, fingers folding in and out with hesitation.

“Sherlock?”

He closed his eyes, his head dropping as he fought the lump in his throat. This didn’t happen to him. He didn’t do this, especially not in front of other people! Not even Mrs. Hudson—because Mycroft was hardly the comparable choice—had seen him this…this…vulnerable, broken, human. Why here, why now, why John?

Warm fingers pressed into his chin, soft but insistent, and he followed their pull to John’s pained gaze.

Why does it hurt, John? Why does it matter? Why are you still here?

“Did he touch you? Did he hurt you?” John asked with restrained urgency.

Sherlock’s stomach twisted as he pondered how two things intended as the same question could be so terribly different. “No,” he murmured, regretting the loss of John’s fingers as they returned to the floor, his nerves still tingling from the touch.

“To which one: touching you or hurting you?”

He winced. Too clever, John, as always. Too clever for your—my? our?—own good. “He didn’t hurt me.” His voice was barely audible, even to his own ears.
“But he did touch you?” John’s fingers curled against the ceramic.

It was a long moment before Sherlock managed to coordinate his muscles into a nod.

John’s breathing was ragged, his fists whitening with tension, and there was a muscle protruding from his neck as he clenched his jaw, the thing Sherlock chose to focus on rather than his blazing eyes. “How- When- What happened?! Sorry, I-I’m sorry,” he muttered, a hand darting out to grasp Sherlock’s arm through the blanket as his rage momentarily boiled.

Sherlock shook his head, looking down at the tan fingers pushing into the grey fabric. “It’s fine. I’m fine.”

“No, you’re not,” John said, not angry or argumentative, just sure.

He was quiet, staring at John’s fingers and wondering why he didn’t remove them, as well as being very grateful for that fact. It was anchoring, somehow; a warm weight that tethered him to this place, this moment, and made what happened in the shadows of the pitch seem far away, unable to reach him wrapped in John’s duvet on the floor of their fluorescent-lit bathroom.

“You don’t have to tell me,” John said, his grip loosening, but not leaving, “but you could. I need you to know you could.”

“I know,” he answered, because he did know, because it was the most obvious thing in the world, because the mere fact that he had not thrown John out the second he’d walked in here was evidence of that.

John smiled, giving his arm a firm squeeze before retracting his hand, Sherlock firmly suppressing the pang of loss that shattered across his chest. “Okay,” he said softly, and then rose to his feet. “I’m gonna run down to the common room and make some tea. You wanna order pizza when I get back? I can run down to the gate and pick it up?”

Sherlock smiled, every hint of nausea and chill disappearing with that one, simple, merciful act of John allowing it to drop.

John was still curious, still terribly concerned, but he was not going to press, that amazing, extraordinary, inexplicable friend Sherlock had stumbled into through the grand design of some deity he didn’t even believe in.

“Sure,” Sherlock said, shifting on the floor and prompting John to extend down a hand. He took it, lurching up with the surprisingly strong tug as he tucked the duvet tightly to himself with his free hand.

When John returned to the dorm, two cups of tea (one of which had been futilely declined) in hand, Sherlock was sitting on his own bed, John’s blanket still closed tightly around him.

If John noticed he had removed his coat beneath the duvet, he had the grace not to mention it.

*****

“What was the one rule, Victor?”

Victor Trevor trembled violently on the warehouse floor, his dark jeans stained with dirt and the blood that was still trickling from his nose. “I-I didn’t”

“DON’T LIE TO ME!”
Victor winced, his breathing shallow with panic. “Please. Please, I-I’m sorry. I didn’t mean-”

“Yes, you did.”

Footsteps clicked slow and deliberate across the concrete.

“Maybe he would have taken the drugs if you’d been able to keep it in your pants.”

“No, I-I didn’t.”

“But you would’ve,” the voice interrupted, dangerous with calm, and Victor shuddered. “Did he threaten to kill you if he saw you again?”

Victor nodded, tremors rattling his fingers against his thighs as he shifted into a kneel.

“He would, you know,” the man said with an audible smile, “but my associate here would take care of you first.”

Victor shrunk slightly, shooting a sidelong glance out into the shadows to his right.

“You should be grateful for it, too. Sherlock would draw it out so much longer than I will. And I will end you, Victor. Just like Ethan. If you step out of line again.”


“You’d better not, Victor. Because if you do, if you lay a finger on Sherlock Holmes again, if you spoil him…”

There was a loud click from the darkness.

“Well…you know.”

Victor swallowed hard, but nodded.

“Good.” Clicking steps paced away. “Now, tell me about this John Watson.”
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

*John searched his face, trying to put things together as best he could when dealing with Sherlock, where there were always a few pieces missing. “You’re being difficult on purpose, aren’t you?”*

*Sherlock huffed, crossing his arms over his chest and staring defiantly at the ceiling. “Nonsense. Why would I do that?”*

It had been several days before Sherlock had felt comfortable telling John the entire story of what had happened with Victor, and he got it mostly in pieces that he had to string together, but he hadn’t let Sherlock out of his sight for very long since, a fact that was slowly driving the detective mad.

Friday’s game had been by far the worst, and even John could agree he might have been a touch irrational, but he thought it only fair that he got a pass for that, considering it had been the same day he’d finally gotten all the details.

Sherlock, of course, hadn’t quite seen it the same way, muttering under his breath like a petulant child the entire way back to the dorm, frustrated that John had insisted he wait in the locker room so as not to be alone on the pitch for even the small amount of time it would take John to change. ‘It smells like sweat and ignorance,’ he had said, wrinkling his nose in distaste as he’d watched boys flicking towels across one another’s backsides.

It had taken a herculean effort for John not to laugh.

After a weekend of John “mother hen-ing”, as Donovan had put it at the crime scene on Saturday (a kidnapping Sherlock had deemed painfully dull and quickly revealed had been paid for by the father, who was about to lose custody of the children in the divorce), Sherlock had finally put his foot down, which is how John found himself working into a panic attack on Wednesday afternoon. It was 3:45, 15 minutes after double English had ended, and Sherlock had not been in class. Nor was he in the dorm or anywhere on the lawn, where John was currently sitting with Mary and desperately trying to focus on what she was saying rather than why Sherlock wasn’t answering his texts.

She was looking at him expectantly, tilting her head, and his chest tightened as he realized he was supposed to be replying to something. Mary seemed to know he hadn’t heard, and smiled forgivingly. “I asked what you thought of the ending of *Pride and Prejudice*.”

“It was more than that, wasn’t it?” John asked, feeling terrible he hadn’t heard, but also fairly certain she had said something much longer.

Mary smiled down at the grass. “I talked a bit about what I thought of it,” she said with a shrug, “but it’s not really important.”

“No, no, it is,” John urged, sighing as he grimaced in shame. “I’m sorry, I just- I was somewhere else. Please tell me. Please,” he added, leaning closer, bracing his upper body on his arm.

Mary smiled shyly, tucking a strand of golden hair behind her ear. “Well, alright. Basically, I was
just saying about how I thought it was so realistic, the way they both let their pride get in the way of their true feelings. And then the way, even when he’s already proposed to her, already made it very obvious how he feels, Elizabeth still can’t tell him at the end; she still can’t admit it.”

John nodded, really listening this time, but Mary’s words were interwoven with memories of Sherlock’s opinion on the same subject.

‘Of course they get married; they’re perfect for one another. Both idiots.’

“And it was so romantic, the way he saved her family like that, even though he thought he had no chance with her at all.”

‘I don’t know why people think this is romantic. It’s a tragedy, really. Mr. Darcy stuck with that horrible woman for the rest of his life.’

“I just thought it was such an amazing portrayal of how we can let our own assumptions and fear get in the way and keep us from doing things that would be really amazing.”

‘Maybe she’ll get pneumonia and die.’

It had been almost three hours since he’d seen Sherlock at lunch.

“Yeah, it was pretty good,” John said as Mary finished, looking up at him with a slight flush to her cheeks.

“I suppose that’s not really your type of story, is it?” Mary chuckled.

John smiled at her. “Not really, no,” he conceded with a shake of his head.

“What do you like to read, then?” she asked brightly, folding her legs beneath her and balancing her elbows on her knees, her socks and shoes abandoned in the grass beside her.


“Really?” Mary said with surprise, tilting her head, her blue eyes sparkling in the sunlight as a strand of hair drifted across her face with the wind. “What kind of mysteries?”

“Er, ya know, the usual stuff,” he muttered. “Murders and spies and detectives and all that.”

Mary chuckled. “I didn’t take you for the murder mystery type.”

“Oh?” John questioned. “Why not?”

“I don’t know,” she said lightly, shrugging as she leaned back onto her palms. “Just seems a little…violent for you.”

He chuckled, looking down at the ground as he played with one of his shoelaces, and then his amusement at the irony vanished to prickling dread.

What would Mary think of him if she knew he not only read murder mysteries, he lived them? Would she think he was some sort of psychopath? Probably. That’s what everyone thought Sherlock was. Where was he?

“Yea, well,” John chuckled uncomfortably, reaching into his pocket for his phone, “guess you never can tell about people.”
No new messages.

John frowned down at the screen, opening up Sherlock’s thread.

“No, I guess not,” Mary chuckled, and John flashed a smile up at her before typing out a message.

**Sherlock seriously where are you?**

“So what do you do when you’re not reading murder mysteries and Austen novels?” Mary joked with a dramatic flourish of her hand.

John laughed, resting his phone on the grass in front of him. “Oh, ya know, sit around in my smoking jacket and ponder the meaning of life.”

Mary threw her head back with a girlish giggle. “Seriously, though, what do you do in your free time?”

Hunt down serial killers with my brilliantly barmy roommate.

“I don’t have much, really,” John said, and that was technically true. “Between classes and rugby”—he left out the murder—“I pretty much just sleep and eat.” He grabbed his phone as she nodded thoughtfully, taking the moment of silence to text.

*If you don’t answer I’ll call Mycroft.*

Practically hearing Sherlock’s skeptical eye roll from here, John added another text.

*I will Sherlock. I swear I will.*

And then, just because it occurred to him:

*I’ll tell him you havent eaten in 3 days too*

“Ever go into town?” she asked, her voice slightly higher as she looked down at the grass.

“What?” he said automatically, understanding a second later. “Oh, um, sometimes. For groceries.”

His phone beeped, and he dove at it, almost missing what Mary said as he opened Sherlock’s message with a rush of relief.

“Ever tried the café down there? Lindsey’s?”

*Stop texting me and focus on your wildest dreams coming true.*

“Er, no. No, can’t say I have,” he muttered as he read, frowning while typing out a reply.

*What?*

“They have really good scones. And the French vanilla latte is amazing. I usually go there Thursdays around lunch to study because I have the rest of the day off.”

“Sounds like a nice place,” John murmured distractedly, tapping open the latest message.

*You’re being asked out on a date John. Do keep up.*

He stared. Stared and blinked and gaped, and then snapped his head up to look around, but there was
no dark figure leaning smugly against a building, lamppost, or tree anywhere in sight.

“You should check it out sometime,” Mary said, smiling as he looked to her, her cheeks reddening on either side of a sparkling smile. “Maybe you could come with me tomorrow. After class.”

“I- Er-” A message beep momentarily spared him, the most beautiful sound he had ever heard.

**There's a case but I don't need you on it.**

Like hell he didn’t, that pompous, arrogant, selfish-

“Yeah, sure,” John said, smiling broadly as he made a bit of a production out of shoving his phone away in his pocket.

Serves him right, the git.

“Sounds like fun,” he added, and Mary beamed while John looked past her ears to scan the windows of the building beyond for a head of curly hair.

“Great!” she chirped, unfolding her legs. “Well, I should go. I’m supposed to help Molly with her chemistry.”

“But…you’re not in chemistry,” John said hesitantly, hoping he hadn’t simply missed Mary in there the past three-and-a-half weeks.

“No, but she’s having some trouble with the formulas and, ya know, with my taking maths,”—she stood, shrugging—“it’s a little fresher in my mind.”

“Right,” John acquiesced, brushing grass off the backs of thighs as he rose with her. “Guess I’ll see you tomorrow, then,” he added as she bent to pick up her backpack.

“Yeah, I- I’m looking forward to it.” She turned to the ground, slipping her hair behind her ear before looking back up at him through her eyelashes, her hands clutching together around a notebook in front of her.

“Me too,” John replied with a smile, his rib cage suddenly feeling too small for his lungs.

Mary nodded, looking at him over her shoulder for the first few steps before she turned away, walking across the grass before disappearing between the buildings.

John sighed, shaking his head as he wrenched his own bag from the lawn, slinging the strap over his shoulder and marching toward the dormitory. He reached into his pocket just as his phone beeped, something he didn’t quite think was coincidence.

**That was positively painful.**

He grumbled down at the phone, mashing at the touchscreen.

*Then why did you watch?*

He waited, but there was no reply, and he huffed irritably as he dropped the phone back in his pocket and headed to the dorm.

Predictably, Sherlock was there when he arrived, lying flat on his bed and tossing a ball repeatedly into the air.
“What, are you stalking me now?” he snarled, tossing his bag on his bed before standing over Sherlock, arms crossing as he glared.

Sherlock sighed, catching the ball and holding it in his raised arm while he spoke. “No, John,” he said, tired and condescending. “I merely came to look for you after returning from London and happened to find you with Ms. Morstan. It was hardly anything as sinister as stalking.” He began tossing the ball again, his grey eyes following the rising and falling progress.

“Then how did you know what we were saying?”

Sherlock’s eyes never left the ball. “I could read her lips, and glean a general sense of your responses through her expressions and body language.”

John’s eyes narrowed. “Why were you in London?”

“To get the details.”

“The details on what?”

“On the case.”

“What case?”

“The one Lestrade asked me to look into.”

“Yes, okay, but what specifically- Give me that!” He snatched the ball out of its downward arch toward Sherlock’s waiting fingers, clenching it in his fist as he pulled it away.

Sherlock turned to look at him, eyes sparking with anger as his arm collapsed to the bed with a muffled thump.

John searched his face, trying to put things together as best he could when dealing with Sherlock, where there were always a few pieces missing. “You’re being difficult on purpose, aren’t you?”

Sherlock huffed, crossing his arms over his chest and staring defiantly at the ceiling. “Nonsense. Why would I do that?”

John thought, his eyebrows drawing closer, the anxiety only building as he felt Sherlock’s waiting eyes on him. Then, maybe just this once, it all made sense. “You told me you didn’t need me on the case!” he bleated. “You can’t be mad at me for going out with Mary when you said you wouldn’t need me, and then you took off on me today without a-”

“I’m not mad you’re going out with Mary!” Sherlock exclaimed, swinging his legs over the side of the bed and standing with such ferocity, John jumped back, nearly toppling over as his knees hit the edge of his mattress. “I hope you two have a fantastic time drinking your Nazi-sympathizing lattes over a rousing discussion of Romanticism!” He turned, ripping the dormitory door open and storming across the corridor.

“We will!” John shouted after him.

“Good!”

“Great!”

“Excellent!”
“Fan-fucking-tastic!”

The laboratory door slammed just as the last syllable left John’s mouth, and even though he was over a meter away, he still winced at the force of it, the walls rattling around him. With an animalistic growl of frustration, he spun, digging his fingers into his hair and gripping tightly as he paced down the pathway to his desk. He stopped behind the chair, untangling his fingers to clutch the top of the backrest, the chair shifting slightly in an attempt to swivel under his grasp. Breathing deeply, he closed his eyes, hanging his head as he pushed his anger out through a white grip on the wood.

Their first fight, first proper one anyway, and, though John had known it was inevitable with Sherlock, he’d never thought he would feel so…bereft.

A minute or so later, he moved to sit on the edge of his bed, hanging his arms limply off his knees as he stared at the floor. Another couple minutes of deep breathing and, counterintuitively, growing nausea, and he was up, crossing the corridor to hover uncertainly outside the laboratory door. He raised and dropped his hand a few times before making contact, a tentative knock on the wood.

There was no answer, but he hadn’t really expected there to be.

He tried the handle, finding it unlocked, and figured that was permission enough.

“Sherlock?” he said softly, peering around the door.

The boy was sitting on the floor, leaning against one of the tables against the right wall, his legs drawn up in front of him and tethered by his hands around his ankles. He looked the opposite direction when John entered, but did not move away as John sank down cross-legged in front of him.

They sat in silence for a while, John twisting at the hem of his trousers while Sherlock continued to stare blankly out the window on the back wall.

“Ya know,” John said eventually, and silver eyes flicked over him, “I don’t even like lattes.”

Sherlock stared at him, entirely unresponsive apart from a faint wrinkling of his forehead.

“Or Romanticism,” he added, the left side of his mouth twitching up, his gaze erratically shifting between Sherlock’s and the floor.

Sherlock didn’t smile, but his face softened somehow. “I know.”

A breathy chuckle puffed from John’s mouth. “Of course you do,” he answered, shaking his head as he smiled properly now.

Sherlock’s lips upturned slightly as he dropped his head. “I don’t really think the French are Nazi-sympathizers,” he mumbled after a moment.

“I know,” John said, mustering as much smugness as he could.

Sherlock lifted his head, smiling a bit brighter now, and they simply looked at one another for a long moment.

“I’m sorry,” John muttered hurriedly, tugging at his shoelaces now, unable to meet Sherlock’s eyes for this part. “I- I shouldn’t have yelled.” He didn’t dare look up to see what Sherlock was doing until he heard a soft sigh.

“I suppose I could have handled the situation better as well,” Sherlock murmured, his fingers shifting
his socks around on his ankles.

The pressure in John’s chest alleviated, manifesting in a smirk. “Is that an apolo-”

“Don’t push it,” Sherlock interjected, his glare weakened by a slight curl at the corner of his mouth. John laughed, watching as Sherlock’s smile grew more pronounced, eventually becoming a chuckle as he rose to his feet and hoisted John up beside him.

“So, what’s the case you’re working on?” John asked, following as Sherlock crossed to the dormitory.

“A locked room conundrum.” He pulled a file out of his bag at the head of his bed. “Fascinating, but not why I went to London in the first place.”

“So then?” John said as he crossed his legs on the end of Sherlock’s bed, his usual spot for their ‘powwows’, a term Sherlock was vehemently insisting he replace. It wasn’t gonna happen.

“I wanted to get some associates of mine looking out for any information on the new dealer Carlisle was talking about,” he replied cryptically as he moved his pillow, propping it up behind him to sit at the head of his bed, laying the files out between them.

“Associates?” John questioned, leaning forward, elbows on his knees.

“Homeless network,” Sherlock replied with a dismissive wave of his hand, his fingers steepling beneath his chin as he stared down at the open file. “More knowledgeable, too. At least about things like this.”

“Associates?” John questioned, leaning forward, elbows on his knees.

“A locked room conundrum.” He pulled a file out of his bag at the head of his bed. “Fascinating, but not why I went to London in the first place.”

“Why then?” John said as he crossed his legs on the end of Sherlock’s bed, his usual spot for their ‘powwows’, a term Sherlock was vehemently insisting he replace. It wasn’t gonna happen.

“I wanted to get some associates of mine looking out for any information on the new dealer Carlisle was talking about,” he replied cryptically as he moved his pillow, propping it up behind him to sit at the head of his bed, laying the files out between them.

“So…?”

A irritated sigh hissed through Sherlock’s nose as he looked up at John over his pressed fingers. “I pay them, they ask around, keep their ears open, and report back to me.” He lifted his eyebrows, nearly-green eyes sparkling. “Now, can we focus on the case?”

John glared briefly before shaking his head, rolling his eyes to the ceiling. “Fine. What am I looking at?” he muttered, flicking a hand over the series of photographs.

“Claire Jones,” Sherlock said, pointing to a cropped photograph of a woman smiling at what appeared to be a party of some sort. “She was found in her bathroom this morning on the third floor of her building, shot in the head. The door was locked, as was her flat, with no signs of forced entry.”

“Suicide?” John assumed, knowing that was probably wrong, but feeling like he had to contribute anyway.

Sherlock’s frown deepened. “They found opioids in her system, but there was a bottle next to the tub where she was found; an old prescription from an ankle surgery she had last year.”

“So…she took some pills before she killed herself?”

Sherlock began tapping his index fingers together. “That’s what the police think.”

“But you disagree.” That much, at least, John didn’t need to question, smiling absently as he watched Sherlock fidget.

“She was left-handed,” he answered, sifting through the photos. He lifted one out of the pile, twisting
it around and sliding it across the mess. "Toothbrush on the left side of the sink, toiletries on the left side of the shelves, fingerprints in makeup residue from a left hand on the mirror."

"Okay, so she’s left-handed," John interjected, laying the photo of the bathroom—fancy, free-standing tub and all—back into the fray. "Why does that make it not suicide?"

"She was shot in the right side of her head; the gun was found on the floor to the right of the tub, below her right hand," Sherlock ranted, gesticulating more and more wildly with every example.

"Maybe she’s ambidextrous," John suggested, scanning the photo again for any signs he could point to. "I’m left-handed, but I can use my right almost just as well."

"Yes, but you don’t," Sherlock countered. He then stilled, his eyebrows furrowing down at the photo in front of John.

"What?" John asked as Sherlock snatched it up, pulling it to his face. "What did you see?"

"The window," Sherlock murmured, his eyes scanning back and forth across the photo. "The window is open."

John tilted his head, his eyebrows furrowing, but he did not speak and interrupt the thought apparent on Sherlock’s face.

"Why would she open the window? There are no curtains around the bathtub; she could have been seen. She’s modest, not one to be interested in voyeurism, and it was cold that morning. Why, why would she open the window?"

"Maybe it got too hot," John offered as Sherlock grew silent. "She opened it to let some of the humidity out."

Sherlock’s eyes widened. "Or to let something else out."

"Something else?" John repeated.

"The gunshot," Sherlock said, his voice distant and breathy. "Someone opened the window to make sure the gunshot would be heard. Establish an exact time of death when the neighbors called the police."

John frowned for only a moment, his mind getting better at catching up to Sherlock’s. "Why would they do that, though? If someone killed her, wouldn’t they want time to get away?"

"Not if they were already gone," Sherlock said, a wild look growing in his eyes, "already somewhere else, somewhere with witnesses at the exact moment everyone heard Claire Jones die."

John blinked down at the scattered case files, his forehead increasingly furrowing. "But…how do you time a murder?"

Sherlock’s lips slowly stretched over his teeth in a carnivorous grin, eyes glinting with danger and excitement, and John’s stomach swooped as his pulse quickened, like a split-second of freefall.

"That, John," Sherlock breathed, "is precisely the question."

By 5:30, they were hiking up the stairs to Claire Jones’ flat, ducking under the yellow tape across the door.

Anderson was in the living room, decked out in one of those ridiculous, blue, puffy suits. He was
picking at something on the sofa with a pair of forceps, and spared them only a brief, exasperated glance as they walked past.

John followed Sherlock into the bathroom, where Lestrade was standing beside the tub wearing a grey suit and blue covers over his shoes.

“Don’t bother,” he muttered as John reached for the box of disposable shoe-covers, pausing in scratching on his notepad to wave the butt of his pen at them. “Forensics is done in here.”

They moved into the room, Sherlock going directly to Lestrade while John took in the scene. The body was gone, thank goodness—he wasn’t sure he was quite ready for a gunshot to the head yet—but the bloodstained tub remained. The water had been drained, but the inside was still slightly stained, and there was a large patch of blood running down into the basin from a spot on the opposite rim of the tub where her head must have rested. The floor on the far side probably looked considerably worse, and John was grateful the entrance hadn’t been over there.

“You were right about her being left-handed,” Lestrade was saying behind him. “Family confirmed it.”

“Of course I was right,” Sherlock snapped, and John smiled briefly at the opposite wall before turning to the conversation. “Have you talked to the neighbors?”

Lestrade nodded. “Woman at the end of the corridor was one of the calls we got about the shot. Neighbors across and next door were out. They’re down at headquarters right now giving statements, but I don’t think they’ll be much help.”

“The woman that called in, did she hear anything strange before the shot went off? Within the hour or two beforehand?”

Lestrade’s eyes wrinkled. “We weren’t that specific. Why do you say within an hour or two?”

Sherlock’s forehead furrowed as he looked to the ground. “I’m not sure yet. The flat next door, is the bathroom exactly like this one?”

“Looked like it to me,” Lestrade shrugged. “I think all the flats in here are pretty much identical, ‘cept maybe the curtains.”

“Do you have the keys?” Sherlock asked, holding out his hand.

Lestrade looked down at it, and then turned his eyes back to Sherlock, an eyebrow lifting. He cast John a disbelieving glance, and John merely shrugged back. With a sigh, Lestrade reached into his suit pocket, pulling out a large ring of keys. “The one to the flat next door is—”

“I’ll find it,” Sherlock interjected, snatching the keys and turning on his heels. “John.”

John glared at his back as he swept out of the room. They definitely needed to have a talk about that whole beckoning thing. He turned back to Lestrade with a long-suffering, ‘Can you believe this guy?’ look, but the Sergeant was eyeing him pointedly, and John narrowed his eyes for a moment before turning to Sherlock’s retreating back. “I’ll catch ya up in a sec,” he said.

Sherlock slowed momentarily in the doorway, and then carried on, disappearing around the corner in a sweep of black.

John tilted his head inquiringly at Lestrade.
“Got your email,” Lestrade said, stepping toward him as the main flat door closed with Sherlock’s exit.

“Oh, right,” John muttered, having forgotten about it between Sherlock’s disappearance and the Mary debacle. “Whadidja think?”

Lestrade shrugged his shoulders, waving his hands noncommittally, and John glared, affronted. “It was alright,” Lestrade mumbled, wagging his head, and then broke into a smile. “It was good; you can go ahead and post it.”

“Okay. Thanks,” John replied, suddenly uncomfortable under the praise. He made to follow Sherlock’s path out when Lestrade stopped him.

“Does Sherlock know?”

John turned around. “I don’t think so. I mean, I haven’t told him, but it’s only a matter of time, I suppose,” he answered with a shrug.

“Yeah, can’t pull one over on him,” Lestrade chuckled. “Mrs. Hudson tried to throw a surprise party for his birthday a couple years back, and he sent us all a text sayin’ he wasn’t gonna make it.”

“That sounds like Sherlock, alright,” John laughed, shaking his head down at the floor. “When is his birthday, anyway?” he asked as casually as possible.

“January 6th,” Lestrade replied off-handedly, but then his voice turned more fervent. “Don’t tell him I told you, though. And don’t get him a present; he hates presents.”

“What kind of person hates presents?”

“The Sherlock kind,” Lestrade muttered with a small smile.

“Fair enough,” John chuckled, pointing a finger back at Lestrade as he left. “See ya.”

“Yeah, see ya,” Lestrade answered, and John could hear the scuttling of a pen returning as he went out through the living room.

The neighboring flat door was open, and John wandered inside, heading toward the bathroom.

Sherlock was standing in the middle of the room, hands outstretched into a frame in front of him, his head tilting side-to-side.

John stood silently in the doorway, knowing better by now than to interrupt in the middle of Sherlock’s observations.

“She’s in the bath,” he was muttering to himself, stepping toward the identical, clean tub, “gets up to open the window”—he turned toward the glass pane—“but there was no water over here. No footprints. Opened it before? No, it’s cold; she wouldn’t have felt the need to release the humidity until she had been in the bath for some time.” His hands shifted to press together beneath his chin as he stared silently down at the tub for several seconds. “John?”

“Hmm?” John hummed, pulled out of the trance of watching Sherlock work.

“I need you to get in the tub.”

John blinked, his lips parting. “Er…what?”
“You heard me perfectly well,” Sherlock muttered, hands slipping into the pockets of his suit trousers as he turned.

“No, I don’t think I did, because I thought you said-”

“I need you to get in the tub,” Sherlock finished irritably, looking at him as if he were the one being absurd.

“I- You- What?” John stammered, his voice rising as he took a half-step back toward the door.

Sherlock rolled his eyes. “They wouldn’t let me in earlier, and the body is gone now. I need to reconstruct the scene exactly as it was.”

“You want me to pretend to be a dead body?!” John spluttered, his eyes shifting between the bathtub and the insane man in front of him.

“How else am I going to see it?” Sherlock snapped, crossing his arms.

“You’ve got pictures,” John reminded hopefully.

“I can’t observe from pictures!” Sherlock spat, as if the very insinuation were insulting. “I need to interact with the scene; see everything from every angle just as the killer left it.” He drew closer, his explanation growing more impassioned with every word.

“I’m not pretending to be a corpse so you can ‘interact with the scene’,” John mocked, his fingers bending quotes in the air.

Sherlock sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose. “John, really, this is ridiculous. Just get in. You want to be a doctor; you can’t be squeamish about these things.”

“I’m not squeamish; I just don’t want to do it!” John exclaimed. “And how is this relevant to me being a doctor at all? None of my patients will be dead.”

“Not when they walk in, anyway,” Sherlock muttered.

John glared, stubbornly snapping his arms over his chest.

“Okay, fine,” Sherlock sighed, rolling his eyes. “You probably won’t kill any of your patients. Now, will you get in the bath?”

John didn’t move but to narrow his eyes further.

Sherlock’s fingers tensed and slackened in and out of fists, a stiff swallow moving down the front of his throat. “Please?” he nearly croaked.

John’s arms collapsed out of their folds, his lips parting as he blinked in shock.

Sherlock winced as if in pain, his fingers fiddling with the cuffs of his coat as his gaze dropped to the floor, the biting comment John expected never emerging.

John cleared his throat as he collected himself, determined not to make too big a deal of it, regardless of how much he wanted to note down the exact time so he could carve it in cement later. “Fine,” he muttered, and Sherlock snapped his head up, surprised wonder in his grey eyes, “but not for very long.”

“Of course not,” Sherlock assured, beaming as John made his way into the tub.
He looked down at his shoes against the white, feeling utterly foolish just standing there in the middle of the basin. “What do I do?” he sighed, resigned to what would no doubt be an uncomfortable ordeal.

“Lay down,” Sherlock said, striding to the opposite side of the tub and crouching down. “Put your head here,” he added, tapping a spot on the edge.

John awkwardly lowered himself into position, his head lolled against the rim of the bath in a rather natural, resting pose.

“Now give me your arm,” Sherlock ordered, holding a hand out, and John lifted his right wrist into it.

His arm was splayed out over the edge, brushing against Sherlock’s leg where he was kneeling just behind John’s head, so close his words ruffled warm through his hair.

“Your head isn’t right,” he muttered, and John started as cold fingers pressed into his chin.

“Sherlock-”

“Shhh, corpses don’t talk,” Sherlock silenced, tilting John’s face upward.

When John’s glare met grey eyes, they were twinkling smugly, and Sherlock chuckled as he lifted his other hand to John’s hair. He lifted John’s head, cradling it for a moment as he shifted it back an inch or so, and John opened his mouth to make a smartass comment about how carefully he must have studied that photograph when his voice caught in his throat.

Sherlock’s fingers ghosted through his hair and slid cold across his chin as he withdrew, eyes blazing with that familiar expression of intense concentration. The gaze rendered John’s tongue useless, and he could feel himself staring as Sherlock searched over him, but he could not force himself to stop before he was noticed. With Sherlock, of course, that moment came quickly, and John watched as the scan stopped on his eyes, puzzlement creeping into Sherlock’s gaze as dark curls tilted.

Why was his heart beating so fast? Was he imagining Sherlock’s eyes softening into blue?

Sherlock coughed, the frozen time shattering around them as once-again-grey eyes looked down to the edge of the tub. “That- That’s about right,” he said, his voice fumbling as he stood, walking around to the foot of the bath, the air John could finally breathe chilling with his absence.

“Don’t move,” Sherlock said, stepping slowly around the perimeter of the tub.

“Corpses don’t move?” John murmured through barely shifting lips, looking up at Sherlock in his peripheral vision.

“Not much beyond a faint, muscle tremor, no.”

“Eurgh, Sherlock!” John bleated, grimacing.

“What?” he shrugged, standing at John’s side again. “It happens.”

“I know, but you don’t have to talk about it,” John muttered, and Sherlock’s lip curled into a half smirk before he walked to John’s feet once more.

“Catch!” he exclaimed abruptly, something shiny arching in the air from his hand.

John snatched at it, catching it just before it collided with his chest. He looked down into his hand to
“Find…his watch? “Why do you have my watch?”

“ Took it off your wrist when I was positioning your arm,” Sherlock answered, smirking as he slid his hands into his pockets.

John leaned off the back of the tub, placing his arms in his lap, assuming he had permission to move now that he was being pelted with his own possessions. “Okay, but why did you take it?”

“To prove a point.”

“What point?”

“That, in spite of being ambidextrous, people will still use their dominant hand in a high-stress situation.”

John looked down at the silver watch clutched in, of course, his left hand. “You didn’t have to prove that to me,” he said, slipping the band back over his right wrist.

“You were questioning whether Ms. Jones’ wound could still have been self-inflicted in spite of being on the right side of her head,” Sherlock stated stiffly.

“You said it wasn’t self-inflicted,” John replied, his forehead creasing as he braced his hands on either side of the tub and pushed upright.

“It wasn’t,” Sherlock muttered, stepping to the side of the tub and holding out a hand for John to brace himself with, “but you were skeptical.”

“Until you said it wasn’t,” John strained as he stumbled out of the tub, pushing Sherlock’s arm down slightly under the pressure.

“Why would that matter?” Sherlock questioned, pulling his cold hand out from underneath John’s with a jerk before stuffing it into a pocket of his coat.

“Because,” John said, smiling at the strangely endearing petulance, “this is what you do. If you say she didn’t kill herself, she didn’t kill herself.” He tugged at the hem of his black jacket, straightening out the folds, and brushed at one of the leather-patched sleeves to quiet an itch.

“Why are you suddenly so sure?” Sherlock muttered, tilting his head that particular way he always did when faced with something he couldn’t quite understand. It was with no small shortage of pride that John had noted the gesture was almost exclusively reserved for him.

“Because you’re sure, and I trust you.”

Sherlock blinked, the patch between his eyebrows wrinkling with growing confusion. “You trust me.” It wasn’t quite a statement, wasn’t quite a question, but there was a hesitant skepticism about it that prompted John to reassure.

“Of course,” he smiled. “Mad scientist who lurks around crime scenes and keeps body parts in his fridge? What’s not to trust?”

Sherlock chuckled as he looked down, rocking on his heels. “You do realize you sound a bit mad, don’t you?”

“Then I’m in good company,” John said, grinning now, and Sherlock laughed.

“I am rarely described as good company,” he said, shaking his head.
“Too bad,” John sighed with a dramatic shrug. “You’re stuck with me now. You jump, I jump.”

Sherlock quirked an eyebrow. “So now I’m Mr. Darcy and Leonardo DiCaprio?”

“No, I’m Leonardo DiCaprio,” John stressed, pressing a hand to his chest. “You’re Kate Winslet.”

“At least I survive,” Sherlock murmured.

“Only ’cause you’re a greedy, door-hogging bitch.”

“What the hell…”

John turned to find Lestrade standing in the doorway, puzzled eyes shifting between them as his lips slowly curled in amusement.

Sherlock cleared his throat, shooting a dark look as John burst into laughter. “I have all I need for now. I’ll text you with any developments,” he muttered curtly, tossing the keys to Lestrade as he brushed past him.

“Were you two talking about Titanic?” Lestrade chuckled, grinning now as John walked out with him, both of them watching after Sherlock’s sweeping form racing ahead toward the lifts.

“You promised you wouldn’t let go!” John cried in a faux sob.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake,” Sherlock hissed, repeatedly clicking the call button as John and Lestrade burst into laughter.

“And after that beautiful night we had-”

“Is this thing broken?!” Sherlock snarled, his finger turning white with pressure against the button.

“-when I drew you like one of my French girls-”

“I will leave you here.”

“-before we hit the iceberg-”

“I’ll hit you with an iceberg.”

John shook his head at Sherlock’s blazing glare, fighting back laughter in an attempt to look saddened with disappointment. “Now, Sherlock.”

Lestrade was having trouble standing at this point, bracing himself against the corridor wall as he clutched at his sides.

Sherlock growled in frustration, spinning on his heels away from them. “I’m taking the stairs.”

“Oh, come on, mate! It was just a joke!” Lestrade called after him, gasping through his laughter, but the only response was the resounding clang of the metal door as Sherlock pulled it shut behind him.

John and Lestrade laughed for a moment longer, John sighing down much quicker as an odd weight settled in his stomach. “I should go after him before he leaves.”

“Yeah, probably. Oh, I meant to ask, how’s the blog going anyhow?” Lestrade asked, raising his voice as John started to walk away.
“Good,” John said, smiling quickly, anxious to follow after Sherlock before he disappeared. Again. “A few people already commenting, asking for Sherlock’s help.”

“Anything interesting?”

John shrugged. “Not really. Most of them are impossible to read with all the spelling and grammatical errors.”

Lestrade chuckled, shaking his head down at his shoes, and John’s eyebrows furrowed. “He’s rubbing off on you, too,” he said.

John frowned, confused by Lestrade’s smile. Most people wouldn’t consider taking on Sherlock Holmes’ characteristics to be a positive.

“I’m just saying,” Lestrade shrugged, “I guess it’s going both ways.”

“Both…ways…?” John repeated, shaking his head bemusedly.

The lift chimed beside him as the door rattled open, and John stepped inside, leaning half-out to keep it from closing as Lestrade replied.

“Yeah, both ways,” he said. “You’re rubbing off on him, too, I mean.”

“I am?” John murmured, so bewilderedly preoccupied, the lift door nearly knocked him over as it nudged forward.

Lestrade smiled warmly as he nodded. “I don’t suppose you would notice, not knowing him before, but he’s better with you. A little less…”—he shifted his head side-to-side—“himself.”

John chuckled. “Well, if I start skulking around in a trench coat, feel free to initiate an intervention.”

Lestrade laughed, pointing at John with a quirk of his head. “Will do. See you soon, I’m sure.”

“No doubt,” John answered, and backed away to allow the insistent door to close. His foot tapped anxiously against the quivering floor, trying to mentally work out if Sherlock could have reached the lobby before him. It seemed more than likely, so John took off through the lobby at a just-dignified sprint.

“Sherlock!” he called as he broke out onto the pavement, catching him halfway in a cab. John didn’t have Sherlock’s skills at deductive reasoning, but even he could read the stiffness in Sherlock’s muscles at the shout.

Sherlock slowly turned, his face completely blank. It made John’s skin crawl, and his throat was suddenly very thick. “We- We didn’t mean anything,” he murmured, whatever brush-off apology he had loosely prepared in the lift wiped away by the cold of Sherlock’s gaze. “Mates take the piss out of each other all the time.”

Sherlock scoffed, pushing his hands into his pockets as he looked pointedly past John’s shoulder.

Something heavy bashed against the sides of John’s stomach. “It was just a joke, Sherlock,” he said, half-reaching out before covering it by tugging at the zipper of his jacket. “I didn’t mean anything by it.”

Sherlock’s eyes roved over him, familiarly calculating, and John recited apologies in his head, pushing them onto his face. “So I’m not really a greedy, door-hogging bitch?” Sherlock asked,
eyebrows lifting.

John’s eyes narrowed, but Sherlock smiled, and he automatically returned it as his chest heaved with relief. “You might be,” he said, still grinning as he shrugged. “The situation’s never come up.”

Sherlock huffed, turning away to slide into the cab, and John clamored in after him, much less graceful in spite of his shorter limbs. “Please, John. We would never be shipwrecked.”

“Oh?” John teased, still drunk on immediate forgiveness. “And you can assure that, can you?”

“Of course I can,” Sherlock snapped, but there was a playful edge in the scorn. “I would have assessed any structural abnormalities before ever boarding. We would never be shipwrecked because we would never be on a vessel where being shipwrecked was possible.”

“I suppose you can predict the icebergs too,” John said, knowing his fond smile betrayed the taunt.

“Well, that’s simple,” Sherlock scoffed with a wave of his hand. “Don’t cross the Atlantic before summer.”

John shook his head, turning away from Sherlock to grin out the window before he could compose himself. He sighed theatrically, dropping his head in what he hoped conveyed regret. “Guess I’ll never get to draw you like one of my French girls.”

“Life’s full of disappointments,” Sherlock deadpanned.

They caught one another’s eyes for barely a second, and then burst into laughter, only growing more hysterical as the cabbie muttered expletives under his breath.
“You do!” John teased, his voice growing higher as he laughed. “Somewhere deep down—deep, deep, down—beneath your ‘I hate everyone’ exterior, Sherlock Holmes has a heart.”

“You have no quantifiable proof,” he snapped, crossing his arms, affecting haughtiness even as a bubble of laughter rose in his throat.

“Well I can’t exactly cut you open to check, can I?” John chuckled, leaning back against his bureau, his hands folding against the base of his spine.

“It’s the only way to be certain,” Sherlock replied, the picture of serious.

John grinned a moment before stifling it into something more austere. “No, I couldn’t do that. I doubt I could find another possibly, probably, completely mad roommate to solve crimes with.”

Sherlock did laugh at that, a quick bolt of mirth. “No. No, you most certainly could not,” he chuckled, shaking his head. He cocked his curls to the side, raising a smug eyebrow as he smirked. “I am the only one in the world, after all.”

“The married boyfriend is the most likely suspect, of course, but he was in a meeting at the time of her death. There’s also the ex who was something of a stalker for a period after their breakup, but if he was too dim to realize we weren’t actually from the census bureau, I doubt he has the capacity to commit a murder of this caliber. So, we figure out the how and work backward to the who. Only logical course of action, in this case, don’t you think? John? John?”

Sherlock sat up, removing his eyes from their fixation on the ceiling to scan around the room. The empty room. His eyebrows furrowed as he searched again, doubting his own senses.

John had to be there; Sherlock had just been talking to him. It was Thursday afternoon, and all of their classes were done for the day. He was there, he was right there, sitting on the edge of his bed and nodding in thoughtful agreement. Wasn’t he?

Sherlock tilted his head, closing his eyes as he reversed through his memory. John had said… something. Some time ago, too, Sherlock now realized.

‘It’s nearly 1:30, I gotta go. We’ll pick this up after, alright?’

Sherlock’s eyes snapped open, his fingers gripping at his duvet with the unexpected spasm in his chest.

Ah, yes. The insipid date with insipid Mary at the insipid café with insipid lattes.

He growled, tossing himself back onto the bed, and then grimacing at the stereotypical reaction. Flouncing on the bed in a jealous sulk? He was better than that.
His body stiffened with a dawning idea, eyes shifting back and forth as he considered. He then leapt up, decided, snatching his coat and shrugging into it as he burst out the door. It was several steps before he stopped, grumbling to himself as he turned back, tumbling into the dorm and plucking the keys off his bureau. Back in the corridor, he closed the door behind him, wasting precious time twisting the key to click in the lock, but he could not bear to sit through another tiresome lecture from John if he found the door left open again.

‘You chase killers for a living, Sherlock. Some of them might chase back,’ his mind spit at him, John’s words from the previous week.

He had, rightly so, insisted that he would hear anyone who wasn’t John coming and act accordingly, but then John had asked how he could be absolutely positive he could tell the difference between his footsteps and anyone else’s, and Sherlock hadn’t been able to answer.

Not that he hadn’t known, of course, but he wasn’t about to admit that he knew the exact pressure of John’s footsteps, the way his shoes squeaked as he twisted through the corners, and the precise increments of time between his footfalls, right down to being able to interpret his mood through their speed. That would probably have been a little much, even for John, so Sherlock had remained silent, allowing John to think he had won that single, small victory.

As he approached the main gate, the irrationality of his actions began to creep in. He didn’t have a plan, he had hardly thought much about this at all, but now he was rounding the corner toward the main street to- To what, exactly? Burst into Lindsey’s and demand John leave the café for no reason other than Sherlock wanted him to?

He smiled at the thought, quickly stifling it as a few passersby gave him odd looks for grinning at the pavement.

In his mind, of course, this interruption was met with John leaping up, possibly tossing an insult or two at Mary, and running after Sherlock into the neon-lit night, but he wasn’t quite prepared to risk it, so he ducked into the bookstore that sat almost directly opposite the café. Luckily—or maybe it wasn’t, given the roiling in his stomach—John and Mary were seated at a table near the window, clearly visible when passing cars weren’t obscuring his view.

John was smiling his I-know-that-joke-was-brilliant-but-I-can’t-laugh-without-seeming-narcisstic smile across the purple-draped table at Mary, who had her boring, blond head thrown back in predictable laughter.

Normal. It was all so mind-numbingly normal.

John couldn’t possibly be enjoying something so pedestrian. He would much rather be discussing rates of decomposition over that coffee, it was obvious. The fact that such a discussion would be happening with Sherlock across that table instead of Mary was an avenue Sherlock firmly did not allow his mind to travel down.

If only to save John from his obvious misery—and it was obvious—Sherlock pulled out his mobile, taking a moment to compose what he hoped would be an interest-piquing text.

We should check how long it takes to get from Claire Jones’ flat to Michael Parker’s office.

SH

He waited, his fingers tapping against the sides of the smartphone as he stared across the street. He could tell the moment John’s mobile buzzed in his pocket, saw the stiffness ripple through his muscles, and watched as he ignored it, leaning further over his coffee and continuing to talk to Mary.
Oh. Well, that just would not do.

An anger he could not justify or explain seized him, and he was firing off another message before giving his brain a chance to object.

*Maybe later tonight because tomorrow we have that game away*

*SH*

Because I’m on the team with you. Because you got me into that. Because we are a we, a unit, a team, and you have responsibilities.

Muscles stiffened again, the smile on his face hitching slightly, but John still did not reach for the buzzing phone.

Sherlock was quite possibly going into cardiac arrest, no other logical conclusion for the increasingly ragged breathing and tightness in his chest coming to mind.

*If I even go. I might stay behind and work on the case.*

Oh god, that was petty. Petty and desperate and so horribly transparent. He was almost relieved when John didn’t reach for that one either.

“Sherlock?”

He jolted, turning halfway through a message he probably would have regretted sending anyway.

“You alright?” Molly asked, her head tilting slightly as she surveyed him with warm, brown concern.

“Of course,” he said, but he knew it was a second too late, a pitch too high, and she looked over his shoulder to follow his previous line of sight.

She smiled softly, a flicker of pain before it dissolved to sympathetic pity. “I kind of figured,” she murmured, nodding vaguely as she turned her eyes to his.

Sherlock didn’t respond, uncharacteristically frozen by the paradox of sad compassion in her features.

“Why don’t you just go over?” she asked, stepping to stand beside him, looking back out across the street once more.

“Go over where?” he snapped.

Molly huffed through her nose with amusement, rolling her head to smile up at him. “Sherlock, I’ve known you since primary school,” she said tenderly, and that was all she said.

He opened his mouth to tell her that didn’t make any sense at all, but stopped at the look in her eyes, full of an understanding he did not yet possess himself. Thinking about it, Molly had been looking at him like that a lot lately. Her stammering offers to help him study had ceased over the past month, replaced by muted smiles and nods of acknowledgment as she passed him in the corridors. The few times he had caught her gazing at him across the lawns, it had always been with that same, knowing look in her eyes, that same, almost-sad smile as she watched him and John-

Oh. *Oh.*

“It’s not like that,” he snipped, shaking his head. “It was just something about a case. I forgot he was
busy,” he added, barely hitching at all on the last word, certainly not enough for Molly to notice.

An affirmative hummed in Molly’s throat as she nodded, but it was unclear how entirely she believed him. “Well, if you’ve nothing to do,” she muttered, shrugging as she shifted away, “we could grab coffee.” She nodded toward the window, smiling, but Sherlock could see it held little of the hope that usually accompanied Molly’s invitations.

Still. “I’m not sure—“

“Sherlock,” she interjected, soft but imploring, “let me buy you coffee.” She flushed slightly, embarrassed by the bold statement, but the smile was warm and playful. And decidedly platonic. She was wrong, of course. Her conclusions were entirely erroneous, based upon a flawed interpretation of the given facts, but, if it helped her stop being so insufferable in her attentions…

He had always tolerated Molly, liked her even, but this Molly, a Molly who wasn’t stammering all over herself every time he entered the room…well, he might be able to have coffee with her, however incorrect her logic for snuffing out her proverbial torch was. And it was incorrect. It was. Decidedly so. He was just allowing her to believe that because it was more convenient. Obviously.

Sherlock found himself nodding. “Alright,” he muttered.

Molly chuckled, all awkwardness crumbling with the soft sound. “Okay then! I’ve just got to pay for these and then we can go,” she said, lifting the notebooks in her hands as she turned and headed toward the counter.

He followed, marveling at her sudden ease. If he had known it was as easy as supposedly being in love with someone else to make her drop the childish crush on him, he would have done it years ago. Or was it because she thought that person was John, a man? He wanted to ask, but stopped himself, not wishing to disrupt the new, delicate balance they seemed to have formed.

After paying for her few things and bidding the clerk have a nice day too—Sherlock hadn’t replied to his sendoff—Molly pushed open the glass door, holding it open with her fingertips as Sherlock stepped out after her.

“We don’t have to get coffee,” she said as they stood on the edge of the pavement, scanning for a clearing in traffic. “We could go somewhere else, if ya like. Have you had lunch?”

“Coffee’s…fine,” he murmured, his voice failing as his breath was robbed by the sight in front of him.

John’s cheek. Mary’s fingers on John’s cheek. Mary’s fingers on John’s cheek, brushing off an eyelash that wasn’t even there, god that was clever, god he hated her.

He couldn’t seem to tear away, watching in his peripheral vision as Molly’s head turned.

“Oh,” she said, a small, sad sound of surprise, her fingers lifting to her chest.

“What?” he muttered sharply as he looked down at her, determined to play this through as though nothing had happened, even as he internally kicked himself for being so obvious.

And Molly—sweet, incredible Molly whom he’d never doubted for a moment—merely shook her head. “Nothing,” she said, “must have been the wind. We can cross now.” She placed a hand over his forearm, gripping just hard enough for the sympathy to be conveyed, and then let the touch glide away as they walked briskly across the street.
His longer strides brought him to the door first, and he held it open, Molly unravelling her red scarf as she entered under the tinkling bell.

“Molly!” a man behind the display case greeted, beaming. He had short, grey hair and wrinkled, brown eyes that landed on Sherlock. “And you’ve brought a new face! I’m Daniel, the barista, baker, janitor, and, incidentally, owner,” he chuckled, extending a large, calloused hand over the counter as they approached.

If Sherlock had been able to deduce anything poor about him at all, he would have declined, but the only thing that made Daniel not every bit the stereotypical grandfather figure he appeared was a smoking habit he couldn’t quite kick, and Sherlock could hardly fault him for that.

“Sherlock Holmes,” he replied, answering Daniel’s firm grip with his charming introduction smile, as he’d dubbed it. “I’m just a student, I’m afraid.”

Daniel laughed, throwing his head back as if Sherlock were the most brilliant thing in the world. He liked Daniel, he’d decided.

“Nothin’ wrong with that! Gotta get an education before you can make it in the big leagues like me!” He laughed at himself, Sherlock chuckling along with Molly in reply. “Usual spot, Molly? Or do you want somewhere a little more private.” He winked, and Sherlock courteously became very interested in the sign denoting bakery offerings as Molly flushed and stuttered.

“Er, no. No privacy. I mean, privacy is fine, but we don’t- We aren’t- It isn’t-”

It was too painful. “Anywhere is fine,” Sherlock interrupted.

Daniel raised an eyebrow, his gaze shifting between him and Molly, but then only smiled and snapped up a couple menus. “Alright, suit yourselves. We’ll just put you over here by the window.”

Panic—absolute panic, the kind that rushes through your chest, ice and fire all at once—gripped him as Daniel began walking toward the front of the shop. He was going to throw up or scream or run or-

“Actually!” Molly piped up, throwing a quick glance back at him as she grabbed Daniel’s arm, and he could have hugged her right then if she didn’t always wear that abhorrent perfume and he didn’t despise physical contact. “Not by the window. I- I get cold.”

Daniel gave her a curious glance. “Really? You never said. I could turn up the heat.”

“No, it’s fine, really. Just…maybe over there,” Molly suggested, pointing to a spot toward the interior of the café, hidden from the window by a demi-wall.

“Well alright,” Daniel shrugged, turning right and leading them down a path between the tables. “Here ya go. I’ll be back in a bit to get your order,” he said as he sat their menus down, leaving them with a final, friendly wink.

“Molly?”

Sherlock had never dropped into a seat so fast in his life.

“Hey!” Molly answered, her voice a little higher than normal as she remained standing, looking over the wall.

“I didn’t know you were coming here today,” Mary’s voice continued, growing closer, and Sherlock
shrunk in his chair, a small attempt to ward off the inevitable. “I thought you were going to the book-
Oh!”

He winced, not much caring if she saw it, and then looked up into her wide, blinking eyes.

“Sherlock,” she greeted, smiling dimly with surprise. “Sorry, I-I didn’t see you there.”

“Sherlock?!”

Any time the earth wanted to swallow him whole, he wouldn’t object.

John’s blond head poked over the wall, looking bewildered. Bewilderment quickly shifted to
curiosity, however, and then, upon a brief glance across the table at Molly, a whole myriad of
emotions tumbled across his face. Confusion, anger, frustration, and, most surprisingly, hurt.

“What are you doing here?” John snapped, his jaw tightening as his eyes continued to flicker
between him and Molly.

If it hadn’t been exactly what Sherlock wanted to see, it would have been embarrassing to watch.
Even Molly was blushing slightly, looking down at the table and biting her lip.

“I met Molly in the bookstore,” he explained evenly, waving a hand in her direction, “and we
thought we might get some coffee.”

“You didn’t have to go to the bookstore;” John retorted, prompting an alarmed glance from Mary.
Only then did he seem to remember himself, his chest swelling with a deep breath.

“Well, we’ll just…leave you to it,” Mary murmured with a faltering smile. “John?”

Sherlock barely controlled the clenching of his teeth, needing to remain entirely impassive in spite of
the sudden rush of fury at Mary’s beckoning.

John was looking directly into him, as if he were trying to read something on the back of Sherlock’s
skull, or perhaps burn something into it, considering the dark flashing of his eyes. “Right,” he
answered after a beat, his tone clipped. “See you guys later;” he added, somewhat lighter, and his
smile was friendly as he nodded at Molly. When he looked back, however, it vanished from his eyes,
and there was a final, narrowed scan of Sherlock’s face before he turned away.

Only then did Sherlock realize he hadn’t been breathing, a sigh heaving out of him exactly in time
with Molly’s as she collapsed into the chair opposite.

“God, that was… I mean, that wasn’t just in my head, right? There was some…tension there, wasn’t
there?”

Sherlock swallowed. “Perhaps,” he muttered with a vague shrug, reaching out and snatching one of
the menus, even though he had no intention to eat.

Molly opened her mouth with a small click, clearly intending to argue the point. She seemed to think
better of it, however, and just sighed, shaking her head as she leaned back in her chair and grabbed
the remaining menu. “Do you want any food?”

“No.”

“Me neither,” she said, laying the menu back down on the table, twisting in her chair as she looked
around. “Where’s Daniel got to?”
Sherlock lowered his own menu to reply when a loud rush of music burst from his pocket. He growled, wrenching it from his pocket and silencing the din.

Molly raised an eyebrow. “Was that…the Doctor Who theme tune?”

“The what?” Sherlock snarled down at the alert on his home screen.

“You know, the wee-ooo-wee bit?”

“I don’t know what it is,” he spat, opening settings for the third time that week. “John just keeps personalizing his text alert to it.”

“You let him into your phone?” Molly asked, her eyebrows high.

“No,” Sherlock sputtered, stabbing furiously at the touchscreen. “He just keeps finding it!”

“You could always set up a PIN code.”

Sherlock stalled just for a moment before finishing resetting John’s alert to the generic one. Somehow, locking his phone hadn’t occurred to him, and, even now that it had been mentioned, he found he still didn’t want to do it, for some, inexplicable reason.

“So, he’s texting you? Right now?”

“Obviously,” Sherlock muttered, finger hovering over the inbox icon, uncertain if he wanted to give John the satisfaction of a reply after he himself had been ignored, but John would have heard the message tone, would know Sherlock was avoiding him.

“Oh,” Molly murmured, a strange tone to her voice causing Sherlock to look up. She was smiling secretively down at the table, clearing trying in vain to stifle it as she fiddled with the corner of a menu. “That’s…interesting.”

“Hardly,” he grumbled, and Molly lifted her head to smile at him directly, the exact opposite reaction he’d been hoping for.

“Sherlock,” she said, and his eyes narrowed at the patronization in it, “you must see it.”

He blinked, his head tilting slightly.

Molly smiled, pityingly now, and his leg shook with the restraint of not snapping at her for it, genuinely curious what she was going to say. “Okay, what if it were someone else?” she asked, leaning closer to him across the table.

“Someone else?”

Molly nodded. “Like, if we were on a date-”

“Molly.”

“I know, I know,” she assured, a faint flush to her cheeks, “but, as an example. If this were a date and I sat here texting someone else, what would you think that meant?”

“That’s obvious,” he scoffed. “Clearly, you’re more interesting in whomever you’re texting that me.”

Molly simply stared at him for a beat before raising an eyebrow, and he reasoned his body may have physically shook with the force of something slotting into place.
“This is different,” he muttered, choreographing his posture into aloof. “We were talking about a case.”

“Okay,” Molly said, nodding down at the table, but she obviously didn’t believe him.

His skin prickled as he glared at her, but he dropped his eyes furiously to his phone instead of retorting, ashamed to admit he didn’t know what he would have said anyway. More for something to do than actually caring—because he didn’t care whatsoever what John had to say now that it suited his busy schedule—he opened the text message.

What are you doing here?

He rolled his eyes down at the screen, firmly ignoring Molly’s smirk.

We just went over this

His foot tapped against the dark hardwood as he waited. The mobile had been silenced, but he snapped it up as soon as it illuminated moments later.

I mean what are you doing here with Molly

I believe we went over that too

He heard a chair scrape to his left, knowing instinctively it was John. He had a tendency to fidget when aggravated.

You know what I mean. It’s not fair to her

He blinked down at the screen, his head pulling back slightly. What was that supposed to mean?

It was her suggestion

Of course it was! But you shouldn’t have said yes

Why ever not?

You know why not

Somewhere overhead, Molly was ordering their coffees. He would have to ask her later how she knew his order, but right now, John was being too ridiculous for him to end the conversation.

If I knew, I wouldn’t have asked

You’re leading her on Sherlock

He blinked, his lips parting, although there was no longer breath passing between them. What!? This was getting out of hand.

That’s absurd, he typed, because it was. Completely and entirely. How could John even say that?

Oh please you’d have to be blind not to see she fancies you

Sherlock audibly spluttered, shaking his head down at the message.

“How’s the case going?” Molly asked, a smile playing on her lips over the rim of her coffee cup.
Sherlock hadn’t even noticed it arrive, but quickly grabbed his own, taking a rather hasty swig to avoid responding. It was too hot, but he swallowed it down anyway, returning to his phone even more irritated.

*Molly does not “fancy” me, as you so eloquently put it.*

*Bollocks!*

*The caliber of this conversation is rapidly deteriorating.*

*Just stop leading her on*

*I told you, I’m not.*

*Yes you are!*

*I’m not going to humor this mundane, back and forth argument.*

*Because you’re wrong*

*No, because she doesn’t fancy me anymore.*

*Anymore?*

Oh. Well that was a mistake.

Sherlock stared down at the message, not quite sure how to respond, or if he even wanted to. He probably would have to explain to John at some point why Molly’s behavior had changed, but he hadn’t composed a reasonable explanation yet, and he couldn’t exactly tell the truth. There was only one option, then: defensive haughtiness.

*Don’t you have your own date to focus on?*

There was no reply, and Sherlock pocketed his mobile, not quite able to be proud of his successful evasion as he sipped his too-sweet coffee.

He and Molly left the café before John and Mary, the male portion of that ensemble actively avoiding looking at one another. He had kept up some small talk with Molly on the short walk back to school, but his mind was spinning with possible answers to John’s inevitable questions, and he was still thoroughly perplexed as he lay on his bed, back to staring at the ceiling.

The familiar footsteps came pounding down the corridor toward him, quick and obviously flustered, and Sherlock closed his eyes, preparing for the onslaught.

“Okay, what the *hell* was that about?!” John shouted, slamming the door behind him. “And don’t give me that rubbish about the bookstore; you had no reason to go to the bookstore!”

“I may have,” Sherlock muttered, still staring at the plaster overhead as he listened to John rip off his jacket and toss it onto his bed.

“But you didn’t, so what were you doing there?”

Sherlock blinked, keeping his eyes closed a fraction longer than normal. “I was just out for a walk. Thinking about the case.”
“And that walk just happened to lead you right past Lindsey’s?”

“No, it led me to the bookstore. Haven’t you been paying attention?”

“Dammit, Sherlock, will you take this seriously!?”

He sighed loudly. “And what, exactly, is it that I’m not taking seriously, John?” He swung his legs over the side of his bed, knocking into John’s knees with his own, but the blond boy didn’t budge, glaring down as Sherlock looked up at him.

“Why were you at the bookstore?”

It was a mark of how fierce those blue eyes were that Sherlock was the one to look away first. “I told you,” he said, speaking just to the left of John’s torso, “I was out for a walk. I got cold and stepped into the bookstore. That’s when I ran into Molly.”

John was silent and still, but Sherlock didn’t dare look up to read his face. He must have at least somewhat believed him, however, because he stepped away slightly, breaking the contact with Sherlock’s legs. “What did you mean about Molly?” he asked, more curious than angry. “About her not fancying you anymore.”

“Can we not use the term ‘fancy’?” he murmured with a wince.

“Lusting after you?”

“Oh, god!”

“Those are your choices, sorry,” John shrugged, vainly trying to stifle a smirk, and Sherlock felt the tiniest bit forgiven.

He sighed, leaning back against his mattress on his palms. “We talked about it,” he muttered, skipping the terminology altogether.

“You talked about it?” John asked, sounding rather incredulous, but Sherlock didn’t look up to confirm, instead watching his fingers as he twisted and tugged at the duvet beneath him. “What did you say?”

Sherlock shrugged. “She did the majority of the talking.”

“But she doesn’t fancy you anymore?”

“That appeared to be the result of the discussion, yes.”

“Did you tell her you don’t fancy her?”

“No!” Sherlock bleated, looking up sharply. “I would never do that.”

“You wouldn’t?” John pressed, tilting his head down, his eyebrows furrowing. “Why not?”

Sherlock swallowed hard, looking away from the azure gaze, regretting his momentary rashness of speech. His eyes were shifting rapidly around on the blanket, his mind delving for a suitable response when he was interrupted by a low chuckling.

“I knew it,” John murmured fondly, and Sherlock’s eyebrows pinched at the warm smile and twinkling eyes. “You do have a heart.”
Sherlock’s lips shifted wordlessly, and then he shut them tightly around the smile he fought with a roll of his eyes. “Don’t be ridiculous,” he snapped.

“You do!” John teased, his voice growing higher as he laughed. “Somewhere deep down—deep, deep, down—beneath your ‘I hate everyone’ exterior, Sherlock Holmes has a heart.”

“You have no quantifiable proof,” he snapped, crossing his arms, affecting haughtiness even as a bubble of laughter rose in his throat.

“Well I can’t exactly cut you open to check, can I?” John chuckled, leaning back against his bureau, his hands folding against the base of his spine.

“It’s the only way to be certain,” Sherlock replied, the picture of serious.

John grinned a moment before stifling it into something more austere. “No, I couldn’t do that. I doubt I could find another possibly, probably, completely mad roommate to solve crimes with.”

Sherlock did laugh at that, a quick bolt of mirth. “No. No, you most certainly could not,” he chuckled, shaking his head. He cocked his curls to the side, raising a smug eyebrow as he smirked. “I am the only one in the world, after all.”

John rolled his eyes as if Sherlock were the most tiresome creature on the planet, but he was smiling. “Thank god for that. The world couldn’t handle two of you.”

“The world can’t handle one of me.”

“Too right,” John chuckled, and then sighed theatrically, shaking his head. “I don’t know how I manage it.”

“You’re practically a saint,” Sherlock answered, trying to muster serious conviction, but the corner of his mouth lifted in an irrepressible smile.

“Patron saint of patience,” John said through a chuckle.

“There already sort of is one of those.”

“I deserve it more.”

“I wouldn’t argue.”

John laughed, pushing off the bureau and shaking his head as he walked past, toward his desk. “That’d be a first.”

“I don’t always argue with you,” Sherlock muttered, a little sharper than he’d intended out of a panic he couldn’t quite explain.

“You don’t?” John chuckled, flashing a coy look over his shoulder before turning back to whatever he was rummaging around his desk for.

“No,” Sherlock snapped, crossing his arms tightly over his chest. “You’re not always wrong.”

John froze, his hands stilling where they were hidden in a drawer. “What was that?” he murmured in an almost painfully transparent attempt at nonchalance.

Sherlock rolled his eyes. “You heard me; I’m not saying it again.”
“Oh, come on!” John whined as he turned around, positively beaming. “I get compliments so rarely from you! It’d be nice to hear them twice.”

“It’s hardly a compliment,” Sherlock retorted. “It is merely a statement of verifiable fact. You are not incorrect 100% of the time, therefore, there is not always a need to argue with you.”

John smiled in that bafflingly fond way he always did when Sherlock was certain he had really put his foot in his mouth this time. “Okay,” he said simply, and turned back to his desk, a closed smile still on his lips.

Sherlock uncrossed his arms, leaning back against the wall beside his bed, his fingers instinctively lifting beneath his chin as he considered the ever-more-complicated riddle of John Watson, directing his eyes at the back of the blond head. He quickly pulled his mobile out of his pocket and looked busy as the boy turned around.

“So what’s this about you not going to the game tomorrow?” John asked over the top of the notebook he was flipping through as he flopped down onto his bed.

Sherlock blinked, taking the half second necessary to piece together what John was referring to. “I’m not certain the team needs me,” he said down to his phone with a shrug, realizing he had automatically opened up a message to John as his ruse. “Sheffield will hardly be a difficult game, and we’re staying overnight.”

“That’s half the fun!” John exclaimed, tossing his notebook aside to shuffle to the edge of his bed, folding his legs under him and leaning across the aisle.

“A three hour coach ride is half the fun?” Sherlock muttered tonelessly, dropping his head and lifting a skeptical eyebrow.

“Well, no,” John mumbled down at the floor before lifting his head again, a determined smile on his face, “but staying in the hotel is fun! I went with the team last year all the time, and it was always a riot.”

“What about me says ‘I love a good riot’ to you, exactly?” Sherlock asked, waving a hand past his face to emphasize the point.

“Oh, shove off, you’ll have fun!” John urged with a laugh, grabbing his pillow and swatting it playfully against Sherlock’s knee. “Besides, I don’t wanna go without you.”

Sherlock blinked across at him, but John looked just as dumbstruck, his eyebrows furrowing down at the floor as if he couldn’t figure out why he’d said such a thing either.

“And I’ll probably have to room with Kevin if you don’t come,” John chuckled, rubbing at the back of his neck as he lifted his head.

Sherlock grimaced at that, letting the previous moment pass without comment.

Kevin Clark was the fullback for the team, and his obnoxiously large, muscled build and brutish attitude were every bit what you’d expect for the part. Coach Powles had been encouraging John and Kevin to interact more, as they worked together quite a lot on the field, which had resulted in John forcing laugh after pained laugh at the plethora of those abhorrent “That’s what she said” jokes Kevin seemed so very fond of. Although John did seem to enjoy when Sherlock feigned ignorance, tilting his head and blinking with all the innocence of sincerity, and Kevin was forced to explain the innuendo, blushing and stuttering over himself as he did. Still, on his own, Sherlock could see how painful it would be for John to tolerate him.
“I suppose I can’t be quite that cruel,” Sherlock conceded, and John beamed, visibly relaxing with relief.

“Great! I wasn’t too chuffed at the thought of sitting next to Coach for three hours. He keeps trying to corner me to talk about my right-handed throw.”

“Why would you need to throw right-handed?”

“Exactly!” John exclaimed, throwing his hands up toward Sherlock. “I don’t even know,” he murmured, seemingly to himself as he shook his head down at the ground. He then stilled, biting his lip as he plucked at his sheet. “There is…something I’ve been meaning to talk to you about, though,” he muttered, eye contact flickering.

Sherlock narrowed his eyes in suspicion. “What?”

John inhaled, as if to speak, and then his mouth closed again as he swallowed. “Well, with you spending more time with the team…and now, with the away game and everything…and staying overnight…” He sucked in a breath, releasing it in a quick huff before sitting up straighter and meeting Sherlock’s slivered eyes. “See, everyone will be wearing their regular clothes on the coach, and at the hotel, and the next day too, and…well…”

“You don’t think my clothes are appropriate,” Sherlock finished, tired of waiting when he already knew.

“All you have are suits, Sherlock,” John said, actually looking a little relieved to have his sentence finished.

“And what’s wrong with that?” Sherlock snapped, folding his arms defensively.

“You’re 17,” John implored, leaning over his knees. “I just don’t think it would hurt to…ya know, fit in a little.”

“Fit in?” Sherlock scoffed, snapping to his feet and striding to the window. “Perhaps it’s escaped your notice, but I’m a bit beyond help in the ‘fitting in’ department.”

“Why do you do that?” John asked, anger edged around the question, and Sherlock heard him stand behind him as he gazed out the window.

“Do what?” Sherlock barked, leaning against his desk and crossing his arms.

“Talk about yourself like that, like you’re some sort of…lost cause?” John replied, his voice closer now.

“Look,” Sherlock snarled, twisting in place and glaring down at a surprised, but not backing down John. “I know it’s important to you that everyone like you, that everything be sunshine and rainbows and we all gather ‘round the fire and swap stories about our childhoods, but that is not me. People will never like me.”

“You don’t even try!” John shouted, but there was pleading in it in spite of the glare. “You act like you don’t care, like none of it bothers you, but it’s the biggest load of bollocks I have ever seen, so will you just put on a fucking pair of jeans and try!?”

Sherlock stared at him. He watched the rising and falling of his chest, the wide, dark pupils of his eyes as he searched Sherlock’s, the lips that trembled with each passage of breath, and Sherlock felt so very, very beaten.
“Jeans?” he manage to murmur.

John blinked, and then the anger slipped away from his face, his posture relaxing as he leaned back from Sherlock’s face. “Yes, jeans. I don’t care if you have to spend 200 pounds on Ralph-bloody-Lauren ones, you should own a pair of jeans.”

Sherlock belatedly realized he was smiling, not having given his muscles permission, and then he was laughing, so suddenly, John looked mildly concerned. “Ralph-bloody-Lauren,” he quoted through his laughter, and John raised an eyebrow. He calmed himself into a chuckle, shaking his head. “Fine,” he said, smiling at his still-perplexed friend, “I will purchase a pair of jeans, if it’s really so important to you.”

John’s eyes widened momentarily in surprise, and then he smiled. “Good,” he said with a sharp, official nod, turning away and grabbing his mobile off his bed. “Shirts too.”

“What?” Sherlock sputtered, watching as John pulled his keys from his jacket pocket. “Shirts?”

“And possibly jumpers,” John added with a shrug, looking over his shoulder to smirk. “Grab your coat, our ride is waiting.”

Sherlock gaped, blinking furiously, and then quickly settled into a glare. “Where are we going? And I am not buying jumpers.”

John laughed, pausing in the half-open door. “I called Mrs. Hudson earlier, told her we’d be in London later getting you some new clothes. She wanted to come along—I believe her exact words were ‘I wouldn’t miss this for the world’—and offered to pick us up.”

“You didn’t know I would agree,” Sherlock snapped, crossing his arms.

“You wanted to check that guy’s alibi anyway,” John reminded.

“Doesn’t mean I would want to go shopping.”

“I would have convinced you.”

“Oh, really?” Sherlock scoffed, lifting his eyebrows.

John nodded, still smiling like he was having the time of his life. “I was prepared to grovel.”

“That wouldn’t have worked.”

“I was prepared to grovel in song.”

Sherlock blinked, his smug smile collapsing. “That might have done it,” he admitted, the muttered words running together.

John laughed as he opened the door. “Come on, she’s waiting,” he said, beckoning Sherlock out into the corridor with a nod.

He stood a moment longer, just to be contrary, and then sighed vehemently, stepping forward to grab his coat from the wardrobe.

John grinned with pride as Sherlock stepped out into the corridor, snapping the door shut behind him. Evidently knowing better than to speak, John merely leaned past him to lock the dorm. “Okay,” he chirped, slipping the keys back into his pocket. “Allons-y!” he added, pointing grandly forward as he began to walk.
“You speak French?” Sherlock asked, thrusting his hands into his pockets obstinately as he followed.

John shook his head. “No, it’s from Doctor Who.”

“Doctor what?”

“Doctor where, when, and why!” John exclaimed, laughing at himself as they opened the main door out onto the lawn.

Sherlock merely raised an eyebrow.

“You really don’t remember?” John asked, looking up at him through narrowed eyes. “I’ve explained it to you, like…a dozen times.”

“No,” Sherlock barked, thrusting his hands deeper into his pockets, uncomfortable with the admission, “must’ve deleted it.”

“Oh, Mr. Holmes,” John chuckled, shaking his head, “we have a lot of work to do.”

*****

John was sitting on a black sofa outside of a fitting room in some posh place he couldn’t even pronounce the name of, fidgeting on the leather.

“Oh, stop it, dear,” Mrs. Hudson chided, swatting him gently on the knee. “No one’s looking.”

That distinctly was not true, and another glance over the back of the sofa showed that, indeed, the staff and couple of customers outside were still eyeing him like some strange, new species of person they didn’t want to come into contact with, lest they catch some commoner disease. These jeans were Topman, for heaven’s sake! Topman off a charity shop rack, but still, they were a name brand! He couldn’t say the same for his emerald green jumper, however, so perhaps it was that they objected to. Or the fact that he had no product in his hair, which, in a shop full of very shiny-haired people, was painfully obvious.

“Yeah, no one,” John muttered, and Mrs. Hudson smiled sympathetically at him.

“Don’t worry, love,” she whispered, leaning closer across the squeaking leather. “They looked at me the same way at first. They get used to you after a while.”

John opened his mouth to contest whether he would ever be in here again, when Sherlock and the sales associate—who had probably lost the straw-drawing for who had to wait on him—entered the fitting room behind them.

“I have your selections, madam,” the young man said, looking wholly relieved to be talking to anyone but Sherlock, and was shooting him anxious, sidelong glances.

“Thank you, dear,” Mrs. Hudson said, beaming up at him. “Just put them in the room with him, if you could. Thank you so much.”

The man’s brown eyes widened fearfully for a moment before he turned away, quickly bustling past Sherlock without a glance, which was probably for the best as Sherlock was glaring at him.

“I’m not trying on that yellow…thing,” Sherlock spat at Mrs. Hudson, flicking a hand toward the fitting room with a grimace.

“I picked it out, and you’ll try it on. Now get a move on; I’m not getting any younger,” Mrs. Hudson
ordered, swatting Sherlock toward the curtained stall as the attendant exited, holding the blue, velvet drapery aside with a cautious smile.

Sherlock glared a moment longer, and then complied, heavy a haughty sigh as he strode into the fitting room, tugging the curtain shut with a fluttering swirl.

“That boy,” Mrs. Hudson sighed with a roll of her eyes, but there was something fond about the gesture as she shook her head.

The attendant, notably more relaxed with Sherlock safely sequestered, approached John, standing in front of him and wringing his hands as he leaned down. “Is there anything you’d like me to bring in, sir?” he asked in short, nervous tones.

John blinked, his lips parting as his forehead furrowed. “Sorry?” he murmured, equally perplexed by the question and being called ‘sir’ while he was wearing this ragged jumper in a store that didn’t even have socks for less than 50 quid.

The man smiled, a strange, knowing sympathy twisting around his lips. “Is there anything you saw in our store that you’d like me to bring in for your partner to try on?” he expounded.

All the air in John’s lungs left him in a faint wheeze. “No,” he stammered, lifting his hands in front of him. “No, he’s not- We’re not-”

“Hey, John?” Sherlock voice interrupted from behind the curtain, crooning in so obvious a non-Sherlock way, John’s stomach flipped with panic at whatever very-not-good thing he knew would accompany that tone. Sherlock popped his head out, the coy smile on his face only adding to John’s certainty. “Would you mind taking my coat? You know how I am about losing things.”

John glared at him, and, as the attendant looked away, Sherlock quirked his eyebrows in an obvious challenge. John channeled his anger into his fists, forcing what he knew was a sugary sweet smile onto his face. If Sherlock was going to make it his mission to make this as miserable for John as it was for him, he would have another thing coming.

“All the air in John’s lungs left him in a faint wheeze. “No,” he stammered, lifting his hands in front of him. “No, he’s not- We’re not-”

“Sure thing,” John chirped, throwing in a good-natured nod as he rose from the sofa, proud at the ease in his limbs as he walked to the curtain.

Sherlock betrayed nothing, passing his coat out through the gap with an affectionate grin that made John want to punch him, but also made him acutely aware just how Sherlock kept getting past that receptionist at the Met. “Thanks, love,” he gushed with an apologetic tilt of his head.

John gripped the coat tightly, feeling a rush of pride as Sherlock’s façade faltered momentarily to look down at his coiling fingers. “No problem, peaches,” John sang back, beaming obnoxiously, and Mrs. Hudson choked behind him.

Sherlock’s face fell almost comically, his eyes widening before narrowing sharply.

John quirked his head, lifting his eyebrows, knowing the ‘You started this’ would be clearly conveyed. “And, as a matter of fact,” he continued, turning to speak to the attendant, who was smiling fondly at them, “yes, I did see a few things.” He managed to cover his hiss at the sharp impact of Sherlock’s fist in his back with a clear of his throat, smiling valiantly on as the man nodded.

“All the air in John’s lungs left him in a faint wheeze. “No,” he stammered, lifting his hands in front of him. “No, he’s not- We’re not-”

“Of course, sir. If you’ll just follow me.”

“Thank you,” John said, tossing Sherlock—who looked torn between fury and terror—a smug pop
of his eyebrows over his shoulder before walking after the attendant.

Mrs. Hudson was practically shaking with suppressed laughter as he passed, but she managed to wink, and he nearly lost his composure at that, but hoisted it back together as he entered the racks of clothing, suddenly not garnering nearly as strange of looks.

John smiled to himself softly, staring down at the floor to cover it. This excursion was definitely looking up.

“Where would you like to start, sir?”

“Well, er.”—he paused, narrowing his eyes down at the man’s nametag—“Steven, to be honest, jeans all look the same to me. No offense,” he muttered, but Steven merely smiled, nodding agreeably. “But, I did see some jumpers…”

The next ten minutes were spent with John leading a gradually more comfortable Steven around the shop, pointing at different things and trying to carry them himself, but Steven always captured them away. Shopping truly was an exhausting business, however, and he collapsed gratefully onto the sofa next to Mrs. Hudson, leaving Steven the ominous task of delivering John’s choices to Sherlock—which were, surprisingly, accepted with only a grunt.

Although he would never admit it, there were actually a few things John had seen walking through that he thought would look decent on Sherlock, but he was blaming that on his undeniable penchant for jumpers. Maybe Sherlock was right and he did have a disease.

“Pick ‘n’ Mix?”

He looked across to find Mrs. Hudson holding a bag of various, gummy candy toward him, a half-eaten, coke bottle one in her opposite hand. John looked between her and the printed, plastic bag curiously.

She shrugged. “I figured this would be a good show. Never dreamed it would be this entertaining, mind you,” she added emphatically, gesturing between the closed curtain and John, a smile growing on her face.

“He started it,” John muttered, reaching into the bag and pulling out a sour strawberry, his teeth ripping through the pink gelatin.

“He always does, dear,” Mrs. Hudson sighed, popping the rest of her coke bottle into her mouth. “He always does.”

John laughed, Mrs. Hudson joining him, and they settled in with their snacks, prepared for what would no doubt be a fashion show to remember.

They most certainly were not disappointed, Sherlock emerging in several pairs of jeans that, true to his word, all looked the same to John, but it was the shirts that were positively marvelous.

Whether by design or simple poor taste, Mrs. Hudson seemed to have managed to pick the ugliest patterns in the store, and they choked on fizzy candy more than once as Sherlock emerged, eyes rolling, in a myriad of striped, plaid, and paisley shirts.

John wolf-whistled at an orange polo he knew immediately would be his personal favorite for the day, earning himself said shirt being flung out of the changing room like a whip a few moments later, hitting him square in the face.
“You look like a picnic blanket!” John gasped, bending double at one particularly hideous, deep-red check, and Mrs. Hudson gripped his arm, peals of laughter bursting from her as she threw her head back.

Sherlock glared at them, crossing his arms over his chest, but the normally intimidating gesture was stunted by the folds of red fabric. “I am not trying on any more of your choices!” he snarled, pointing accusingly at Mrs. Hudson, who couldn’t seem to be bothered to be offended.

“Alright, alright,” she sighed, wiping tears from her eyes. “Just move on to John’s then.”

“His will be even worse!” Sherlock pleaded, waving an arm at him.

“I beg your pardon!” John blurted in mock offense, raising a delicate hand to his chest. “I have impeccable taste in fashion! Don’t I, Mrs. Hudson?”

“The absolute best,” she agreed with a firm nod.

“There ya have it,” John said, nodding toward the woman on his right as he smirked triumphantly at Sherlock, who was trying his best to glare John into submission. “Off you go,” John ordered, lifting his hands and waving Sherlock away with a waggle of his fingers.

Mrs. Hudson and he swapped ratings for a few minutes—her favorite so far had been the blue and purple paisley number—before a loud, frustrated sound emanated from within the fitting room, something between a growl and a whine.

“How do people wear this!?” Sherlock groaned, keeping his back to them as he stepped out, surveying himself in the large mirror as he pushed the sleeves up to his elbows. “All these superfluous layers!”

John’s throat constricted, and swallowing would have been impossible, had he needed it, but his mouth had dried up, his sandpaper tongue turning thick and useless. He blinked, as if to break the image apart, to shatter the mirage with a renewed moistening of his eyes, but it was still there, standing in front of a mirror and ranting words that rumbled like unintelligible, watery echoes through his head.

He could explain the impatient minutes spent staring at his phone, desperate for Sherlock’s response mere seconds after his own. The man was always getting into trouble, after all. He could understand the way his mind always supplemented whatever conversation he was having with things Sherlock had said, or sometimes just things John suspected he would say. They did spend a lot of time together, being roommates. He could justify his anger toward Sherlock over the café-incident—he-was-trying-to-block-out, because he was right about it being cruel to Molly.

But he could not make sense of this, could not qualify it and put it in a safe, little box where he never had to dwell on it again because Sherlock was standing there in a blue, plaid shirt that jutted out in tones of turquoise and navy from beneath a dark-blue jumper, and John could not breathe. He couldn’t so much as form a coherent thought, his mind seeming to narrow on the pale expanse of flesh between Sherlock’s wrist and where the bundle of rolled fabric pooled at his elbows, and John was overtaken by a dizzying desire to touch, to know if he would be able to feel the muscles responsible for the surprising strength Sherlock possessed, to know the texture of the nearly transparent skin. Would he be cold? He looked like he’d always be cold, all thin and sharp and so, so pale. John wanted to know, wanted in a way that made his heart physically ache, and, with a
moment of crystalline clarity that sent a tingling rush of panic down his spine, John knew he was in trouble. What kind, how bad, and how deep, he did not know, but, as Sherlock’s eyes locked on his in the mirror—he had been right, the shirt did make them look more blue—he knew that, whatever it was, it promised to be difficult. Just like everything else when it came to Sherlock Holmes.

“Sorry, what?” John muttered, clearing his throat as his voice came out more rasp than words.

Sherlock’s reflection raised an eyebrow at him, and John surreptitiously gripped the edges of the sofa to keep his face clear, pleading with whoever was listening for Sherlock not to read him in that moment. “I was saying,” Sherlock apparently repeated tiredly, “that I don’t understand why people can’t just wear one shirt. This blue thing”—he plucked at the protruding plaid at his waist—“or the jumper. Why is all of this necessary?”

“Oh, Sherlock,” Mrs. Hudson breathed, clutching her hands together beneath her chin, a dewy expression on her face. “You look so handsome!”

Sherlock looked absolutely appalled, turning around to look at them without the aid of polished glass, and that was somehow so much worse. “It’s a shirt,” he said slowly, plucking at the blue knit over his chest as if they would not know what he meant otherwise. “I look the same as always.”

“No, you don’t,” Mrs. Hudson argued fondly, shaking her head. “Well, I suppose you do, in a way, but this makes you look more…” She trailed off, and John thought that was probably for the best, considering Sherlock appeared to be silently daring her to call him anything remotely pleasant. “You just look so handsome! Don’t you think, John? Don’t you think he looks handsome?”

John snapped his head around so quickly, his neck cracked, and he was just about to put voice to the ‘What the hell, Mrs. Hudson?! I thought we were a team!’ he knew was on his face when the woman flicked her eyes over his shoulder. He calmed his expression slightly as he turned, finding Steven hovering a respectable distance from his armrest. “Er, yeah. Yeah,” he said stiffly, clearing his throat again as he stared at Sherlock’s shoes. “Blue is...definitely your color,” he added, managing to bring his eyes up to smile at Sherlock’s.

Sherlock’s eyes flashed to flint for a moment, and John’s skin prickled at the invasion. Dark brown eyebrows twitched together and apart in tiny pulses as Sherlock tilted his head just the smallest fraction, but it was enough for John to know he was being analyzed, and he couldn’t afford for Sherlock to see just how sincere his last statement was.

“I’ll be right back,” he muttered, standing up and hurrying out of the room, avoiding Sherlock’s gaze. As he entered the main shop, he pulled his mobile from his pocket, trying to slow the pounding of his heart as he typed out a message.

*Finish that maths yet?*

He scrolled through the contacts to Mary, selecting her as the recipient and tapping the send icon. The second his phone alerted him the message had sent successfully, he regretted it, his stomach sinking as his grip tightened on the black plastic. It was an act of desperation, and he knew it, but it was too late now, so he merely sighed as the phone buzzed with a reply a few minutes later.

*Finish that Shakespeare yet?*

John smiled weakly at that, sliding his fingers across the screen.

*Touche*, he replied, and then looked up toward a noise at his left.

Mrs. Hudson was exiting the changing room, accompanied by a comfortably chatting Steven, who
was carrying what looked like almost the entirety of John’s pile of choices.

He was still looking when Sherlock stepped into view, and their eyes immediately locked, John’s entire respiratory system failing in an instant. His phone buzzed in his hand, his arm instinctively twitching, and he watched with mounting dread as Sherlock’s eyes drifted down to the mobile. When grey eyes looked back to him, John was sure he saw a flicker of pained anger pass through them, and he guiltily dropped his gaze, disappointed in himself for reasons he didn’t understand. He never replied to Mary’s text.

Sherlock insisted on going to check on the boyfriend’s alibi on his own, sending John back to school with Mrs. Hudson and the bags, promising he would get a cab back before it got too late. Still, it was nearing 11, and Sherlock had not returned, leaving John sitting on his bed and staring at the two, red bags he’d sat neatly on the opposite mattress. He’d avoided it up until this point, but the worry had become too much.

Are you coming back soon?

The familiar sound of a certain theme tune came from outside, and he straightened up, lowering the phone to his lap. His forehead furrowing, he stood, slipping the phone into his pocket and walking to the door. Slowly, he pulled it open, peering out through the crack to find the laboratory door open, a familiar pair of thin, trouser-clad legs stretching across the visible portion of floor.

“Hey,” he said, gently pushing the door open with a press of his palm, “I didn’t know you were back.”

“Clearly,” Sherlock muttered, not looking up from where he lay on his stomach as he jutted an arm out, waggling his phone toward John, his recent message displayed on the screen.

“When did you get in?” John asked, closing the door behind him as he stepped inside, squinting in an attempt to read the notebook Sherlock had open in front of him, but the scrawl was, as usual, illegible.

Sherlock shrugged in response, scratching something else into the margin with a mechanical pencil John recognized as his own.

He smiled at that, although he couldn’t say why, and lowered himself to sit cross-legged beside the splayed out boy. “Did you tell Mrs. Hudson you got back?”

Sherlock hummed affirmatively, and then they fell quiet, Sherlock’s rhythmic tapping of the eraser against the floor the only sound in the silence that was steadily growing awkward.

“You ready for the game tomorrow?” John offered, knowing it was a paltry attempt.

“I don’t have to play, so there is nothing for me to be ready for.”

John blinked, his eyes widening at the cold rebuke. “I-I guess not,” he muttered. “So, how-” A beep issued from within his pocket, and he glanced down instinctively at the message tone. Looking up, he caught a flash of irritation on Sherlock’s face before the boy turned away, bending his head even lower to the notebook. John’s hand hovered over the pocket of his jeans, his fingers twitching in momentary indecision, and then he pulled away. He twisted on the floor, pushing his legs out behind him as he lowered himself to his stomach, positioned at a right angle to Sherlock as he leaned over the notebook. “So what happened with the boyfriend’s alibi?”

Sherlock paused in his writing, John’s pencil hovering still over the paper. Slowly, he turned his head, lifting an eyebrow, as if to silently ask if John was making this decision on purpose.
John answered by shuffling forwards another inch.

A ghost of a smile twitched at Sherlock’s lips, and then he launched into a rapid explanation of various routes and results, dragging the notebook closer so their arms brushed together as Sherlock gesticulated over his findings.

The text went unanswered for the remainder of the night.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

“And now?”

He looked to find John watching him closely, that cautiously expectant something Sherlock couldn’t place sparkling in his eyes again.

“What do you prefer now?”

Half a dozen answers flashed through Sherlock’s mind, but he knew his mouth would never consent to form any of them. “Now…I don’t find company quite so intolerable,” he answered softly.

John smiled, and Sherlock nervously returned it, hoping just how specifically he meant ‘company’ wasn’t betrayed on his face.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sherlock sat his small bag in the pile beside the coach, John’s thumping to the ground beside it.

“Ya think we can get on?” John asked, sliding his hands into the pockets of his jacket, his shoulders hunched to the cold.

“Doubtful, considering no one else has,” Sherlock replied, looking around to the rest of the team loitering about.

Some of them were clearly excited to miss their later classes, being that the coach was leaving at 2:30 to make it to the game in Sheffield. The game wasn’t set to start until 7, but apparently they needed time to “warm up”. Sherlock never saw that warming up had any effect on performance, but merely seemed to make the players confident enough to be more daring during the game. He’d have to tell John about that datasheet he was compiling later.

His fingers flipped inside the cuffs of his coat, tugging at the hem of one of his new shirts. It was soft, something John had referred to as “flannel”, but it was a name brand, so Sherlock refused to give it the same title. It was his favorite out of his latest purchases, a blue-tone plaid that John had picked out, and he’d paired it with a grey jumper, the same style he’d tried on in navy at the store. It would be a bit too obvious to wear exactly the same combination John had appeared to like, but this small change in color seemed to be keeping him from recognizing Sherlock’s motives.

Although he and John had ended the evening on good enough terms, discussing Sherlock’s findings that, unless he had teleportation abilities (or the Batmobile, as John had helpfully suggested), it was impossible for Michael Parker to make it from Claire Jones’ flat to his office in the time between the call to the police and his meeting, Sherlock was still uneasy about the situation. They hadn’t talked about it, and he was certainly not going to be the one to bring it up, but he was fairly certain of what he’d seen in John’s eyes in that fitting room. He’d spent the better part of the night awake, trying to figure out if he were merely inventing what he wanted to see, but had finally come to the undeniable, unbelievable conclusion that John had been attracted to him. Not all the time, not at all apart from that moment, actually, but it had been there. And then he had run away, texting that insipid girl in
order to cling to his heterosexuality.

Sherlock watched him out of the corner of his eye as John talked to Mike and Kendall about tactics, obvious from his commanding and their receptive body language. He couldn’t blame John, not really. It was not as if he would have been prepared to have that conversation in that moment. He imagined he could relive that moment a thousand times over and still not find the words, but it didn’t seem to be bothering John, so maybe there would be no need.

John had evidently dismissed it, probably blaming something idiotic like sleep deprivation or a Pick ’n’ Mix high, and was going to ignore his bisexual tendencies. Because that’s all it was, just bisexual tendencies. It had nothing to do with Sherlock personally; he was merely a vessel, a catalyst. Which was the only explanation he could think about without feeling as though something was trying to elbow its way out of his chest.

“Right, everybody gather ‘round! I’m gonna call you off!” Coach Powles yelled, and Sherlock turned, watching as the team lazily grouped together. Coach Powles droned through the names, most of which Sherlock still hadn’t bothered to retain, but his ears instinctively found his own.

“Yeah,” John answered for him, and Sherlock smiled at the fact that no one questioned it at this point, although Coach Powles did do his customary glance up just to be sure Sherlock was actually there.

Roll call complete, John wandered back over, rubbing his hands together in front of him. “We can get on now. The driver’s gonna load up the bags.”

Sherlock nodded, following to the small queue.

John stopped near the back, where pop culture seemed to infer the more well-liked people sat. “You want the window or the aisle?”

“You don’t have to sit with me,” he replied, mentally berating himself for the slip. ‘We don’t have to sit together’ would have been much better, much less telling, and John wouldn’t have that pity in his eyes.

“No, I want to,” John said, smiling reassuringly. “So, window or-”

“I’ll take the aisle. You prefer the window,” Sherlock interjected.

John smiled with his usual fondness in the face of Sherlock’s oddities, but it caused an unprecedented twist in Sherlock’s stomach this time. “Yeah, I do,” John said, shuffling into his seat, and Sherlock flopped down next to him.

“This pattern is atrocious,” Sherlock said, running a disparaging finger over the rough, blue material of his seat. “If you didn’t already get motion sickness, this would do it.”

“How do you know I get motion sick?” John asked, leaning closer as he looked around, apparently embarrassed.

Sherlock gave him a withering look. “It’s nothing to be ashamed of, John. At least six people on this coach have taken some sort of travel sickness medicine, although some of them weren’t as careful as you were to select a non-drowsy derivative.” He nodded backward and to the left, and watched as John’s eyes found Mike Stamford, already half-asleep against the window.

John shook his head, sighing with soft exasperation as he turned back to the front. “I’m not sure they’ll work as well, though. I’ve never tried the homeopathic ones.”
“There’s a toilet in the back if they don’t.”

“Your bedside manner is terrible, you know.”

“That is why you are the doctor, and not I,” Sherlock answered, leaning forward to shake his arms out of his coat. He tugged it out from under him and rolled it up, shoving it behind his lower back as he leaned back into his seat.

John’s eyes lingered just a moment longer than platonic, tracing a line up Sherlock’s torso. They stalled on the collar-framed neck, and Sherlock watched his Adam’s apple bob with a swallow. A split-second later, however, as he met Sherlock’s eyes with a smile, all traces of the expression were gone. “I’ll try not to throw up on you,” he teased.

“Please do,” Sherlock said, rolling his head away to watch the rest of the team filing in. He could pretend nothing was happening too.

“Hey guys,” Devon said, the seat in front of Sherlock rattling as the black-haired boy jumped into it on his knees. “So, whadya reckon? Sheffield got a chance?”

“Well, I-” John began, diplomatic as ever, but Sherlock intervened.

“Langley hasn’t lost to Sheffield in eight years, which, however illogical considering the players are constantly turning over, has a profound effect on the psyche. Coupled with the fact that their defense is crippled due to a player’s unfaithful girlfriend with an apparent penchant for the defensive line, Sheffield’s odds of being able to mount a successful attempt are, even with the wind conditions being in their favor, no more than 34%.”

Devon gaped as he finished, and John had already pressed his face into his palm about halfway through. “Blimey,” Devon breathed. “How do you-”

“Common sense, recent photographs and articles in Sheffield’s school newspaper, and the weather report,” Sherlock answered in order of appearance.

Devon shook his head dazedly. “That’s- That’s-”

“Amazing, incredible, extraordinary, yes, he’s heard them all, don’t encourage him,” John muttered, twisting in his seat to better join the conversation, his knee pressing against Sherlock’s.

Devon’s eyes flicked downward at the contact, a wrinkle of confused curiosity forming between his eyebrows.

Sherlock twitched his head in a minute tilt, watching as Devon pulled a smile back onto his face.

John continued with businesslike composure, oblivious to the development. “I was thinking about the Echo play-”

“The one that looks like a backwards checkmark?” Devon asked, miming the form with a flick of his finger.

“No, that’s Juliet,” John muttered impatiently, a small scowl ridging his forehead.

“The wiggly one? Kinda looks like an ‘S’?” Devon guessed again, gesturing along.

John sighed, a quick huff of exasperation, and Sherlock felt a strange stab to hear the sound directed at someone else. “No, Echo,” he insisted. “You have a playbook, Devon.”
“I’m bad with names,” Devon shrugged. “Is it the one with the little swoop on the end?”

John’s mouth was tightening into a line, but Sherlock leaned between them before he could say anything he’d regret.

“Here,” he said, turning his phone around to show Devon.

He tentatively took it, pulling it up to his face. “Oh, the kidney bean!” he announced, pointing down at the mobile as he handed it back.

“Echo, yes,” John snapped, his face taut with irritation, but it relaxed as he took a deep breath. John always got rather tense before a game, but, of course, completely denied this tendency any time Sherlock mentioned it. “Why do you have the plays on your phone?” he asked, probably forgetting his original train of thought with Devon, not that he’d admit to that either.

“I downloaded the file after you told me you would, and I quote, ‘punch me back into puberty’ if I didn’t start calling them by their proper names.”

Devon laughed, and Sherlock flicked a small smile at him reflexively.

“I would’ve too,” John assured with a stern look before turning to Devon. “You should’ve heard some of them! Like, okay, here, I’ll show you.” Sherlock’s phone disappeared from his hand as John grabbed it, sliding through the pictures. “What’s this one?” he asked, turning the display to face Sherlock.

“Humeral trochlea,” Sherlock answered, barely needing to glance at the sweeping lines.

John glanced pointedly up at Devon before sweeping to the next photo. “And this one?”

“Avian ileum.” He looked at John over the top of the mobile, growing bored with the demonstration. “I did try to explain it to you.”

“Yeah, sorry if I’m not familiar with the internal anatomy of birds,” John mocked, closing out of the photo gallery and handing Sherlock back his phone.

“You should be.”

“Oh, shut up,” John grumbled, crossing his arms and turning away to look out the window as the coach began to move.

Sherlock smirked down at his legs as he slid his phone back into the pocket of his jeans, another purchase from yesterday. As he lifted his head again, he noticed Devon looking at him curiously, his green eyes flicking between him and John underneath slightly furrowed eyebrows. It didn’t take a genius to figure out what was going on, but Sherlock was one, so he figured it out immediately. He wasn’t aware he was glaring at Devon until the boy’s eyes returned to him, widening with the knowledge of being caught as his cheeks flushed slightly.

Without another word, he turned to sit properly in his seat, the head of black hair disappearing behind the atrocious, blue fabric.

There was a tap on Sherlock’s arm, and he turned to find John looking at him with furrowed eyebrows. “What did you do?” he whispered, gesturing at the back of Devon’s chair.

Sherlock’s eyes narrowed. “Why do you assume I did something?”
John’s expression was a practically audible ‘Oh, please’.

Sherlock glared more. “I didn’t do anything.”

John lifted a skeptical eyebrow, and then relented as Sherlock held his gaze. “Then what happened?”

Sherlock looked up at the back of Devon’s chair, biting his lip as he debated dishonesty. “I’ll explain later,” he settled on, comfortable that he would, at some point. ‘Later’ covered the rest of his life after all.

“Later tonight,” John stated rather than questioned, and Sherlock internally scowled.

Damn John and his occasional perceptiveness.

“Fine,” he grumbled, and John beamed, clearly aware of his victory.

“So,” he said, wriggling into his chair as he turned to Sherlock, a bright grin on his face, “what should we do for the next three hours?”

“I brought the case file,” Sherlock proposed, pointing down to John’s backpack sitting between the boy’s knees.

John chuckled, shaking his head. “Of course you did,” he said, but made no move to retrieve the bag. “Sherlock,” he started carefully, “do you think we can maybe…not talk about the case for a while?”

Sherlock’s eyebrows furrowed.

“I just-” he stammered, licking his lips and averting his gaze. “We’re on an overnight road trip for a rugby game!” he said, smiling as if this were a grand treat. “Can’t we just…leave work behind? At least for a little?”

Sherlock almost scoffed, almost exclaimed absolutely not, almost went into a scathing lecture on how he was appalled John would even suggest such a trivial thing, but there was something in those eyes, an urgency that made Sherlock think John was asking something much larger, and Sherlock didn’t want to deny him, even if he didn’t yet know what the request was.

“I suppose,” he relented, the sounds slow and uncertain in his mouth. “But only for a while.”

John was barely containing what would have been a ridiculous grin as he nodded, accepting the compromise.

“So what does one do on a road trip when they can’t discuss murder cases?” Sherlock asked, his fingers twitching against one another in his lap as he looked around the coach. Apparently, people slept, listened to music, ate, or talked in loud, boisterous tones.

John chuckled as his head landed against the protruding rest molded into the seat. “I dunno,” he mumbled through a shrug. “Sing songs, play travel games. The usual.”

“Travel games?” Sherlock asked, because singing songs was certainly out of the question.

“Yeah, ya know,” John began, twisting to be resting more on his shoulder as he faced Sherlock, “trying to get through the alphabet on license plates or I-spy.”

“I-spy?” he repeated, the phrase foreign on his tongue.
John’s eyebrows twitched in surprised bewilderment. “I-spy,” he repeated, as if that would make it any clearer. “You’ve never played I-spy?”

“You know I hate it when you—”

“It’s a game,” John interrupted before Sherlock got too belligerent. “One person looks around and picks something, and then they say to the other person—or people, I suppose—’I spy with my little eye—’”

“Oh god!”

“…something that is…’ and then they put in whatever it was, like a color or something.” John’s smile only seemed to grow at the disgust on Sherlock’s face. “So, if I said ‘I spy with my little eye something that is blue’, you would have to guess—”

“The seats,” Sherlock interjected.

John nodded, his smile patient. “Just like that. Now you try.”

Again, Sherlock almost refused to ever even speak of this game so long as he lived, but John looked so hopeful, like a puppy who had been promised a treat even though you had none in your hands. “Fine,” he sighed, and if John didn’t just bounce up straighter in his seat. “I spy…with my average-sized eye—”

“Weeeell…”

“-something that needs to shut up.”

John laughed, quickly smothering it to nearly silent shaking as he no doubt remembered there were people sleeping. “Well, you’ve gotta admit, your eyes are a little ridiculous.”

Sherlock just glared at him.

“All right, all right, I’m sorry,” John chuckled, but it fizzled as he made an effort to be sincere. “Go ahead.”

Sherlock considered calling the whole thing off, but even he could see that was childishly spiteful, so he searched, scanning the coach and motion-blurred windows. “I spy”—he paused, eliminating the eye prepositional phrase entirely—“someone who is currently breaking up with their girlfriend via text.”

“What?” John blurted, but he was already half-laughing. “Sherlock, you can’t—”

“Oh, please, that’s much more exciting than colors. And you know you want to try and guess, so just do it,” Sherlock snapped, challenging John to argue.

John opened and closed his mouth a few times, faint, choking noises drifting up his throat, but he eventually relented, closing his lips and smiling softly before turning his eyes to the passengers. His eyebrows furrowed and unfurrowed several times as he considered the options, blue turning sharp as it scanned. “Kendall?” he said after a time, his voice rising with uncertainty.

Sherlock rolled his eyes. “Really, John, does Kendall honestly strike you as the type to break up with a girl in a text message? No, he’s far too sensitive for that. Try again.”

“Can’t you just-”
“You’ll be upset with yourself for hours if you don’t guess. Try again.”

John glared at him, but it was only a flash, the half-hearted attempt of someone who knew they were exposed. “Fine,” he muttered, an obligatory expression of irritation before returning to his search. “Taylor,” he finally spoke again, this time much more certain.

Sherlock slowly unfurled a proud smile as he nodded. “Very good, John,” he acknowledged, and John looked a little stunned, but also warily pleased. “Taylor hasn’t been handling his usurping very well, and his relationship has been taking the brunt. Why is he coming along, anyway; he’s useless.”

“He’s still on the team, Sherlock,” John chided, but there was a pinch to his expression and he looked past.

Sherlock followed his gaze to find it still resting on Taylor. “It’s not your fault,” he reassured, and John turned to him, doubt and guilt in the line of his mouth. “You said it yourself, he was a terrible captain.”

“I never said that!” John snapped, quiet in the close quarters, but blazing in his eyes.

“No in so many words, but it’s what you thought,” Sherlock rebutted, and John merely closed his mouth in mute admittance. “It’s not that he was usurped that bothers him, it’s that everyone is so happy about it,” he clarified.

John’s eyebrows twitched just slightly.

“The team is running much more smoothly with you at the helm, and he knows it.” Sherlock nodded in the boy’s direction, watching as he slid his phone into his pocket with a long-suffering sigh. “He’s not really angry with you, John. He’s angry at himself for not being even half as good as you.”

John blinked, his eyes shifting over to Taylor before settling on Sherlock with a soft smile. “You really have no idea how sweet you are sometimes, do you?”

Sherlock scoffed, turning toward the front and pressing his head back into the seat. “I assure you, if I am ever anything remotely resembling sweet, it is entirely due to a misinterpretation on your part.”

“If you insist,” John said, the grin evident in his voice, and Sherlock hoped it wasn’t due to the blush he could feel creeping up his neck. “Give me another I-spy.”

They passed over an hour that way, John getting progressively better at picking out the sources of Sherlock’s deductions, and then drifted into comfortable silence, John nodding along to his iPod as Sherlock mused over the case file.

There was very little to go on, and he still thought figuring out the method would be the best way to identify the killer. Although, he was nearly positive it was the victim’s boyfriend, Michael Parker, but it wouldn’t do any good without proof, and, right now, all he had was proof that the man couldn’t have done it. Even with his knowledge of London, Sherlock couldn’t make it to his office in the time between the reported gunshot and the meeting, so there was no way Michael Parker could do it.

Michael Parker was boring in every sense of the word. He had the typical house in the typical suburb with the typical wife, and was having a typical affair with the secretary at his legal firm. It was all grossly unimaginative, to say the least, which was why Sherlock was particularly excited about this case. Michael Parker was an idiot, and not just in the way Sherlock referred to everyone. If he had wanted to kill Claire Jones, he would have drugged her and dumped her body in the Thames or something equally mundane, but this? This was choreographed, calculated down to the most minor
detail. It was patient and delicate and hiding in plain sight. This was art, and Michael Parker, while he was the killer, was certainly no artist. No, there was someone much smarter whispering in his ear, and Sherlock was determined to expose them both. He just needed the how.

He scanned the pictures again, visualizing the scene in his head, searching for something, any small detail he had missed. He worried his bottom lip, forehead wrinkling as he gradually drew the pictures closer and closer to his face, absorbed by the task, which was why it took him an indeterminate amount of time to notice the weight on his shoulder.

Twisting his neck minutely to the right, he was met with a patch of sandy blond hair glistening in flashes as the streaming sun protruded through the trees. John’s left temple was pressed against him, his face downturned slightly, but Sherlock could see the eyelashes fluttering with a REM cycle, the lips parted to accommodate his deep, slow breaths.

A wistful smile drifted across Sherlock’s face as he slowly lowered the photographs to his lap, careful to move his right side as little as possible. Apparently, even the homeopathic remedy wasn’t entirely non-drowsy, or perhaps John was just tired. He never slept well the night before a game, twisting and mumbling in his bed. Sherlock wondered if he knew that.

Slowly, Sherlock stretched his left arm over his body, gently wriggling the iPod from John’s hands before the sleep-slackened fingers lost their grip on it. He turned it off, and then sat it between them, next to John’s thigh on the seat, trying not to tug on the wires of the headphones still in John’s ears.

John stirred slightly, his mouth closing as he swallowed, and he mumbled something unintelligible as he burrowed further against Sherlock’s arm.

Sherlock huffed a faint chuckle, shaking his head softly as he looked down at his friend, and then closed his own eyes, leaning back against the headrest. They still had over an hour before they reached Sheffield; he could afford to get a bit of sleep.

“Sherlock? Sherlock, wake up.”

His eyes shot open, his head jolting up, and John recoiled from him, the hand that had been gently rattling his arm withdrawing as if scalded. “What?” he blurted, urgent but raspy with sleep. “What happened?”

“Nothing,” John responded, slow and soothing, like talking down a startled pet. “We’re about twenty minutes out. Coach Powles was just about to make an announcement.” He nodded toward the front of the coach, and Sherlock turned, still moving much slower than his mind commanded.

“I hope you all kept your gear with you like you were supposed to, but if anyone did leave something with their other luggage under the coach, let me know when we arrive. We won’t be unloading fully until we get to the hotel, so make sure you have everything you need before we go into the locker room,” Coach Powles announced, gripping two seats to hold his balance in the aisle.

A few students exchanged anxious glances, obviously having neglected the rules, and Sherlock rolled his eyes as Coach Powles continued.

“I hope you all kept your gear with you like you were supposed to, but if anyone did leave something with their other luggage under the coach, let me know when we arrive. We won’t be unloading fully until we get to the hotel, so make sure you have everything you need before we go into the locker room,” Coach Powles announced, gripping two seats to hold his balance in the aisle.

A discordant blend of nods and mumbled assurances drifted up from the players.

“I said, is that understood?” Coach Powles asked assertively, looking up and down the rows.
“Yes, Coach,” came a vaguely synchronized reply.

Coach Powles seemed satisfied, however, and nodded with a small smile. “Good. Win or lose, I want us to be the better team out there. And to help with that…” He hoisted a cardboard box up from the set of seats beside him and wrenched it open with a grating pop. “’Bout time you boys looked presentable,” he joked, lifting a bright blue and white ball of fabric from the container.

There was a ruckus of cheers and applause from around the coach as Coach Powles began walking down the aisle, glancing at the jackets he revealed before tossing them to their owners. “Stamford. Richards. Price. Thompson. Watson.”

Sherlock ducked into the aisle as the bundle bulleted toward them, and John stretched up an arm and deftly snatched it from the air.

He turned it over in his hands, lovingly examining each white sleeve that framed the bright-blue body. Running his fingers over the elasticized cuffs—blue with horizontal, white stripes that matched the collar and hem—his mouth stretched into a dazed smile as his eyes roamed over the back. ‘Watson’ was embroidered in bold, white letters near the top, and a large, white number 2 patch was stuck beneath it, framed in navy to stand out even more against the blue background. John turned the jacket to the front, touching at the shiny, white snaps down the front before he stilled. On the left side, right over where his heart would be, his last name was embroidered again, smaller this time, and there was a large, ‘C’ patch beneath it, the same white and navy as the 2. He ran his fingers over the inner chenille, the fluffy fabric compressing under the pressure, before following the curves of the darker, felt border, his eyes wide with disbelief.

Sherlock was transfixed watching the display, mesmerized by the awestruck joy rolling off John in nearly visible waves, and almost missed his name being called, turning just in time to catch the projectile. He looked down at the jacket in his hands, confusion wrinkling his eyebrows as he turned it over in his hands. “I got one?” he asked, mostly to himself as he stroked across the embroidered ‘Holmes’ on the back, a large, white-filled ‘C’ patch framed in red beneath his name.

“Of course you get one,” John chuckled, eyes sparkling over a grin. “You’re part of the team too. See?” He turned the jacket over, pointing to where his last name should be stitched again, but it wasn’t there. Instead, the words ‘Consulting Coach’ were printed in large, white lettering, much more visible than the last names of the players.

Sherlock turned toward him, lifting an eyebrow.

John smiled sheepishly as he shrugged. “Coach asked, and I didn’t think ‘Assistant Coach’ would go over so well.”

Sherlock scoffed, shaking his head at the words as he held the jacket aloft in front of him. “No. No it would not.” He stared at the heavy, wool jacket, his fingers absentmindedly rubbing into the fabric. “I’ve never been on a team.” The admission had escaped before he could think to censor it.

John’s head tilted, his eyebrows furrowing thoughtfully. “What do you mean? Like, on a sports team?”

“No, I- Well, yes, that as well, but I meant I’ve never been on any sort of team. I always preferred to work by myself if I could help it.” It wasn’t wholly uncomfortable telling John, but he kept his eyes on his jacket as he did.

“And now?”
He looked to find John watching him closely, that cautiously expectant something Sherlock couldn’t place sparkling in his eyes again.

“What do you prefer now?”

Half a dozen answers flashed through Sherlock’s mind, but he knew his mouth would never consent to form any of them. “Now…I don’t find company quite so intolerable,” he answered softly.

John smiled, and Sherlock nervously returned it, hoping just how specifically he meant ‘company’ wasn’t betrayed on his face.

~~~~~

The game was, predictably, a blowout. Sheffield, living up to their reputation, had played a thoroughly unpleasant game, culminating in some rather creative curses as they shook hands down the line after the final whistle. Sherlock had not been needed much beyond a threatening presence on the bench, which was where he sat now, plucking at the white sleeves of his new jacket as he waited to load back onto the coach, his trench coat left behind in his seat.

John emerged from the locker room to his left, shaking the last remnants of a shower from his hair, the droplets catching the lights of the pitch as they arched away from him in a halo of crystals. It was disgusting, and Sherlock couldn’t look away, John smiling as he caught his eye. “Hey,” he said, tugging his jacket firmer around his shoulders. “Are we supposed to wait here?”

Sherlock shook his head. “We can get on the coach,” he said, nodding his head back toward the car park.

John nodded, smiling as he adjusted his athletic bag and started walking across the pitch at Sherlock’s side. “Some game, wasn’t it?” John asked, the question heavy with disapproval.

“I’ve heard worse,” Sherlock replied, curtailing John’s tact in favor of addressing the source of his discomfort.

John shook his head, clearly not dissuaded. “So’ve I, but still. That guy was way outta line.”

“It is hardly the first time someone has implied I’m gay, John,” Sherlock said, smiling in a way he hoped was comforting. “Even Devon was wondering earlier, although I doubt he would use the same, derogatory language to convey the sentiment.”

“Wait, what?” John spluttered, stopping and placing a hand on Sherlock’s arm to prompt him to do the same. “Devon? Is that- Is that what happened earlier? On the coach?”

Sherlock nodded, shifting his weight nervously between his feet, but John didn’t seem to notice. “It seems our acquaintance has brought about certain…suspicions in some of your teammates.”

John’s eyes widened with shock, and Sherlock looked past him into the now-deserted stands as he clasped his hands behind his back.

“I’m sure the inferences could be corrected, however. I would understand if you wish to spend less time together or change your living-”

“Sherlock,” John interrupted, his head tilted softly as he smiled in that maddeningly warm way. “Don’t be daft. It doesn’t suit you,” he ordered fondly, elbowed him in the arm as he passed, continuing on their path toward the coach.
Sherlock stared after him for a moment, and then smiled with grateful relief, taking a few, long strides to catch up.

The rest of the team clambered onto the coach shortly after, drifting out of the locker room in groups, and Sherlock suffered through some of John’s music for the short trip to the hotel, one ear bud stretching to each of them.

By the time they got their bags and shuffled into the room they would be sharing, Sherlock was thoroughly fed up with the entirety of the human race, and scowled with impressive intensity as John dragged him back down to the so-called ‘pizza party’ taking place in one of the hotel’s conference rooms.

They mingled—or rather John did, Sherlock dragged along at his elbow—around the various groups, John receiving several congratulatory slaps on the back as they waded through the grotesque laughter.

“You should eat something,” John said, swallowing a bite of the cheese pizza he was carrying around on a paper plate.

Sherlock’s lips pulled up in a sneer at the food, and John chuckled, shaking his head.

“Suit yourself!” he chirped, pointedly ripping off a chunk of his slice and chewing as he held Sherlock’s gaze. “Mmmmm, cheese.”

Sherlock rolled his eyes just as Devon appeared from behind them.

“Good game out there,” he said, smiling broadly. “That throw was something else. Thought for a minute I wasn’t gonna make it!”

John laughed, his blue eyes crinkling. “Never doubted you for a second,” he assured, and Devon grinned. “So who ya roomin’ with?”

“Kevin,” Devon grumbled, grimacing slightly as he looked over his shoulder.

John snorted, and Sherlock fought not to smile himself as he looked down at his shoes.

“Yeah, yeah, alright,” Devon muttered, rolling his eyes at John. “How ‘bout you?”

John jerked a thumb to his left, indicating Sherlock, and Devon’s eyes passed between them with that same, curious expression. This time, however, John noticed. “You two gonna flip for the bed?”

Devon raised his eyebrows, and Sherlock barely avoided doing the same as they both looked to John. “There’s only one bed?” Devon asked, and it was only then Sherlock noticed he was still carrying his bag, obviously having not gone up to the room yet.

John nodded, and Sherlock pushed his mind back to the brief moments they had been in their own room.

He had mostly been focused on being in a strop in hopes that John wouldn’t make him go downstairs, but, now that he thought back on it, there had been only one, double bed. There had been a sofa that obviously pulled out too, but John was evidently withholding that information from Devon for the moment. He nearly smiled at the evil genius of it as he took in Devon’s fearful expression.

“You might wanna just forfeit it to Kevin, though. Doesn’t look like he’s in the mood to take the
sofa.” John nodded forward, his eyes shifting their gaze, and they followed it to find Kevin sulking as he leaned against the wall and glared at anyone who dared walk too close. “You’re taking the sofa,” he muttered, turning his head slightly up at Sherlock even as his eyes never left Kevin.

“We’ll flip for it,” Sherlock replied, following his lead and avoiding eye contact.

“You’d know which one it was going to be. You’d figure out the curve of my thumb and current air pressure meant it’d turn up heads or something.”

Sherlock smirked, his eyes now unfocused. “Nobody could be that clever.”

“You could.”

He turned, looking down at the strangely soft tone to find John already staring back, a smile tugging up the corner of his mouth as his eyes warmed. Sherlock opened his mouth to say something he hadn’t thought of yet when movement coming in from John’s back caught his eye.

“We have to go,” he muttered sharply, his eyes focused on the rapidly approaching complication.

John’s head tilted in his peripheral vision, forehead furrowing as his lips parted.

“Just move,” Sherlock interrupted before he could speak. “Get out of here. Go back to the room.”

“What are you on about?”

“John, please, just-”

“Well, well!”

Sherlock grimaced, the loud voice signaling the end of their window of opportunity.

John turned toward it, taking an involuntary half-step backward as he was faced with a furious Taylor Jordan.

The brunette had his arms folded across his chest, conspicuously the only one not wearing his jacket, and his mouth was curled into a cold sneer as he glared down at John. “Good game, Captain.” The word was practically spit out, and a drop or two may have actually landed on John’s face, but the fairer-haired boy didn’t flinch.

“Cheers,” John replied, only a slight tightness around his smile betraying the discomfort. “I’m shattered, though. Think I’ll turn in.” He twisted, but Taylor lunged for his arm, stilling his progress, and every muscle in John’s body instinctively tightened at the touch.

Sherlock’s did as well, but there was an added jolt in his chest and a roaring in his ears as John followed up Taylor’s arm to meet his eyes.

“Let go, Taylor,” John said, dangerously quiet, and Sherlock thought it may remain the only smart thing Taylor ever did as he immediately released his grip.

The boy chuckled, one half of his lips pulling up in a sneer over his teeth. “Nice jacket, Watson,” he hissed, scanning pointedly across the captain’s symbol on the front. “Little big on you, though, don’t ya think?”

“And I suppose you think you could fill it out?”

Three pairs of eyes turned to him, and it took him a moment to realize that had been spoken aloud.
He was in it now, though. Might as well play through.

“But you don’t really, do you?” Sherlock continued, taking a minute step forward to bring himself level with John. “No, of course not. Even you can’t be that thick. It would take an even bigger idiot than you to miss that the team is *much* better off with John as captain.”

“What did you fucking-?”

“Although, I suppose it did make for a rather awkward conversation with Daddy. Tell me, did he ask after your health at all? Or was it straight into your uni prospects?” Sherlock tilted his head, eyes narrowing as he scanned Taylor’s gradually reddening face. “Ah, I thought as much. Well, not to worry, I’m sure you can still get in on your academic merits. That is, if you stop sneaking out to smoke marijuana in the woods and actually open a book for-”

“SHUT UP!” Taylor yelled, thrusting a finger in Sherlock’s face as he spat through the exclamation. “You just shut the hell up!”

“Sherlock,” John cautioned, just the slightest expense of breath, but Sherlock could not stop, could not allow what he had known was the entire reason for Taylor’s approach to happen to the designated target.

“Yeah, that’s right!” Taylor was shouting again, his head nodding disjointedly in rage as he looked between Sherlock and John. “Get your little boyfriend out of here before I-”

“Oh, please, just because your father is now involved with a man doesn’t mean everyone around you-”

That had done it, just like he knew it would. It came up in slow motion, and Sherlock did nothing but relax his muscles, angling his head just slightly to minimize the damage. Pain—predictable, but unpleasant nonetheless—bloomed over his jaw, and he staggered backward. He probably could have righted himself, but he collided with someone behind him as struggled for balance, sending him toppling back to the floor. His head cracked against the tile with an impressive thwack, echoing around his skull and ringing in his ears, and he let his eyes stay closed for a moment, uncertain if he could take any more sensory input through his already singing nerves.

Tremors vibrated through the floor around him from the struggle overhead, and there was nothing but an unintelligible roar of voices before an unmistakable one broke through, frantic and much closer than the others.

“Sherlock? Sherlock!?”

He grimaced and opened his eyes, blinking the hovering face into focus.

Relief washed through wide, blue orbs as John sighed, dropping his head and momentarily closing his eyes. “Christ, are you alright?”

“That’s right!”

He cut off with a hiss of pain, wincing as he tried to sit up.

John’s hands were on him in less than a blink, fingers gripping around the back of his neck to keep his head from falling back again. “Careful, you might have a concussion. We gotta get you out of here. Can you stand?”

Sherlock nodded, and then groaned at the fresh wave of pain.

“Alright, come on. Let’s get you up.”
Sherlock leaned forward as John shifted over him, clutching his right hand firmly while wrapping the other arm under his shoulder and across his back.

With a heaving shift from kneeling, John pulled him up, and Sherlock staggered slightly, relying solely on John’s stability.

“Okay?” John asked, turning his head as he grabbed Sherlock slung-over arm at the wrist, securing it firmly against his shoulder.

“Fine,” Sherlock replied, thoroughly failing at haughty.

John chuckled, apparently aware, and they slowly made their way out of the room.

There was still shouting, Coach Powles’ voice echoing over the rest, but Sherlock could hardly pick out any of the words before he and John let the door bang shut behind them. The progress to the elevator was somewhat fuzzy, but he was nearly completely coherent as they reached the door of their room.

“There ya go,” John strained, gently lowering Sherlock to the edge of the bed. “Now hold still.”

“I don’t need-”

John pushed down forcibly on his shoulders, sending him bouncing back to the mattress as he pinned him there.

Sherlock clutched at his forearms reflexively, and then looked up, dumbstruck and a little woozy from the sudden assault.

John was smirking at him, one eyebrow cocking as Sherlock stared. “I said hold still,” he stressed, each syllable deliberate, leaving no room for dissention, and a tingle shot up Sherlock’s neck at the cool confidence as his brain went disconcertingly quiet.

Oh, this was bad. This was very, very bad.

John disentangled himself from Sherlock’s grip on his arms, lifting his hands to push gently into Sherlock’s curls, prompting him to bow his head.

He complied without thinking, his hands clenching around one another tightly in his lap as he stared resolutely down at John’s trainers, deducing the fabric blend of the laces to distract himself from John’s fingers twisting through his hair.

“Sorry,” John sputtered as Sherlock let out a small gasp, jerking his head away from John’s touch as he prodded a particularly tender spot. “It doesn’t feel too bad,” John murmured, brushing more softly this time. He pulled away, and Sherlock suffocated the flicker of disappointment in his chest. “Let me see your eyes.” John tapped his fingers under his chin, and Sherlock lifted his head, opening his mouth to snap out a scathing remark, but his closing throat smothered it as he realized just how close John was leaning into his face.

Sherlock’s lips were parted, his eyes locked into John’s blue ones, and he could not for the life of him figure out where to look, shifting his focus from one piercing pupil to the other as John searched him for any signs of a concussion.

He pushed more firmly on Sherlock’s chin, lifting his eyes to catch the light, and Sherlock nearly gasped as something winged and entirely unfamiliar leapt inside his stomach.
“No,” John mumbled, and Sherlock’s eyelids fluttered as the warm breath tickled his face, “doesn’t look like there’s anything…wrong.”

Anyone who wears contacts, has recently had their eyes dilated, or is the bearer of a unique eye color must eventually grow accustomed to people looking at their eyes. Sherlock, constantly being in the latter category—and occasionally the second—was one of these unhappineses, but there is a moment, as any of those people could attest to, when something changes, when looking **at** becomes looking **in**, and, as John froze in front of him, Sherlock could feel that shift burning through every nerve in his body.

John’s face slackened slightly, the searching tension around his eyes fading away, and the fingers on Sherlock’s chin faded from commanding to suggesting, leaving Sherlock free to pull away.

He couldn’t move, however, hoping against hope that John couldn’t see his pulse heaving in his neck as he screamed at himself in ear-splitting decibels to absolutely not, under any circumstances, drop his gaze to John’s lips.

John was evidently not under the same orders, however, and his pupils twitched just slightly, but enough to make their intended path clear.

He needed to say something, something cutting and caustic, and John would laugh like he always did and everything would continue as if this had never happened, but for some idiotic reason he blamed on all those years of faking responses to social, flirting cues, he murmured, “Think I’ll live, Doctor?”

John’s lips trembled, and Sherlock didn’t need to tear his eyes away from John’s to know he’d just shivered. “Prognosis looks good,” John replied, his voice low and more breath than words.

“What a relief,” Sherlock’s mouth formed without his brain, the syllables shuddering slightly.

John blinked, the motion just slightly slower than normal, and that brief flicker of hazy intent brought the reality of the situation back to Sherlock with a rush of heavy panic.

“Ineedyourlaptop,” he blurted, ducking out and to the side, sending John staggering back slightly as he leapt up past him.

“I- What?” John stammered, his voice dazed, but Sherlock dared not turn around, not sure his pounding heart could take the strain of the accompanying expression.

“Your laptop, I need it,” he said as he unzipped John’s backpack.

“For the case?” John supposed, sounding a bit more like himself.

Sherlock made an indistinct noise in his throat, but John seemed to take it as an affirmation, asking no further questions as he crossed behind Sherlock toward the door.

“I’m gonna go- er- grab some ice. For your head,” he muttered, avoiding eye contact and gesticulating much more than normal.

“Right.”

“Right.”

The moment the door closed behind John’s hasty retreat, Sherlock exhaled noisily, allowing his legs their desired giving out as he flopped backward onto the bed, John’s laptop clutched to his chest. He
closed his eyes, breathing deeply and gripping the edges of the black plastic as he tried to force the thoughts of alternate endings from his head.

Caring is not an advantage.

Caring is not an advantage.

Alone protects me.

The work is all that matters.

He opened his eyes, systematically locking away every stirring feeling—if he dared even call it such a thing—as he brought images of Claire Jones to the forefront, but her body kept being replaced by a much more alive one in a different tub.

‘Don’t move.’

‘Corpses don’t move?’

Sherlock growled, crushing his eyelids closed and rattling his head, trying to shake John out of it. He was going to be back soon; Sherlock had to be in control of himself by then.

Seeking a distraction, he spun onto his stomach, snapping John’s laptop open in front of him as he curled his legs behind him, his crossed ankles bobbing in the air over his thighs.

John hadn’t told him the password, but he seemed to have assumed Sherlock would figure it out because, after only two tries, Sherlock was typing in ‘ihopeyouaskedfirst’ and clicking the internet icon on John’s desktop.

On autopilot, he went to his website, scanning through the comments and messages. He had long since given up finding any interesting requests, but the spelling mistakes were always good for a laugh, and he could certainly use one of those. One particular post caught his eye, and his eyebrows furrowed as he leaned toward the screen, reading it several times. Curious, he returned to the search bar, typing in a few, choice terms and waiting. The third result down caught his attention, and he clicked on it, his eyes widening as the page loaded.

“I grabbed some extra bags,” John said as he reentered, ice clattering within the small, plastic bag in his hand, “but you should probably wrap it up in a towel before you-”

“Winged Cupid Painted Red!?”

John’s eyebrows twitched as he tilted his head minutely, and then his eyes shot wide, lips parting in recognition. “I-I was going to tell you—”

“Oh, really?” Sherlock interjected, spinning the computer screen around to face the ever-darkening boy. “When? Were you just going to slip in ‘Oh, by the way, I’m writing up a stalker blog on you’ over breakfast!?” Yes, fighting. He could do this. Anything to avoid talking about the fluttering that had reemerged in his stomach at John’s entrance.

John’s fists clenched around the ice bag, his jaw tightening. “A stalker blog?” he snarled, stepping further into the room. “Really, Sherlock? God, I don’t know why I even bothered!”

“Bothered with what, overly romanticized descriptions of my coat?”

John blushed further, but it could have been the anger Sherlock could see in the creases around his
eyes. “No! Your coat is bloody ridiculous, but no, Sherlock, I was trying to prove people do care about your work!”

“My coat is practical, and people don’t care, John, I told you! Some absurd, hero-worshipping blog won’t change anything!”


“Exactly!” Sherlock interjected, so forcefully, John’s anger slipped to shock as he staggered a step back. “I’m insufferable! I’m a manipulative narcissist with self-destructive tendencies who takes pleasure in others’ discomfort. I am a socio-

“Don’t.”

Sherlock blinked, words fleeing his brain at the sudden shift of John’s voice. It was quiet, yet bitingly cold, and blue eyes were looking down at him with a similar sharpness.

“You’re not a sociopath,” John said firmly, moving closer as he raised the hand holding the ice bag toward Sherlock. “I know what a sociopath is—I looked it up—and you are not one.”

Sherlock sighed, hanging his head. Why was John making this so difficult? Why wouldn’t he just let himself be pushed away like everyone else? “Yes, I am,” Sherlock maintained, nodding his head in urging. “I told you, every psychiatrist I have ever-”

“Why did you egg Taylor on?” John’s arms crossed over his chest, triumphant and stubborn, and Sherlock’s throat made a shameful, choking sound as he faltered.

“I-I don’t-”

“Yes, you do,” John snapped, standing nearly directly in front of him now. “You knew he was looking for a fight, and you just pissed him off more. Why?”

Sherlock opened and closed his mouth, screaming at his brain to kick back on, but it seemed infuriatingly frozen once again at the impossibility of John Watson.

“You tried to get me to leave. You knew he would get violent,” John continued, those blue eyes narrowing slightly as they scrutinized Sherlock’s wide ones. “And you made it worse. You let him hit you, wanted him to hit you. Why? Why did you do that?”

Sherlock swallowed hard, forcing his traitorous emotions behind an impassable mask once again. “It would have been detrimental to your position on the team to get into an altercation with-”

“Oh my god, Sherlock!” John pleaded exasperatedly, but there was a hint of a laugh in it that Sherlock could not comprehend. “Will you stop reciting the bloody dictionary and answer the question?!?”

It took every ounce of self-control not to look away, to keep his eyes firmly fixed on John’s as his mind frantically searched for a way to prevaricate. “I didn’t want him to hit you.” Sherlock blinked rapidly, surprised to hear his own voice. That wasn’t supposed to actually come out!

John looked even more shocked, his mouth going slack, but he didn’t seem taken aback by the content so much as the fact that Sherlock had admitted it. “Why not?” he asked softly, his defensive body language beginning to wilt. “I mean, I suppose you’d never want somebody to hit me, but what made you stop him?”
“I hardly stopped him.”

“You know what I mean, Sherlock,” John interrupted, but it was gentle now, an indulgent smile on his lips.

Sherlock didn’t know what to say. He may have even told John the truth, but he wasn’t certain what that was himself. It hadn’t made any sense, getting involved like that, shifting Taylor’s attention away from John, but he hadn’t exactly been thinking sensibly. All he had known was that Taylor was going to hit someone, and he could not have borne standing there and watching that be John, but he couldn’t say that. He would sound like a sentimental fool!

“There would have been disciplinary action,” Sherlock said, his mouth easily delivering the excuse his brain concocted. “Coach Powles may have suspended you from playing for a time or revoked your captaincy. By Taylor hitting me, however, the punishment will remain relatively one-sided, and it would certainly be beneficial for everyone if he were no longer around.”

“Sherlock,” John admonished at the cold remark, but it was half-hearted at best, and the corners of his mouth curled in evidence.

Sherlock rolled his eyes. “And, even if you were removed from the team, I would no doubt be expected to stay on, and it would be unbearably tedious with you.”

“Selfless, as always,” John chuckled, the bitterness gone from his face, and Sherlock smiled softly at the dissipating frost in the air. “Here,” he said, leaning forward and depositing the bag of ice into Sherlock’s hand. “I’ll get you a towel.”

The condensation dripped between his fingers, and he held the bag away from his legs, not wanting any cold droplets seeping into his jeans. Jeans. Well, that was a new thought. They weren’t intolerable, however. Not that he would ever be admitting that to John.

John was back in a moment, sitting on the edge of the bed beside Sherlock. He took the ice again, wrapping it quickly in a towel before gently pressing the bundle to the back of Sherlock’s head. “Hold it there for a while, yeah?” he advised, the ice clicking together as it shifted against Sherlock’s skull beneath his fingers.

Sherlock sighed, but lifted his hand, fingers covering John’s for a moment as they replaced them, and he cleared his throat against the lump that appeared at the contact. “What precisely is this blog of yours?”

John smiled sheepishly, twisting his fingers atop his thigh as he dropped his face. “I just wanted you to get some credit for what you do. And people seem to like it.”

“People? What people?” he muttered, twisting his body to face John more directly.

Blue eyes twinkled hopefully as John looked up, shrugging. “Just people, Sherlock. Some are even asking you to look into stuff for them. I was gonna bring it up soon, actually, because some of them sound pretty interesting.”

“They do?” he asked, genuinely dumbfounded. People liked hearing about him? People wanted his help? He would never have believed it had it not been coming from John.

John nodded enthusiastically, tugging his laptop toward him. He yawned, covering it with the back of his right hand while his left swiped across the track pad.

“You’re tired,” Sherlock said, but John was already swatting dismissively at him before the words
were even entirely out.

“I’m fine. Take a look at some of these emails.”

“John,” Sherlock cut in, and the boy froze in turning the computer back toward him. He searched John’s evasive gaze for a moment, and then his mouth twitched up at the realization. “You don’t want me to fall asleep in case I have a concussion.”

John sighed through his nose, leaning back from the laptop and shaking his head, smiling slightly as he looked aimlessly around the room.

“I never sleep, John. You hardly need to stay up with me to ensure that.”

“Yeah, well, I also want to ensure my blog remains undeleted, soooo…” He lifted his hands, alternating them in the air as if physically weighing the pros and cons.

“Yes, about your blog—”

“I’ll take it down if you really want.”

“No, it’s fine,” Sherlock muttered, waving his free hand in the air between them and ignoring John’s rising eyebrows. “I was just wondering where you came up with the name.”

John tilted his head, his eyes shifting between the laptop and Sherlock with mounting confusion. “Er, it’s just my name,” he said hesitantly, twisting the screen further Sherlock’s direction as he pointed. “‘The Personal Blog of John H. Watson’, see?”

Sherlock rolled his eyes, the effect no doubt diminished by the shudder that ran through his body as an icy drop of condensation snaked down his neck. “Believe it or not, I managed to work that much out for myself,” he said tonelessly, and John sneered good-naturedly at him. “No, I was referring to the title you gave the Gravin case, ‘Winged Cupid Painted Red’.”

“Oh,” John said, pushing off the bed, the mattress bobbing in his wake, “that’s easy. I started reading A Midsummer Night’s Dream last week. Didn’t get very far, though, before I switched to Rebecca. The Shakespeare was making my head hurt.” He bent down over his backpack, his arm whipping around a moment later to toss a book behind him.

Sherlock picked up the volume, turning it over in his hands to read the swirling, silver lettering. “Why weren’t you reading it aloud?” he asked, handing back the copy of Rebecca.

John straightened, turning halfway back to Sherlock with a smug, knowing smile tugging at his cheeks. “Do you want me to read it to you?”

“No to me, just aloud,” Sherlock muttered, fighting off a blush at the obvious dichotomy even John was bound to notice. “You usually read them aloud.”

“I’ve only read the one,” John said, smile in full bloom now. “Doesn’t seem like that’d be enough evidence to say ‘usually’. ”

Sherlock narrowed his eyes at the obvious taunt as John crossed his arms, his eyebrows lifting in an unspoken dare. “How am I supposed to be prepared for class if you don’t read it aloud?”

“You could read it yourself,” John suggested, chuckling as Sherlock grimaced. “Alright, alright, I’ll catch you up. Go through those emails while I read, though, okay?”
Sherlock grumbled, a petulant sound he hoped would make John reconsider, but the boy was staunchly ignoring him as he crawled up the double bed.

John grabbed a pillow, folding it in half and shoving it behind his lower back as he leaned against the headboard, bringing his legs up in front of him and holding the book open with one hand in his lap. He met Sherlock’s glare with a smile over his knees, and Sherlock somehow could not bring himself to argue the point.

With a frustrated sigh, he grabbed the laptop, placing it beside John’s legs as he turned around, stretching up the bed on his stomach. “They’re probably all idiots,” he muttered, clicking into the message box and beginning to scroll through the requests.

“Everyone’s an idiot to you,” John chuckled, flashing a smile down at him as he turned back through the pages from the torn piece of notebook paper he was evidently utilizing as a bookmark.

“But no one,” Sherlock answered softly, not taking his eyes off the screen, but he heard John still beside him.

The only response he gave, however, was a quick clearing of his throat before he began to read. “Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again. It seemed to me I stood by the iron gate leading to the drive, and for a while I could not enter, for the way was barred to me…”

John’s voice spun on as Sherlock picked through the messages, hoping it went unnoticed when his eyes started drifting up as opposed to across the screen.

Chapter End Notes

Hello all! I don’t plan on making these author’s note things a regular occurrence, but I just wanted to take a second and thank all of you for reading, commenting, kudos-ing (it’s a word now!) and just generally being a phenomenal group.

I also wanted to let you all know that I am going to be at C2E2 in Chicago this coming weekend, so, if you’re gonna be there, make sure to say hi!

Oh, and FUN AUTHOR FACT, Rebecca is my favorite book, and you should all read it because it is wonderful.
This space is usually used for a quote, but I have a couple heads-ups for you guys that take precedence today.

First, I get a lot of messages from you all that contain things like "Sorry to bother you", "Sorry if I'm being annoying", "Feel free to ignore this if you're busy", etc. Please do not feel that way. You are never bothering me. Want some help on a fic? Ask! Want a fic reviewed? Ask! Want help naming your cat? Ask, and I'd be honored! Seriously, though, just talk to me, here or on Tumblr or in smoke signals or whatever.

Second, I am going to have to ask for your patience in this next month. In May alone, I am going to my cousin's wedding, having another cousin staying with me for a couple weeks, moving to London for the summer, and the rough draft of my piece for the Merlin Big Bang Challenge is due May 29th. Updates are going to get a bit further apart (once every two weeks or so), so I am going to need you all to just bear with me for a little bit here while I get a grip on my life.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

John awoke rather roughly to the sound of a book slapping to the floor, his mind swirling with that usual mixture of fear and confusion that comes with waking up somewhere new. A familiar smell drifted in with his deep, waking inhale, and his nerves immediately began to ease, even before his mind caught up to identify the scent. Opening his eyes, he blinked rain-scented, dark curls into focus, and then lifted his head warily to survey the scene.

John was still propped against the headboard, although he had slouched slightly, his head and upper body drooping to the left as his legs splayed out crookedly down the mattress. Sherlock’s laptop was still open beside his left shoulder, but the boy himself was asleep, curled up against John’s side, his head tucked so his forehead loosely rested against John’s forearm. John watched the rise and fall of Sherlock’s side, feeling the sleepy warmth of his breath ghosting over the hairs on his arm, and John felt something tingle lazily up his spine at the sensation. Sherlock’s knees pressed against John’s thigh, one, long leg draped over in a loose tangle with John’s foot, and John couldn’t help but smile as he looked down at their feet, his white, threadbare sock meeting smooth, black cashmere with a warm, solid pressure.

Something bubbled in his chest, an overflowing heat of liquid light, and John lifted his right arm, pulling it over his body to brush a renegade, brown spiral from Sherlock’s forehead with his fingertips. The boy shifted into the touch, burrowing further into John’s arm, his leg tightening in its hold, and that was when John froze.

He wouldn’t say it was panic; panic was something experienced when confronted with the unfamiliar, when a sudden shift in the world sent you spiraling down a well you could not see the bottom of. No, this was not panic, this was dread, the quiet dread that came with knowing the inescapable inevitable was bearing down on you like a freight train, and you had tied yourself to the tracks.

John forced himself to breathe, trying to synchronize with Sherlock’s rolling lungs, but his heart
would not allow it, demanding oxygen as it pounded against his chest. It was ridiculous that this was
the moment, that it wasn’t something more obvious, like his roaring jealousy over Sherlock’s date
with Molly or his aroused shock at seeing Sherlock in a plaid shirt, but, here he was all the same,
literally staring it in the face—well, the hair, at least. He was attracted to Sherlock Holmes, and
bloody hell if that didn’t need to stop right this second.

John closed his eyes, gently resting his skull on the headboard and tilting toward the ceiling as
carefully as he could without jostling his sleeping roommate, because this must be a dream, and, if he
just went back to sleep, he would wake up being completely straight again. Because that made total
sense. John sighed as quietly as he could while still letting out his frustration. He wasn’t gay, he was
still sure of that, at least. He had never been attracted to men, not in the slightest, but Sherlock wasn’t
exactly a man, was he? He was something…more, something transcendent, something that defied
any construct or label. He was like one of those galaxies he didn’t care to hear about on the
Discovery Channel, a spiral of energy perpetually spinning in on itself, too far away to touch, to ever
truly understand.

And that, John realized, was the real problem. He didn’t care that he was attracted to Sherlock
because Sherlock was a man, he cared because Sherlock was Sherlock. He was coffee and chemicals
and darts in the walls, and no one would ever claim him. Sherlock Holmes was married to his work,
and John…well, John would just have to get over it.

“Ice!”

“Jesus!” John exclaimed, jumping several inches in the air as Sherlock seemed to shout himself
awake, bolting up from where he had been laying as if it hadn’t been even remotely compromising.

“Ice, John!” Sherlock said, his grin rabid with excitement as he shook John’s shoulders, and then
dropped his hands to tug at John’s jacket.

John felt a flush creeping up his neck, and he tried to fuse his spine with the headboard as he pulled
away. “What are you-” He trailed off as Sherlock pulled out his mobile, already dialing a number as
he pulled back from John, and John was definitely, definitely not disappointed.

“Lestrade? … Yes, I know it’s early. … Well, I figured you wouldn’t care what hour I solved your
case at. … No, I can’t more conveniently time my revelations to accommodate your hangovers. …
Mhmm, sure you’re not. Now, do you want to know how Michael Parker killed Claire Jones, or not?
… No, not Langley, I’m in Sheffield. … For a rugby game. … Does it matter!? … Some hotel
somewhere. John?”

John blinked, pulling himself out of the trance of watching Sherlock’s forehead gradually furrow
with irritation. “Hmm?”

Sherlock sighed, rolling his eyes, as if John should be able to read the question from his mind, and
John sincerely hoped Sherlock didn’t have that ability. “Where are we?”

“Holiday Inn Express,” John answered, the previous portion of the conversation catching up. “The
one on Holton Drive.”

“Did you hear that?” Sherlock snapped back into the phone, and then scowled, his eyes flicking back
up to John for a moment. “Well of course he’s here, where else would he be?”

John couldn’t suppress the twitch of his lips, his body seeming to grow lighter.

“Because he’s on the rugby team too. Captain of it, actually,” Sherlock answered to some unheard
question, and John blinked, unsure if he’d imagined the hint of pride in Sherlock’s tone. “We were in
the same room. … Yes, of course overnight. It’s 6am, why on earth would I be awake if not for
John’s snoring?”

“I do not snore!” John blurted, leaning forward to glare up at where Sherlock was kneeling on the
bed beside him.

“Yes, you do,” Sherlock countered, one eyebrow lifting with his smug smirk.

“How would you know, I was awake before you,” John snapped back, and then some of the anger
unwrinkled from his face as he realized what he might have revealed, but there was no way Sherlock
could know John had been watching him, could he?

It was nearly impossible to say for sure, considering Sherlock was practically transparent anyway,
but he seemed to grow a little paler, his eyes widening a fraction, and then a pink flush just barely
grazed his cheeks. The moment had vanished before John could get a grip on it, however, and then
Sherlock was glaring at him as if this were any other argument. “You snore back home all the time.”

“I do not!”

“You most certainly do.”

Lestrade’s snarl cut through their rapid descent to primary school, completely unintelligible to John,
but Sherlock shot him a final, narrow glare before turning back to the conversation.

Only then did it catch up to John that Sherlock had just referred to their dorm as home. He frowned
thoughtfully down at the blankets as Sherlock got up, pacing anxiously around the room.

Sherlock had a proper home, not that he spoke about it very often, but John knew he had one. And,
even if the Holmes household—which John would bet was a mansion or gated manor of Austen-
caliber grandeur—wasn’t where Sherlock considered home, there was Baker Street, and he seemed
to like it there. Why would, of all places, a dorm room be the place Sherlock chose to give that title
to?

“No, I am not riding in a police car. The pictures are still circulating from last time! … Only if you
confiscate all recording equipment before our arrival. … How is that ridiculous!” Sherlock
continued raving, his hair bouncing with furious shakes and rattles of his head, and John just
watched him, time slipping away as he stared.

Sherlock’s right cheek was still pink with fading creases from the duvet, his hair flattened slightly on
that side. His dark jeans were wrinkled, and one tip of the collar on his plaid shirt was kinked askew.
The combined sleeves of the shirt and grey jumper were hastily rolled up to his elbows, and he kept
brushing up his forearms to secure their position. He was rumpled in a way John had never seen, and
it made him seem softer somehow, approachable, maybe even attainable, and John swallowed down
the swell in his chest as he realized with inescapable clarity just where home was for him as well.

“Okay,” Sherlock sighed, lowering his phone and turning back. “The local precinct is sending over a
car to take us to the Yard. They’ll be here in about 15 minutes. Can you pack up while I go wake
Coach?”

John blinked, an involuntary reaction of surprise at being asked an actual question by Sherlock
Holmes. It sounded like he could refuse and everything, an odd feeling when he was used to just
being commanded. “Why would you wake him?” John asked, gathering himself.

Sherlock rolled his eyes, and John’s irritation returned in full force. “Because I don’t feel like
inspiring a national emergency if he comes up and finds us gone.”

“A national emergency?” John scoffed. “Someone thinks a lot of themselves.”

Sherlock chuckled, smiling back at John as he moved toward the door. “I’ll be right back,” he said, and disappeared from view into the small corridor before the door opened and closed loudly behind him.

John waited until he heard footsteps traveling down the hall outside before flopping back onto the bed with a groan, grinding the heels of his hands into his eyes. In spite of what had happened last night, everything seemed to be pretty well back to normal in the morning light.

Sherlock was focused on the case, they were bickering and insulting one another, and now they were rushing off to Scotland Yard for Sherlock to deliver some grand, dramatic speech of a reveal. It was like nothing had happened at all, and John violently tried to push away the tight twist of bitterness at the thought, but this was not the time for his epiphanies. There were more pressing matters than his identity crisis at the moment, and, besides, Sherlock wouldn’t be interested anyway.

With that thought, John grew numb, and, by the time Sherlock returned to the room, he had everything packed away—both in the suitcases and his mind—and they were off, John somehow winding up carrying both bags.

~~~~~

“What is taking so long!?”

John sighed, rolling his head over the back of the chair and silently pleading the tiled ceiling for mercy. “It’s been twenty minutes, Sherlock.”

“It’s a basic test! I could run it in my sleep!”

“Well then why don’t you go get a degree in forensics, steal Anderson’s job from under him, and run the test yourself. Go on, I’ll wait here.”

Sherlock scowled at him, John smiled innocently back, and then Sherlock huffed and resumed pacing around the incident room the Yard was using for the Jones case.

After a screaming match John had been unable to follow due to being distracted by the way the muscles in Sherlock’s neck moved, Anderson had fobbed off to do something scientific, Lestrade and Sally had gone to bring in Michael Parker, and Sherlock and John had been ordered not to leave the room. They’d even gone so far as to lock the door—apparently Sherlock had a habit of impersonating an officer that scolding couldn’t cure—but John was starting to think the window looked tempting as Sherlock continued ranting.

“He just has to run an analysis and compare it to the database. The Yard has a mass spectrometer, there’s no reason—”

“Sherloooooock,” John groaned, childishly so, but he was exhausted and Sherlock’s snipping was keeping him awake even more than the uncomfortable chair. “Will you please sit down? Just looking at you is giving me a headache.”

“You know it’s not biologically possible that the mere sensory input of—”

“I swear to god, Sherlock, I will put you in a bloody chokehold right here in Scotland Yard if you don’t shut the hell up!” John’s chest heaved, his head pounding as he glared at the detective, but his
anger was quickly dismantled by the expression that met him.

Sherlock was frozen, his torso half-turned toward John where he’d been pacing. His lips were parted softly, eyes wide and flashing, and John watched as the pupil slowly swallowed the flint, something twisting sharp and hot in the pit of his stomach at the sight.

A shaky exhale rattled through the air, and it took John a moment to realize it was his, the sound drawing Sherlock’s darkening eyes to flick down John’s face to his lips. The coil in John’s stomach sprung loose, bouncing violently around his chest cavity, and his fingers twitched with the need to do something, to leap, to lunge, to expend the energy he could feel tautening every fiber of muscle in his body.

“Sherlock?”

They both jumped, turning toward the door, and John couldn’t speak for Sherlock, but his own heart was absolutely thundering.

“We have the results,” Lestrade puffed, rushing into the room, folder held forward.

Sherlock snatched it from him, opening it even as he asked: “And?”

“You were right,” Lestrade replied with a long-suffering sigh and tilt of his head.

Sherlock’s smug smirk was not entirely hidden behind the folder.

“There was dry ice residue. Must’ve been lodged between the hammer and the firing pin. How did you guess?” Lestrade asked, and Sherlock snorted.

“I never guess,” he hissed, snapping the folder shut and looking up. “It was obvious Michael Parker killed Claire Jones to cover up the affair, the only question was how he managed to do it and be in his office at the time neighbors reported the shot. There was nothing in the bathroom to suggest any sort of mechanical rigging, so it must have been more subtle. The open window was, obviously, the key.”

“Er…how?” Lestrade muttered.

Sherlock rolled his eyes. “It made no sense for Claire Jones to open that window herself; people could see in, and it was far too cold. However, if one was trying to slow down the evaporation rate of dry ice in a humid bathroom…” He trailed off, shrugging and lifting his eyebrows. “It really was the only logical explanation. I’m surprised it didn’t occur to me earlier, but then John reminded me—”

“I what?” John interrupted, finally coming back to himself after that whatever-the-hell-it-was moment.

“When you gave me that ice last night,” Sherlock replied with a flippant wave of his hand.

“Ice?” Lestrade inquired, looking between them.

“He got punched,” John answered, rolling his head toward the sergeant.

“Shocking,” Lestrade deadpanned, and John smothered a smile at the carpet as Sherlock cleared his throat.

“Is Michael Parker here yet?” he muttered sharply.

Lestrade nodded. “He’s stewing in interrogation right now. Gonna give him another ten minutes or
“He’s not smart enough to come up with this on his own,” Sherlock stated, and Lestrade bobbed his head thoughtfully.

“Yeah, I thought as much. You thinkin’ a partner?”

Sherlock shook his head, frowning as he paced across the front of the table. “No, not a partner. A mastermind.”

Lestrade raised an eyebrow, while John’s lowered into a glare at the impressed tone of Sherlock’s voice.

“Someone gave him this idea, told him how to commit this murder, but I suspect the execution was entirely Michael Parker’s. The other person would have been much too smart to leave a window open,” he muttered, scowling in disdain, as if the stupidity of London’s murderous masses personally offended him.

A muscle in John’s jaw twitched.

“Alright, we’ll press him,” Lestrade replied, holding his hand out for the folder, and Sherlock passed it over. “You wanna watch this one?”

Sherlock hesitated, and that was strange enough that both Lestrade and John looked to him with concern.

“I- Er, yes,” Sherlock muttered, looking distinctly uncomfortable, which was also worrisome, “but I believe... John?”

“Hmm?” John hummed in response.

Sherlock wasn’t looking at him. “I think you should stay here,” he said, too careful and measured to genuinely be casual, and Lestrade seemed to read some hidden hint and left, closing the door behind him.


“I-” Sherlock began, and then faded away with a rattling sigh. “I would prefer to do this one on my own,” he finished after a moment, looking at John out of the tops of his downcast eyes.

Something prickled around the edges of John’s nerves, synapses crackling with suspicion. “Why?” he asked, eyes narrowing.

Sherlock licked at his lips, pressing them tight in what, by all accounts, looked like contrition, which only made John’s glare sharpen. “I just- After the last interview- Well, I don’t know what’s going to happen, and there are things I would rather you not hear…”

It was a perfectly logical argument, a reasonable request, but Sherlock had just admitted to not knowing something, so John was now **certain** he was being lied to.

“Sherlock, why are you-”

“Will you just stay here?” Sherlock’s eyes flashed, his mask of unease cracking to the frustration beneath for a moment before he glued it back into place.

John didn’t answer, closing his mouth and staring at Sherlock with what he hoped was every
accusation and challenge he had running through his mind.

Sherlock only swallowed and dropped his head. “I’ll text you when I’m heading back,” he muttered, avoiding John’s eyes as he turned away and left, but John didn’t miss his hand trembling on the doorknob when he pulled it behind him.

For a long moment, John could only stand there, staring unseeing at the solid expanse of wood where Sherlock had just been. His stomach twisted with a wave of nausea that swept through him, and it felt almost as if the whole building was shifting beneath his feet. He sucked in a deep breath, apparently having forgotten he needed oxygen for a moment, and then moved numbly back to his chair. Picking his jacket up, he folded the blue and white fabric over his arm and headed for the door, grabbing his suitcase as he went. He left Sherlock’s sitting against the wall, and there was something about it—the single, black bag against the white-washed wall and dingy carpet—that summed everything up.

It shouldn’t come as a surprise, really. After all, Sherlock had warned him, told him time and time again that he didn’t have friends, that he was a sociopath, and, while John still didn’t believe that much was true, he did realize he should have been a little more prepared for this, for the inevitable moment when Sherlock got tired of him.

John was only flesh and blood; he couldn’t hope to hold onto stardust.

With a shamefully shaky sigh, he carried his bag out the door, hailing a cab outside the Yard and watching the streets blur to watercolor as he leaned against the window.

*****

Sherlock walked down the corridor toward his dorm, Langley Hall silent around him at the late hour. He’d snuck past the guard at the gate, no real difficulty considering the man’s penchant for sleeping on the job, and the access card he’d swiped off the custodian’s cart several weeks ago got him into the building without any trouble. Somehow, the most difficult part was this, the walk to his door, so Sherlock paused in the empty common room, a shaft of moonlight crossing over his legs.

Sherlock sighed, swiping a hand down his face.

Parker had given up the name. He didn’t know anything else, Moriarty apparently having gotten in touch through a rather dubious associate of Parker’s, but it was still plenty to go on for Sherlock. They’d only communicated in text messages, likely from a burn phone that would lead nowhere, but that said something in and of itself, and the fact that Moriarty had been the one to indirectly reach out about eliminating Claire Jones? That said even more.

It was inspired, really, organizing crimes from the background, getting your handiwork out there while others take the fall, and, all the while, he got to be a ghost, a whispered name in the shadows. It was brilliant, a level of artistry finally worthy of Sherlock’s attention. It was also dangerous, and therein was the source of the problem he now found himself in.

He moved back out into the corridor, traversing the remainder of it with silent steps before reaching the dorm. The door was, surprisingly, unlocked, and he rolled his eyes at the fact that tonight, of all nights, was when John picked to relax his vigilance.

John himself was asleep, the yellow light from the lampposts outside filtering through the half-closed blinds to creep in stripes up his body. He was breathing slowly, clearly deep within the untroubled sleep of the ignorant, and, if Sherlock had anything to say about it, he would stay that way.
He bit his lip, sighing through his nose, and cast his eyes aimlessly around the room, as if the shadows could offer advice, but even his usually helpful skull gave him no comfort. He didn’t know what he’d be waking up to tomorrow, what John would do or say. He didn’t know if he’d have to explain himself, if John would even ask, and he had no idea how he would respond if John did press.

This case, this Moriarty was something new, something Sherlock had never seen before, and he couldn’t predict it, couldn’t see the variables and possible outcomes laid out in a list before him to be weighed on the grand scale of probability. And, where only a few months ago that unprecedented challenge would have ranked highly for best possible turn of events, now…well now he wasn’t the only one at risk.

It wasn’t what he had wanted to happen, what he had intended. John was his roommate, a roommate he was supposed to drive away in a matter of a week or two like all the others. John wasn’t supposed to stay, wasn’t supposed to be important, but now Sherlock couldn’t do a damn thing without thinking about him, and it was that thinking of him that had to come first now.

Sherlock never thought he would even have a friend, let alone someone he actually considered maybe…more, but there John was, and now Sherlock had to push him away. He knew deep down, something he might call his gut if he was prone to such clichés, that Moriarty would not hesitate to use any leverage he could manage, and, for whatever reason, he had singled Sherlock out, putting everyone Sherlock cared about at risk. That was a rather short list, of course, but John was quickly climbing to the top of it, and that was a weakness he could not afford to have, for both their sakes.

So, he would distance himself. He would be ugly and unfair and cruel, and John would hate him and be safe. It was the quickest solution, the plan with the highest rate of success, and Sherlock’s stomach rolled every time he thought of it, but it threatened to rush up his throat when he considered the alternative. He pictured white sheets and fluorescent lights, a strained Lestrade avoiding eye contact as he nodded to the coroner to peel down the covering for Sherlock to identify the body, and, with all his experience at crime scenes, Sherlock could imagine the injuries marring John’s tan skin all too easily. He could not allow that to happen, no matter how many wounds he had to suffer in the process.

Legs faltering a little, he closed the door silently behind him and sank down on the edge of his mattress. He hung his head, fingers braced in his hair, and shut his eyes as he listened to John’s rhythmic exhales. “I’m sorry,” he whispered, but the darkness continued to accuse him.

Chapter End Notes

I know this ending looks bad, and you're all probably pretty upset about having to wait two weeks (ish), but, just trust me, it's not going to be that horrible, and I will try and get the next chapter up ASAP because I know this is a rough spot for a break.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

I'm stealing the notes again for my own purposes, sorry. Just a reminder to you all to expect slightly less frequent updates for a little while because of all the craziness detailed in the previous chapter's notes, and to thank you for the overwhelming amount of support and encouragement I have received. If I'm being honest, I thought I'd get a bit of hate for not updating as quickly (and that has happened to me in the past) but you have all sent me nothing but well-wishes, and I'm really quite touched. Four for you, Teenlock fans! Four for you!

John had thought having a friend like Sherlock Holmes was its own special kind of hell, but, as it turned out, not being friends with Sherlock was even worse.

The morning immediately following the resolution of the Jones case, John had thought they would talk, that Sherlock might—miracle of miracles—apologize for snapping, and everything would continue like it always had. But, the second John opened his mouth to broach the subject, Sherlock leapt up, telling him he had to go visit Mrs. Hudson, and that there was no need for him to come along. John had only smiled and nodded as if he didn’t know better.

Sherlock had left the dorm without a backward glance, sleeping in the lab that night. He ignored John’s knock for breakfast on Monday morning.

John waited in the cafeteria as long as he could, and was nearly late to Biology, but Sherlock was already there when he arrived, sitting on the opposite side as normal, making Mike a buffer between them.

He didn’t look up when John sat down. He didn’t come back to the dorm during break, wasn’t in the cafeteria at lunch, and had moved a couple seats further back when John came into English.

John wanted to scream the windows out, to grab Sherlock by the collar he refused to wrap a tie around and demand to know what was going on, but instead he only brushed off Mary’s concern with a muttered: “I’m just tired, that’s all”, and tried to ignore the buzzing feeling on the back of his neck that always accompanied Sherlock’s stare. He didn’t walk Mary to Maths, saying he had to talk to a teacher—he could lie too, after all—and rushing straight to their dorm in hopes of catching Sherlock, but the detective was gone, and John’s inquiring text went unanswered.

That night, Sherlock slept in the lab again.

John didn’t bother trying to wake him for breakfast.

On Wednesday, John went to rugby practice alone, Sherlock muttering something about homework, but John knew it was a case, and he never thought he’d miss being included in analyzing blood spatter quite so much.

Thursday, he left an apple and a package of granola bars on Sherlock’s lab table. He hadn’t seen him eat since Saturday, and he thought Sherlock might have looked at him a little softer when he walked into English that afternoon. He was still sitting back away from John, however, so maybe it was only
wishful thinking.

By Friday, John was leaping out of his skin, ready to sob or strangle someone at a moment’s notice, so he packed a bag, planning to spend the weekend at his aunt’s instead of pacing around the dorm, talking himself down from angrily texting Sherlock for leaving him out of whatever he’d gotten himself into now. He had hoped to miss Sherlock entirely, but fate would not be so kind, and he found himself leaving the dorm at the exact moment Sherlock went to exit the lab.

“You’re leaving,” Sherlock said, expression inscrutable, tone bereft of emotion. It was the only way he spoke to John anymore.

“Just for the weekend,” John mumbled, shifting the strap of the athletic bag on his shoulder for something to do. “Going to stay at my aunt’s.”

“You’re not moving out?”

John blinked, body reeling back at the question. “Um, no,” he stretched, remarkably coherent considering Sherlock was looking him directly in the eye for the first time all week and had they always been that green? John cleared his throat. “Why would you think that?”

Sherlock’s eyes darted away as he slid his hands into the front pockets of his pajama trousers, thin thumbs pale against the dark-blue plaid.

Something thick and bitter gathered at the back of John’s throat. “Do you- Do you want-” He couldn’t finish.

Sherlock shrugged.

When John was 12, he got into his first fight. It was during lunch, and the students were all outside in the spring sunshine when Henry Moore and a small group of other boys from the year above him approached, jeering about someone’s father’s cousin or something seeing his mum out at the pub the night before. John had lunged at him, and, in spite of his smaller stature and being grossly outnumbered, he did get a few, good hits in before one of the boys landed a crippling blow to his stomach, sending him staggering backward with a rush of forced air.

This felt something like that.

Somehow, even through an entire week of barely speaking, of Sherlock moving seats and avoiding his eyes, John never thought of this. Sure, things had changed, but Sherlock had never been normal, and John hadn’t exactly known him very long. Maybe he did this sort of thing all the time, maybe these spells just sort of happened. John had expected it to blow over, that he would just wait it out and things would go back to normal, but here was Sherlock asking-without-asking him to move out, and, in the haze of shock and hurt, John lost his grip on the tongue he’d been holding all week.

“What did I do wrong?”

Sherlock’s breath hitched, but, when he looked into John’s face, he was stone, a marble mask so cold, John felt it to his bones. “Must we do this?” he grated out, lips barely moving, and some sort of dam broke loose in John, sweeping his pain away in a tide of red rage.

“Yes, we must,” he snarled, pulling his athletic bag off his shoulder to fall to the tile floor with a heavy thump. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

Sherlock winced and took a half-step back toward his lab, eyes fixed on the ground.
“Everything was going fine, and then you have some sort of **breakdown** at Scotland Yard and, **suddenly**, you want me to move out?!” John was sure his voice was carrying, and, at this time of day, plenty of people would be going to and from their dorms in prime eavesdropping position, but he was rocketing into that stage of helpless fury that didn’t give a single fuck. “What is it, Sherlock? Am **I boring** you? Am **I too slow** to keep up with the great Sherlock Holmes and his gigantic, **fucking** brain that can’t actually understand a damn thing?!”

“I never said-”

“No, you never said anything, did you?” John didn’t realize he’d advanced until there was a low thump, and his eyes darted to where Sherlock’s back had just collided with the wall in retreat. “You just moved seats and slept in the lab and pretended to be helping Mrs. Hudson ‘paint her living room’.”

Sherlock’s mouth floundered in aborted words for a moment. “I told you, she couldn’t reach-”

“Dammit, Sherlock, STOP LYING TO ME!”

Sherlock snapped his head up, staring at John with wide, almost fearful eyes, and a few gasps from down the hall confirmed just how loud that had really been.

John took a step back, loosening his hands from where they were stiffening into fists as he took a deep, slow breath. The influx of oxygen seemed to clear the anger from him, and he felt the heavy weight of disappointed hurt once more, as well as that exhaustion that always follows a shouting match. He pinched his eyes shut for a moment, and then looked into Sherlock’s searching, grey ones, but, for once, he didn’t care how much Sherlock saw.

“You don’t want to tell me things, fine,” he said, voice brittle as he shook his head. “I’ve made my peace with your secrets, but don’t lie to me. Say you can’t tell me, or don’t want to tell me, or shout at me that it’s none of my business, but don’t lie to me.” He hardly recognized his own voice, as weak as it was, and he ducked his head, biting at his lip as he swallowed. “I thought you were my friend,” he breathed, lifting his eyes, and Sherlock almost looked half as shattered as John felt for a split second before he froze over again, and that small denial decided John.

He straightened his spine, stepping back to pick up his bag. “But, I guess you were right,” he said, voice cold steel as he met Sherlock’s uncertain gaze unflinchingly. “You don’t have friends.”

Sherlock’s lips trembled open in surprise, and maybe even hurt, but John didn’t care, had been pushed too far to care, and it was with very little difficulty that he turned, hoisting his bag onto his shoulder and walking away.

Sherlock didn’t follow, nor did he contact John at all that weekend, in spite of how much John was willing it by constantly staring at his phone.

By Sunday evening, John’s tangle of emotions had settled comfortably into a cocktail of bitterness and resentment, and, as he lay on the guest bed at his aunt’s house watching the last of twilight drain from the ceiling, his mind was firmly made up.

He wasn’t waiting on Sherlock Holmes.

*****

Sherlock didn’t know when it had become Friday. The calendar said October 11th, but the last day Sherlock could clearly remember was Wednesday of the previous week, when he had gone on his
first case alone since meeting John. Logically, he knew he hadn’t known John very long, that it didn’t make any sense for him to be so essential, but sweeping his way around the Met and pointing out inadequacy didn’t feel remotely the same without him. He couldn’t remember what it was like before John, couldn’t revert back to his previous patterns of existence, those days unintentionally deleted in favor of brighter ones.

John’s voice circled around in his head, scolding him for snapping at Donovan, praising him for catching some small detail from a photograph of the suspect’s car, and he couldn’t block him out, no matter how many locks he put on the John door of his mind palace. It was as if John had permeated every room, every layer beyond repair. His laugh had latched onto the windows, his smile carpeted the stairs, and his scent had soaked into the walls, staining every new thought with a bitter ache.

And then, when even Sherlock didn’t see a way for things to get worse, John had to go and confront him about it with such clear hurt in his eyes, Sherlock still couldn’t think about it a week later without feeling like he’d been broadsided by a lorry. Of course, John wasn’t helping matters.

Where he had been sullen and surly with everyone for the first week after their fight at the Met, he now appeared back to normal, apart from the fact that his eyes no longer seemed capable of interpreting the light reflecting off of Sherlock. Every now and again, blue eyes would seemingly accidentally wander his direction, and John’s expression would catch, a small hitch in the contrived smile he was giving someone else, but, for the most part, Sherlock no longer existed. John was ignoring him so completely, in fact, that on more than one occasion, Sherlock considered the possibility he had gained the power of invisibility, or perhaps died and returned as a ghost.

John chatted with Mike during the classes they had together, permanently relocating to the opposite side from Sherlock. He sat in the cafeteria or wandered the lawns with some of the rugby guys during break and lunch, and made sure to always be on a different bench from Sherlock during practice. He talked with Mary through English.

Apparently, they had both started on *Rebecca*. Apparently, they had read it together when they met for lunch on Tuesday. Apparently, they had made plans during Wednesday’s class to meet at Lindsey’s again the next day. Apparently, they had stayed there until it closed, because John hadn’t gotten back to the dorm until 9:23 Thursday night.

Apparently, Sherlock was losing his mind.

He wondered if John worried about him walking back alone after practice. He wondered if John noticed he hadn’t slept in his bed for two weeks. He wondered if John was the one leaving a bagel in a bag outside his door every morning and a plastic-boxed sandwich every afternoon, or if he’d conscripted Molly to do it. He wondered if he’d ever mentioned to either of them that he only liked strawberry cream cheese. He wondered if Molly would ever give up inviting him into town for supper. He wondered if Mycroft would ever stop calling.

He wondered if John read to Mary, if he shifted voices for different characters like he subconsciously did with Sherlock, if his lips still twitched when he thought something was particularly funny or absurd, if he still pressed the book flat on the table with one hand when he was getting bored.

He wondered if Mary would even notice those things.

He wondered why he did.

It was Friday night, a week since John had confronted him, and Sherlock was lying prostrate on the floor of his laboratory, mind running circles around all the same questions. He had intended to go down to the rugby game, intended to sit there and pretend he wasn’t watching, but then John had
emerged from Kingsley, Mary’s fingers wrapped around his hand as she towed him through the doors, both of them laughing in the fading, golden light, and he had turned right back around.

The game was over now, and they had won—obvious from the horrid music and boisterous laughing and shouting drifting down from the common room—but Sherlock still did not move, not wanting to run into John in the hallway. Again.

He sighed, lifting his hands from his sides and grinding his palms into his eyes. He was lucky John hadn’t moved out, really, considering how awful he’d been. He hadn’t truly wanted him to, but he certainly hadn’t let any of that show, and he supposed he was grateful John was staying, even if it was clearly out of spite. Just like his early alarms and horrible rap music and extra loud laughing at the cafeteria tables that made Sherlock dig his fingernails into his palms and read the same sentence in his book seven times.

He left his hands resting on his eyes, trying to let the darkness overtake the mirth breaching his laboratory from the crack beneath the door, when a much closer sound caused him to stir, spinning on the floor to tilt his head back toward the corridor.

There was a loud thump against the wall, rattling the metal table that was pressed against it, and then the door swung inward, a slumped figure stumbling with it.

John blinked blearily, body rolling forward onto his toes before he centered himself, still anchored to the doorknob by one hand. Sherlock was looking at him upside-down from his position on the floor, but it was obvious even inverted that John hadn’t showered before coming up from the game, his hair matted and cheeks dirt-streaked, and the air filled with the scent of torn grass and sweet sweat. And beer. Lots of beer.

John’s eyes searched around the room for a moment, and then found Sherlock on the ground, his expression briefly startled before settling into a glower. “You’re an asshole,” he stated, taking a step forward and flicking the door shut behind him.

Sherlock raised an eyebrow. “You’re drunk.”

“Naw,” John said with a wave of his hand. “I haven’t had that much, really. Just enough.”

“Enough for what?”

John smiled down at him, a little shy and slightly sad. “To open the door,” he answered.

Sherlock swallowed. “Yes, well,” he muttered, sitting up and twisting on the tile to face the boy, “you did that, so…” He trailed off, trying to quiet the whole-body-shaking beats of his heart so he could think!

“I’m not moving out,” John snapped, crossing his arms and lifting his chin.

Sherlock blinked. “Yes, I had noticed.”

“No, I mean I’m not going to move out.” He stepped closer, and, for a flash, there was something threatening about it, almost predatory, and all traces of intoxication were gone. “I’m not going to give up. I’m not going to run away.”

“John, I really don’t think-”

“Don’t interrupt me.” He wasn’t shouting, wasn’t even all that loud, but there was something cold and terrifying in the way John spoke that lifted every hair on Sherlock’s body.
He closed his mouth.

“I’m not stupid, Sherlock,” John continued, and he was definitely stalking forward now, there was no other word for it. “Maybe you think I am, but I’m not. I can observe things too.”

Sherlock slid back a few inches, his legs stretching out defensively across the cold floor. “I’m sure I don’t know what—”

“Why are you always watching?”

He froze, fingers tensing against the stone.

John looked away from him, idly wandering to the right as his gaze moved unseeing over the room. “You won’t sit near me in the cafeteria, moved away from me in class, don’t even come to rugby games anymore, apparently.” He chuckled, hands lifting in a helpless shrug, but his eyes turned shrewd when they rounded on Sherlock once more. “But you’re always watching. Always.” He shook his head as if perplexed, but his stride was confident as he paced. “You think I don’t see it, don’t notice you walking past the common room four times while I’m doing homework, and yet you won’t even sleep in your own bed anymore because I’m in the same room.”

Sherlock breaths were coming quick and sharp, every muscle pulled taut as John stopped in front of him.

He sighed, licking across his lips before biting at the bottom one. “It’s not fair,” he breathed, shaking his head at the wall. “You don’t look at me, don’t talk to me, don’t even seem to be able to stand being in my presence, but then—” He broke off with a shaky breath. “Then you show up at the bookstore,” he said, turning to Sherlock with a wry smile. “I’m out for coffee with Mary, and you pop into the bookstore across the street. Again!” He laughed, and the slightly crazed quality sent a wary shot of lightning up Sherlock’s spine. “Do you have any idea how—how twisted that is!?” His eyes were wild, his breaths loud and huffing. “You act like you hate me all the time, but then you won’t even let me—”

Sherlock’s breath caught, body thrumming with anxious anticipation as John let the sentence fade into the crackling air, closing his eyes and dropping his head.

He pinched at the bridge of his nose for a moment, and then something seemed to be decided, and he was once again collected when he lifted his face to Sherlock. “I don’t know what you’re doing, Sherlock. I don’t know what, and I don’t know why, but I can tell you for damn sure that it is not going to work.”

He pinched at the bridge of his nose for a moment, and then something seemed to be decided, and he was once again collected when he lifted his face to Sherlock. “I don’t know what you’re doing, Sherlock. I don’t know what, and I don’t know why, but I can tell you for damn sure that it is not going to work.”

Sherlock swallowed through a closing throat, knowing he was failing spectacularly at appearing impassive as he looked up at John, his elbows shaking with weakness as he fought to keep himself propped up.

“I’m not just going to disappear because you say so. I’m not going to move out and ignore you and pretend none of this ever happened, and, honestly, I don’t even think you really want me to.”

His eyes were so blue, so focused, and Sherlock wondered if this was what other people felt like when he was looking at them, like they were being dissected, their secrets sliced out and splayed under a microscope.

“Look, Sherlock,” John said, soft and suddenly tired, “I’m sure you have a very well-thought-out reason for what you’re doing. I’m sure you have all your evidence and data—maybe even a graph or two—but this isn’t one of your experiments.” He spoke earnestly, face contorting with suppressed
“I’m your friend! You should be able to trust me with—whatever it is that’s turned you into an ass. Or, well, a bigger ass than usual,” he added in a mutter, and Sherlock only just managed to suppress the twitch in his lips. John took a single, deep breath, heaving it out in a stretched sigh. “It’s not wrong to need help sometimes, Sherlock.”

Sherlock started, blinking as his lips popped apart, and John smiled with such fondness, Sherlock would swear the room heated a few degrees from its warmth.

“You don’t always have to go it alone.” He continued to stand there, smiling softly, but Sherlock could not reply, could not even get his brain to reboot and make sense of the turn this conversation had taken. Thankfully, John didn’t seem to be expecting an answer, and, after a moment, he turned back to the door. “I’m gonna go back to the party,” he said casually, without a trace of ire. “Probably be another hour or so. I’ll bring a slice of pizza you’ll pretend not to like when I come back.” He flashed a baffling grin over his shoulder, and then was gone, the door clicking shut in his wake.

Sherlock listened to his retreating footsteps until the blood pounding in his ears overtook the sound. He blinked, and then had to do so several more times, eyes nearly weeping from how long he had stared at the closed door. He went over the conversation again and again, trying to force it to make sense.

John shouldn’t have reacted that way. He should be furious by now. He should be sick and tired of Sherlock and his theatrics. He should have been in Mr. Parish’s office days ago, demanding a transfer, and Sherlock was sure Mr. Parish had offered, given his reputation. So why, why was he staying? Why would he bother? And how did he know Sherlock didn’t mean any of it!?

He groaned, collapsing his face into his hands. He didn’t have it in him to be any worse, he knew that much, at least. It was hard enough being as standoffish as he was now, but he couldn’t just stop. Sure, Sherlock did find his eyes drawn in John’s general direction a little more than normal, and maybe he did check the common room when John was studying to make sure he was still doing so unaccompanied, and perhaps he had waited to get another notebook for his experiments until the day John was having coffee with Mary, but just because this was the most frustratingly difficult thing he had ever had to do didn’t mean he could go back to normal. There was John’s safety to consider! What did it matter if his vision swam a little red every time he smelled perfume on John’s rugby jacket, or found a long, blond hair on the back, as if Mary had been wearing it, had had “Watson” stamped across her back like he belonged to her at all.

Oh, who was he fooling? This had been a lost cause from the start. So…what did he do now?

His ass was starting to go numb before he moved, still without a reasonable plan of action going forward, and he winced across the corridor on stiff legs, quickly changing into pajamas before hesitating at the door.

He could go back to his lab. He could move across the hall, sleep another night in a cocoon of blankets and pillows on the hard, cold floor. With that one, simple act, he knew he could throw all of John’s words back in his face, hurt and disappoint him, and maybe, just maybe, that would be the last straw.

Walking across the hall, he gathered his pillows and blankets up from the laboratory floor and carried them back, tossing them in a heap onto his mattress. With little time left until John returned, he hastily spread the bedding out in a semblance of proper and burrowed underneath, heart jumping with every sound that reached his ears as he waited.

When he finally did hear John’s footsteps—he really did need to get new trainers, the sole of the right one was worn to practically nothing—he closed his eyes, regulating his breathing to sleeping
patterns.

The door opened, the knob rattling with deliberate slowness, and he heard John’s clothing brush against the doorframe as he entered. There was a pause when Sherlock knew he had been spotted, all sounds stalling for a moment before there was a rustle of John’s jacket and the click of the door. Squeaking footsteps crept to his bedside, and his hidden fingers twitched with the tension mounting in his forced-still muscles.

Somewhere above him, there was a breathy chuckle. “Idiot,” John whispered.

Only after John gathered his things and left to take a shower did Sherlock allow himself to smile.

*****

John was dying, he was sure of it. Something—probably an icepick, but he couldn’t rule out an axe—had lodged itself in his head, and someone was clearly still pounding on the back of it to drive the point all the way through to his eyeballs.

“John?”

He groaned.

His murderer was being far too loud. And chuckling, the insensitive berk.

“I have paracetamol,” the now-softer voice coaxed.

John grunted in what he hoped conveyed interest, and began the torturous process of opening his eyes as the light mauled his pupils. “S’it biology?” he murmured as a blurry Mike-head became identifiable.

Mike shook his head, fighting back a smile. “No, it’s Sunday,” he answered, holding out his hands, which carried the salvation of two pills and a glass of water.

“Sunday?” John repeated as he propped himself up on an elbow, his stomach spinning along with his head at the motion. His fingers connected with the cool glass, and it seemed as if the contact jolted his brain to life.

Memories slowly dripped into place, swirling into their proper order. He remembered talking with Sherlock Friday night, Sherlock sleeping in his bed again. He remembered Sherlock being gone Saturday morning and all through the afternoon without any word. He remembered working himself up into a right state over whether Sherlock was gone for good, if John had scared him away being all sentimental—he knew Sherlock hated feelings, how could he have been so stupid!—and he remembered being all-too-ready to go out to a pub that didn’t look too closely at ID with some of the rugby lads by the time evening rolled around. Everything got considerably more Monet after that—and a little bit Picasso, considering how warped some of the faces were in his mind’s eye—but he thought he remembered Sherlock being there when he got back. He wasn’t here now, though, as a quick glance around the room confirmed. Had John said something, a drunken confession he could all-too-easily guess at?

“Oh, god,” he groaned, mostly to himself as he popped the pills onto his tongue and quickly swallowed them down with a swig of water. His throat had apparently turned into the Sahara overnight, however, and he drained the rest of the glass before handing it back to Mike. “Cheers,” he said, voice creaking, and he coughed to clear it.

Mike shook his head, smiling softly again, and John was now aware enough to be a little irritated by
the mocking hint in it. “Don’t thank me, mate, I just handed it to you. Sherlock put that there before he left this morning. Told me to come in and wake you at 11:30. Said you don’t like sleeping past noon, it makes you feel like you’ve wasted the day.”

Through the fading pain of his delirium, John’s chest lurched in hope. Sherlock had laid out the water. Sherlock had talked to Mike. Surely John couldn’t have screwed up anything too badly last night if Sherlock was still showing concern. All of this still racing through his head, he vaguely nodded to Mike in agreement.

“Did you tell him that?” Mike asked, bending to sit down on the edge of the bed. “About you sleeping past noon?”

“No,” John said with a small motion of his head, and, as Mike smiled down at his knees and nodded, John considered how odd it was that he had grown accustomed to this, that they all had, to some degree.

Sherlock said the answer was C? The answer was C. Sherlock said not to mention anything related to Italian food to Lestrade today (“Why would I ever do that?” “I don’t know, the blood might remind you of marinara or something.”)? You didn’t mention it. Sherlock said you wanted apple instead of orange juice with breakfast? You got the apple juice. You never questioned why, you never questioned how, you just took it as fact, a warning you should heed lest something horrible happen. It was all incredibly strange, which meant, of course, that it was completely normal.

“Mike?” John began, and his friend raised his eyebrows in answer. “How long have you known Sherlock?”

“Just since last year,” Mike shrugged, following the topic change without comment.

“Were you closer before?”

Mike shook his head. “No, not really. Sherlock’s not exactly someone you can get close to, ya know?” He turned, his face wrinkled thoughtfully. “Why?”

Now it was John’s turn to shrug, shifting further upright to lean against the wall. “I don’t know, you just…seem to know him, I guess. I dunno.” He shook his head, searching for the words in his still-hazy mind. “You don’t think it’s weird, all that stuff he does. Like knowing about my sleeping past noon thing.”

“Yeah, well, that’s just Sherlock, isn’t it?” Mike chuckled. “You get used to it, or you get verbally hacked to bits.”

John laughed, a brief endeavor, considering how much the shaking hurt his head.

“Ya know, I’ve actually been meaning to ask…” Mike said, twisting his fingers in his lap as he hesitated. “Are you…alright? You two?” He waved a hand between John and Sherlock’s empty bed to clarify.

John was a little glad he was hung-over; it would provide a good excuse for his reddening face. “Yeah,” he said, voice a bit higher than he would like as he avoided eye contact and shrugged. He could practically hear Sherlock in his head: ‘Could you be any more obvious? Really, you might as well put it on a marquee and proclaim it to the world.’

Mike dropped his head, eyeing John skeptically. “You were talking a bit about it last night. On the way back from the pub.”
John cringed. “I was?” he murmured, looking up out of the tops of his downcast eyes.

Mike just nodded, a small smile toying with his mouth.

John lolled his head back to thump against the wall, heaving a resigned sigh. “I don’t know, Mike,” he breathed, shaking his head at the ceiling. “It’s- It’s- …It’s Sherlock!” He lifted his hands helplessly, letting them flop back onto the blanket with an appropriately pathetic *fwump*.

Mike laughed, soft and breathy. “That it is,” he said, nodding. “That it is. But he has been acting strangely lately, even for him.”

“He’s hiding something from me.” John didn’t know why he said it, why the gnawing feeling in his gut over the past two weeks formed itself into words at this moment, but it felt right, it felt true, and, most importantly, it felt safe hanging in the still, afternoon air between him and his oldest friend. All the same, he couldn’t look at Mike, and continued staring at the plaster overhead as he felt the bed shift with the boy’s movement.

“But he’s always doing that,” Mike answered. “Like you said: It’s Sherlock.”

John shook his head, skull rolling over the cool, gloss-painted wall. “This is different,” he said, forehead creasing in worry. “I’m used to not knowing where we’re going or what we’re doing or why I have to practice my American accent—”

“What?”

“Don’t ask,” John advised, closing his eyes and smiling dimly at the memory. “The point is, I know there’s a lot Sherlock doesn’t tell me,—he finally turned to Mike now, letting his head loll to the right—“but this isn’t like that. This is something else, something…important.”

“Important?” Mike repeated, shifting closer.

John looked at him a moment longer, and then sighed through his nose, shaking his head as he dropped his eyes to the duvet between them. “I don’t know. I can’t explain it, I just- I think he’s in trouble.”

“What do you mean, trouble?”

“I don’t know!” John growled, a fortnight’s frustration coming out at the wrong person, and he took a slow breath. “It’s just a feeling. I don’t know; it’s probably nothing.”

“No,” Mike insisted, shaking his head, his brow furrowed in concern. “I know you, John; you have good instincts. If you think there’s something not right…” He shrugged, the remainder of the words implied.

John nodded, acknowledging the compliment, and then returned to frowning at the blankets.

“You said you talked to him?” Mike asked, pulling John from his growing frustration. “Last night. You said you talked to him about how he’s been acting?”

John’s face wrinkled in effort as he summoned the memory. “I called him an asshole…” he said hesitantly, and then winced as Mike laughed.

“You what? I thought you said you talked to him!”

“That’s talking!” John argued, scowling at his cackling friend.
Mike took a deep breath, calming himself enough for words. “Yeah, but you made it sound like you actually made progress.”

“We did!” John paused, conviction turning into a sidelong frown. “At least, I think we did. He slept here last night.”

“Woah! Too much information, mate!” Mike exclaimed, leaning back and lifting his hands in the air between them.

“Oh, shove off,” John snapped, grabbing his pillow out from behind his back and swatting.

Mike batted away the blow, laughing, and then a small, pinging noise drew both their attention to the floor.

John leaned over the side of the bed, finding his mobile sitting on the tile, and he snatched the device up so quickly, he nearly fell off the mattress, balance tipping as he rolled onto his hip.

Mike raised an eyebrow, remaining silent, but it was undeniable that he had seen the contact’s name on the screen.

**Bonnie Tyler**

John blinked down at the screen, eyebrows pinching. “Bonnie Tyler?” he repeated in a whisper, and then nearly hit the ceiling as Mike exploded into laughter.

“No way, it does not say that!?” he guffawed, and John mutely turned the phone toward him, still in shock. “Oh my god!” he spluttered, laughing even harder now, and John stared at the screen, trying to force the name to make sense. “You don’t remember!?” he asked, apparently gobsmacked at John’s lack of reaction.

“No,” John said warily, lifting an eyebrow. “Why, what happened?”

“That song, “Total Eclipse of the Heart” played at the pub, and you got obsessed with figuring out who sang it because you couldn’t remember,” Mike explained, hardly decipherable through the giggling, but John’s eyes widened with horror as the words began to spark flashes of memory. “And you kept singing it! Over and over! But just bits and pieces, because, I guess, you didn’t know the words to the verses? I don’t know, you were slurring pretty bad by then, but you were very eager to get back, because ‘Sherlock will know’,” he added, bobbing his head in clear, mocking imitation.

“Oh, god,” John groaned, wilting down into the blankets to hide his burning embarrassment in the cotton, but he couldn’t escape the recollections.

“Sherly-lock!”

“What the-”

“Who sings the song?”

“What song? What are you- Careful!”

“The song! You know, the-the eclipse in my heart song.”

“I haven’t the faintest idea what you’re talking about. Now, sit down and-”

“You know it. You know everything! It’s the one-the one... You know! Turn around briiiiight eeeeyes!”
“Oh my god.”

“EVERY NOW AND THEN I FALL APAAAAART!”

“Okay, you need to lie down.”

“AND I NEED YOU NOOOW TONIGHT! Ba dum chh! AND I NEED YOU MOOOORE THAN EVER!”

“I will gag you if I have to. Take off your shoes.”

“I did the drums!” John wailed into the mattress, looking up when he heard Mike thump to the floor.

Mike was wheezing, sucking up air in great, high-pitched gasps as he wiped his eyes with the side of his hand. He opened his mouth to speak several times, but only ended up dissolving into helpless laughter each time, and John glared as he reached for his beeping mobile.

*Your falsetto isn’t actually that bad. You should consider joining the choir. Although they tend more toward hymns than ‘80s power ballads.*

John huffed down at the screen, glowering as he smashed out a response.

*Shut up I was drunk*

*Wake up on the wrong side of the bed, bright eyes?*

*Git*

*You really need to turn that attitude around.*

*Ya know for making fun of me, you seem to know the song pretty well*

*Well you sang it enough*

John snarled in frustration, gripping tightly around his mobile as he cast a dark look around the room.

Mike caught his eye as he turned, finally pulled together from his hilarity. “Sherlock?” he assumed, raising his eyebrows, and John nodded stiffly.

“Yes,” he growled. “Why did you let me come home? You knew he’d be a cock about it!”

Mike shrugged, hands lifting up to his shoulders. “You were very insistent. Kept going on about his coat—”

“Oh god.”

“-and how it fans out behind him like a cape when he walks.”

“Oh god!”

“And then you called him a vampire superhero and laughed until you almost threw up.”

John made a piteous sound and spun under the blankets, burying his face into a pillow. His mobile went off again from where he’d left it sitting on the duvet, and he pointed blindly toward the sound. “Tell him I hate him,” he mumbled into the lumpy pillow, turning his head to let the heat of his breath escape.
“I cannot tell a lie,” Mike said, the hand-over-his-heart clear in his tone even if John couldn’t see it, and John muttered nonsensical, irritated syllables as he swatted around the blankets.

His hand finally clapped against a corner of the plastic casing, and he pulled the phone up in front of his face, turned away from Mike toward the wall.

**Are you falling apart?**

John whined, flipping onto his back to stare up at the ceiling once again while Mike chuckled. “This is all your fault, you know,” he muttered while he replied.

*I hate you.*

“I will take whatever punishment you deem worthy,” Mike said diplomatically, smile remaining as he rose from the ground, John glaring at him all the way to the door. “Let me know when you’re ready and we can meet in the common room to study for that bio test, yeah? I’m getting the hormones all jumbled up.”

John stared at him a moment, lips twitching as he slowly quirked an eyebrow.

Mike opened and closed his mouth, a frown creasing his forehead. He then made a small noise in his throat and turned, leaving John to burst into giggles as he made a quick exit through the door.

John was still laughing when his mobile pinged, but the amusement shattered from his face, dying in his throat with a rasp as he read the words.

*I don’t hate you.*

The letters blurred a little, and it was then John noticed his hand was shaking, as if the clamor of his heart was rattling all the way through his fingertips. He stared for a long moment, as if the message would disappear, revealing itself to be nothing but a figment of his imagination after all, and then began to reply, knowing Sherlock was liable to take the sentiment back if he left it too long.

*I’m glad.*

He frowned down at the words, their simplicity tending toward awkward in his mind, so he added a topic change.

*I’m glad. Where are you anyway?*

Reading through the edit, he nodded at the screen and hit send, content his response conveyed very little of the giant mutant butterflies playing a drum solo on his ribs.

**At the Yard.**

A palpable frost fell over John, the butterflies falling limp to form a pit in his stomach. He had been so sure, the way Sherlock had been talking… His mobile chimed again.

**Could use your musical expertise. Victim was a regular at an open mic night downtown.**

Before John could do anything but drop his bottom jaw, the phone beeped again.

*I’ll show you the file when I get back.*

And again.
Should be within the hour.

John blinked, throat clicking and creaking in meaningless sounds of disbelief. Then the self-preservation instinct of not keeping Sherlock waiting kicked in, and he swiped a response.

Sounds good. Might be studying in the common room with Mike

Make sure he focuses on the hormones. His acronym method is clearly not working.

John smiled down at the screen as he replied.

I’ll let him know.

See that you do.

SH

John chuckled, shaking his head as he lowered the mobile to the bed, heart buoying up in his chest. Yes, he had gotten sloshed and done what would perhaps remain the most embarrassing thing of his entire life, but at least Sherlock was talking to him again. Well, mocking him, but that was still a step with Sherlock. Maybe he should be thanking Mike after all. Him and Bonnie Tyler. Smiling to himself, John laid back on his bed, bending an arm behind his head as he stared up at the ceiling.

“Turn around bright eyes,” he sang softly, smile growing to a grin as his fingers idly traced patterns over the surface of his mobile beside him
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

FINALLY! I know, I know, it’s been ages, but this chapter is over 11,000 words to make up for it, plus I think it’s one of my best so far, and I promise I’ll be better about updates now that all this moving-to-London insanity is over. Also, I TOTALLY MOVED TO LONDON GUYS THIS IS CRAZY!!!! Anyway, on to the teaser quotes and then the good stuff!

_They sat opposite one another in the booth, one of those tiny, two-seater ones that got nailed along a wall they didn’t know what else to do with._

“We’re not moving seats, Sherlock,” John said, not even bothering to look up over his menu, but the top half of his face looked unmoved by Sherlock’s concerns.

“But we’re not against a wall!” Sherlock argued, arms flat over his unopened menu as he leaned across the table. “Someone could sneak up on us!”

“Who are you, Don Corleone?” John snorted, dipping his menu to raise an eyebrow at Sherlock, a crooked smile on his face. “No one is going to whack us in a Nando’s, Sherlock. Now”—he flipped the menu out between them with a snap—“medium or mango lime?”

The mantra for the following week quickly became: ‘One small step for mankind, one giant leap for Sherlock Holmes’. At first, John didn’t even notice, as accustomed as he was to Sherlock acting strangely, but, by Wednesday, he was fairly sure Sherlock was attempting to make amends. The reason John couldn’t be sure, of course, was because it was Sherlock Holmes, and, in the world of Sherlock Holmes, one had to look at everything outside of the proverbial box.

For instance, to any ‘normal’ person, someone moving a single seat up from where they had so childishly exorcised themselves from your company wouldn’t be anything significant. Neither would answering a call to breakfast with a dismissive grunt, stealing pencils, using their roommate’s shirt to mop up a chemical spill, or lying flat on the bed muttering up at the ceiling, but, John wasn’t much closer to normal than Sherlock, and he was absolutely ecstatic.

Every napkin-wrapped blueberry waffle Sherlock took from his hands with a huff when John ran it back to him before Biology, every attempt to smuggle his jumpers out for an experiment, every night Sherlock just slept in his own bed set an explosion off in John’s chest, always prompting an involuntary smile that never failed to illicit a “What?” from the detective. John grinned through rugby practice on Wednesday afternoon, constantly flicking glances over to where Sherlock perched on the bench beside him. He grinned all through Thursday afternoon, sitting on his bed and reading _Rebecca_ out loud while Sherlock pretended to be looking over his data sheets, but his eyes had long-stopped moving across his notes. He grinned back at Molly when she smiled at him, giving him a nod heavy with meaning, and tried incredibly hard not to grin when he explained to Mary that he couldn’t go to a movie Friday night because he had to help Sherlock with a case. Of course, that was the only time John wasn’t smiling.

Sherlock had read him in on a handful of cases since they’d started talking again, but John could tell
none of them were the case, the reason Sherlock had shut him out, the thing that kept Sherlock from remembering to sleep or eat. He kept hoping it would be the next one, his heart beating a little faster with every folder Sherlock handed him, but it was always something small, too simple to be causing so much anxiety.

John wanted to wait, to be patient and sensitive to Sherlock’s reasons for being reluctant, but there were some things he just couldn’t do, not even for Sherlock Holmes.

“I don’t care,” he finally said Friday evening, sitting across from Sherlock on the floor of the laboratory, the usual clutter of paper between them.

Sherlock raised an eyebrow. “You don’t care,” he repeated, more a musing than a question, but John answered anyway.

“No, I don’t.” he muttered, leaning over the photographs and police reports. “I don’t care about the color of Mrs. Grant’s next-door-neighbor’s cat, or the height of the scuff mark on her doorframe; I want to know why you ignored me for two weeks.”

Sherlock face locked instantly. “I thought we resolved that.”

“No,” John stressed with a drop of his head, “we didn’t resolve anything, I just haven’t been asking questions because—for god knows what reason—I assumed you’d tell me.”

Sherlock wasn’t even blinking, his face eerily still with control. “So why don’t you ask your questions?”

“I just did,” John snapped, tongue working deliberately through every syllable. “Why did you ignore me for two weeks?”

Sherlock finally blinked, his throat bobbing with a swallow. “Is this where I tell you it’s none of your business instead of lying?” he asked, tilting his head, brow creasing.

John opened his mouth, but the retort stalled, his voice caught around the foot he was being force-fed. “Well, no, I- This is different.”

“How is it different?” Sherlock asked, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees, a victorious glint in his eyes. “You told me that, if I didn’t want to tell you something, I could simply say it was none of your business rather than lie. I don’t want to answer your question, ergo I am implementing your established rules. I don’t see what about this situation would merit exemption.”

John’s jaw clicked. “Sherlock,” he started, quiet with restraint, “I am asking you to tell me. I could’ve called Lestrade days ago—hell, Mycroft, even—but I didn’t. Because I want to hear it from you. So, please...tell me.”

There was a faint quiver of lips, a small twitch of an eye, but John knew he’d struck a chord.

“I- I can’t,” Sherlock said, dropping his eyes to the scattered case file in front of him. “Not yet. Not until I’m sure.”

John simultaneously growled and sighed with frustration. “Until you’re sure? Sherlock, I could help you be sure, now why won’t you just?”

“I can’t!”

John started, unaccustomed to Sherlock raising his voice, although the wild, desperate look in his
eyes was equally disconcerting.

Sherlock huffed out a sigh, turning his head away. “I’m not- It’s not ready. Can you just…accept that? For now?”

John stared at his friend, suddenly so small and fragile in front of him, grey eyes darting everywhere but John’s face. “Okay,” John answered softly, nodding as Sherlock lifted his head. “Okay.”

Sherlock watched him a moment, eyes narrowing as they scanned John’s face, but they quickly relaxed, and a small smile hooked weakly at the corner of his lips.

John cleared his throat. “So,” he said, shuffling forward to peer over the pictures and papers, “why is it important that the next-door-neighbor’s cat is black?”

“Grey.”

John rolled his eyes, and Sherlock smiled up at him from downcast ones.

He then straightened up, tugging at the undone collar of his uniform shirt. “It means, John,” he said, dramatic as ever, “that Mrs. Grant was killed by the plumber.”

“…What?”

*****

Sherlock was seriously pondering starting a diary. Not to keep track of boring things like who said what about who at lunch, or how behind he was on homework. He wasn’t going to doodle hearts all over the pages with initials and plus signs scrawled within them, no, Sherlock wanted a diary so he could keep track of every single reason he came across on a daily basis to hate most members of the human race. Perhaps he could throw in the odd list or two as well, considering today was being spent weighing whom he hated more: Lestrade or Mrs. Watson.

Entry 1 - Wednesday, October 23rd

**Lestrade**
- mentioned Moriarty; caused John to glare at me (Note to self: Prepare answers)
- mentioned half-term break was coming up; caused John to become upset
- mentioned the Yard’s Halloween party he had invited us to; caused John to glare at me again
- mentioned that he had mentioned the Halloween party to me last week; caused John to do that thing with his jaw that always means I’m going to be getting a lecture

**Mrs. Watson**
- failed to mention she had a new boyfriend; caused John to be distraught
- failed to mention her and said boyfriend were going on a cruise over half-term; caused John to look hurt
- failed to mention he would have to find somewhere else to stay for half-term; caused John to look even more hurt

Sherlock went over the lists in his mind as he watched John staring at the top of his desk, mobile still in the hand that wasn’t clenched onto the back of his desk chair, and decided that anyone who put that look on John’s face undoubtedly won any competition for the horrendous human being award.

“Harry’s staying at Clara’s, who my mother still thinks is just a ‘really good friend’,” John ranted, fingers curling around the quotes as he spun and began pacing through the aisle between their beds. “Aunt Claire left last weekend for her vacation; she won’t be back for another week and a half, and
she has her creepy friend Hector house-sitting, so I can’t stay there.”

“Hector?”

“Five cats named after My Little Ponies.”

“Carry on.”

“I don’t have the money for a ticket home and back—I was counting on mum to help me—and there’d be no one to pick me up at the station anyway because she and Derek took the car, and I couldn’t afford a cab.” He stopped, his back to Sherlock, form silhouetted in the afternoon light as he slumped, bowing his head and gripping the bridge of his nose. After a moment Sherlock didn’t even dare breathe, he sighed, spine straightening as he turned. “I’ll just have to stay here,” he said with a shrug, eyes disappointed, but resigned. “Maybe clean out that fridge of yours,” he joked, jerking his head across the hall, a smile trying to form as he looked down, and Sherlock’s stomach twisted at the lie.

“Stay at Baker Street.”

John blinked, head rattling a little as he physically recoiled in surprise. “What?”

Sherlock couldn’t answer immediately, his own mind screaming the same question at him. He rallied quickly. “Well you can’t very well stay here alone. You’ll disturb my carefully crafted system.”

“That’s a lot of fancy words for sock index.”

“You matched a navy with a black!”

“I was helping! That pile of laundry was three feet high!”

“And I was going to sort it. Properly.”

“It sat on your desk for a week!”

“Do you want to come or not!?” Sherlock kept his face frustrated, careful not to betray any of the nervous anticipation churning in the pit of his stomach. Certainly, at first, it had just slipped out, but now that it was out there, now that he was thinking about it, he wasn’t sure he could bear John saying no.

John smiled, the small, fond smile reserved just for when he wasn’t fooled by Sherlock trying to be an ass. “That depends,” he said with faux hesitation, tilting his head. “Do you have a sock index there too?”

Sherlock felt the traitorous twitch of his jaw.

John grinned, and then sat down on his bed, mirroring Sherlock’s cross-legged position as he faced him across the aisle. “You know, we’re going to need costumes.”

Sherlock raised an eyebrow.

“For the party. At the Yard,” he clarified, and Sherlock shuddered. “We’re going, Sherlock,” he said, tone brokering no argument.

Of course, Sherlock had to at least try. “It’s a party at police headquarters. How enjoyable could that possibly be?”
“Well, they have all that stuff in the evidence room. Maybe they’ll bust out some contraband, make a real knees-up of it.”

Sherlock snorted, but John only beamed, swinging an arm across the gap to swat at Sherlock’s leg.

“Come on, it’ll be fun! Your first party!”

“It is not my first party,” Sherlock snapped.

“No, no, of course not,” John said, voice dripping with false contrition as he shook his head. “I’m sure you’ve been to loads of parties, because who doesn’t want a guest who can identify every ingredient of the punch?”

“Devon is allergic to strawberries; that punch could have killed him.”

“Yes, but you didn’t know Devon was allergic to strawberries, you were just showing off.”

Sherlock popped open his mouth to protest, but John crossed his arms, eyebrows lifting in a smug dare, and the gesture prompted Sherlock’s throat to malfunction, words evaporating into a garbled wheeze.

“It’s settled then,” John chirped with a nod, slapping his hands on his knees. “We’re going. In costume.”

Sherlock groaned, rolling his eyes and letting his body droop to the side.

“It’s a costume party, Sherlock. You’ll look silly if you’re the only one without one,” John admonished tenderly, and Sherlock simply gaped at him for a moment.

“Do you hear yourself when you speak?” he questioned, and John—bafflingly—began to laugh. “Because I cannot imagine any possible scenario where not wearing a costume would make me the ridiculous one.”

“Oh, come on,” John urged, frustratingly winsome smile on his face. “You can be anything you like. Astronaut, firemen, hot dog vendor.”

Sherlock scoffed, and John smiled a little brighter before dropping his head, blue eyes watching the progress of his fingers as they twisted around one another in his lap.

“We all wish we could be someone else sometimes,” he said softly, weak smile and downturned gaze flicking to Sherlock for a moment.

Sherlock swallowed, a weight pressing in on him from every angle, a feeling he was growing more and more accustomed to the more time he spent around John, a feeling he was starting to suspect was what ordinary people called caring. “A pirate,” he found himself saying, because caring made him do ridiculous things.

John released a small, confused laugh. “What?”

“I wanted to be a pirate. Growing up,” Sherlock added, shrugging as he twisted at the hems of his pants. “My mother would read me stories about them ‘sailing the seven seas’ and whatnot. I always harbored rather romantic notions of making Mycroft walk the plank.”

John laughed, and it was the one Sherlock liked best, when he threw his head back to the ceiling and clutched across his abdomen with one hand. “Oh my god, Sherlock Holmes: a pirate! The Dread
“Pirate Holmes!” He collapsed into giggles, toppling onto his side. “The eye patch!” he wheezed. “And you’d teach your parrot nothing but insults!”

“Why do I have a parrot?”

“Shh, shh,” John hissed, waving a hand up at him, “don’t ruin this for me.”

So Sherlock sat in silence, eyebrows rising progressively higher as John continued to laugh.

*****

John stopped on the step of 221B, suitcase in hand and a rather confused Sherlock looking back at him from across the threshold. “Permission to come aboard?” he asked, lips twitching.

Sherlock rolled his eyes with a snarl. “I will lock you out,” he threatened, arm stretching toward the door handle.

John shrugged, smiling to himself. “Mrs. Hudson would let me in,” he replied, stepping inside, and Sherlock turned to glower at the landlady beside him, who completely ignored it.

“Oh, it’s so nice to have you with us, John,” she fussed, giving his forearm a welcoming squeeze while her other hand plucked a few stray fibers from his jacket. “I was hoping Sherlock would invite you back, but I wasn’t sure what you’d be doing, what with your family and all.”

“Mrs. Hudson,” Sherlock said smoothly, as if it weren’t an interruption on John’s behalf, but John knew the panic must have shown on his face, “perhaps you could make us some tea.”

“Oh, of course, of course,” she chirped, flitting her hands through the air as she backed toward her flat. “You boys go on up and get settled. I’ll bring a tray up in a bit. Don’t go getting used to it, though,” she warned, pointed index finger furthering the point. “I’m really not your housekeeper.” She smiled over her shoulder as she pushed through her door, and the silence was suddenly awkward in her wake.

John’s fingers shifted over the handle of his suitcase, eyes cataloguing the room instead of meeting Sherlock’s. “It’s nice,” he said, his pitch a bit high as he nodded appreciatively at the wallpaper.

“You’ve seen it before,” Sherlock muttered, and John’s stomach flipped as heat rushed up his neck.

“Yeah, but…it’s usually dark when we come in,” he stumbled, switching the suitcase between his hands.

“I suppose it is,” Sherlock said slowly, the words rolling over his tongue, and John snapped his eyes over with a glare, knowing he was being mocked before he even saw the half-smirk.

“Are you going to lead the way or not?”

Sherlock smiled, but bobbed his head toward the stairs as he headed up, his small leather bag bouncing against his thigh.

“How did you fit a week of clothes in there?” John asked, waving a hand toward the bag even though Sherlock couldn’t see him. He could probably hear it or something, though. Air displacement or some such rubbish.

“I have some clothes here, and Mrs. Hudson can wash whatever I need.” Sherlock pushed open the door, leading past the living room as they started up the second flight.
“She really isn’t your housekeeper, you know,” John chided teasingly.

Sherlock flashed a grin down over his shoulder, and John had to catch onto the railing as he stumbled on a step. “My impeccably dusted bookshelves would beg to differ,” Sherlock replied, and John laughed, following through the door Sherlock passed through in front of him.

He hadn’t known what he had been expecting until he didn’t see it, but he was shocked to find a fully functioning bedroom. No organs he’d rather not be able to put a name to sitting on the shelves, no suspiciously sizzling vials suspended over Bunsen burners, no cupboards with yellow tape stretched across the handles. There was simply a wooden chest of drawers, a desk pushed up against the window, a door that looked to lead to a closet, and a double bed draped in a faded, green duvet.

“Wow,” he murmured, turning to take all of the nothing in. “It’s so-”

“Boring, I know,” Sherlock muttered, rolling his eyes, “but Mrs. Hudson didn’t think you would appreciate having a skeleton staring at you from the corner while you tried to sleep.”

John’s lips twitched. “A real skeleton?”

“No,” Sherlock snapped bitterly, glowering at the corner that presumably previously housed the skeleton. “One of those horrid, hanging, model ones. For some reason, Mr. Hooper won’t let me take any of the real ones.”

“For some reason,” John echoed, trying to keep a straight face as he watched Sherlock glare at him in his peripheral vision.

“I suppose you’ll need to…get settled or something,” the detective muttered, jerking his shoulders in a shrug. “Bathroom is downstairs, but you know that already. There’s a shelf cleared off for you in the medicine cabinet.”

John barely managed not to gape. “You- You cleared a shelf for me?”

“No,” Sherlock scoffed, and it would have been incredibly convincing if his neck wasn’t changing color, “Mrs. Hudson did.” He stared at John a moment longer, and then dropped his head with a cough. “I’ll just…be downstairs,” he muttered, and then was gone, his footfalls all blending together as he hurried back down the steps.

John chuckled to himself, sitting his suitcase on the bed and unzipping it. He pulled out his toiletry bag, making to throw the lid back over the remainder of his clothes and head downstairs, but then he paused, looking down at his crisply folded piles of shirts and trousers. John usually lived out of his suitcase whenever he visited anywhere. Even at his aunt’s, he kept everything together, ready to be zipped up and wheeled away at a moment’s notice. He had kept an overnight bag packed beneath his bed at home ever since he was 12, just in case his mother’s latest someone-who-called-him-’buddy’ came back with her, and he had to stay at Mike’s.

Here, however, felt different. Here, he wasn’t worried about being woken up in the middle of the night by someone pounding on his door or screaming in the kitchen. He wasn’t going to lie awake and wait for someone to come home so he could sneak down and make sure the door was closed this time. He wasn’t going to move the dresser in front of the door to keep out any lost, drunken “friends” from the pub. The truth of the matter was, Sherlock could be downstairs right now mixing gunpowder and gasoline while holding a sparkler, and John still wasn’t nearly as uncomfortable as he was in his own home, or, as he was coming to consider it, the place he had grown up.

Sitting his toiletry bag down, he delved both hands into his suitcase, slowly pulling out everything
from shirts to socks and spreading it out on his bed. He stowed the hollow luggage under the bed, smiling softly to himself before letting the draping duvet fall back to the floor, hiding the bag from view. He then turned his attention to the drawers in the wooden bureau against the wall. He was only going to be here a week, so he didn’t have any more than a drawer’s worth of things, and the small piles of things in the single wooden enclosure looked rather pathetic now that he had them in there. Maybe he could start leaving things here too, if he and Sherlock continued coming into London for cases, and there was always Christmas and WOAH where had that thought come from!?

John shook his head, rattling the hope loose.

Sherlock had barely asked him to stay for half-term, let alone over Christmas, and he probably wouldn’t be at 221B anyway. He would go home to wherever that was, and John would go back to where his mother still lived, and it would be fine. Not great, not even all that good probably, but it would be fine, and John wasn’t about to impose.

He pulled up the two items he had laid carefully on top of his other clothes when he packed—the only decent jacket and trousers he had, brought just in case Sherlock dragged him somewhere he didn’t fit in. He would have called it a suit before he met Sherlock, but now it didn’t seem to merit the word. Navy blue and ill-fitted, both pieces were a bit creased from the journey, but the wrinkles would fall out once they were hung, and it was with a strange sense of pride that he crossed the room to the closet, somehow feeling like he was properly moving in now that it involved hangars.

“JESUS!” He leapt back, suit pieces falling to the floor, breaths coming in gasps and puffs as he clutched a hand to his chest.

The skeleton stared out at him with hollow eyes, hangars shifting in the gust of air from him opening the door to click against the white skull and clavicles.

He clenched his hands into fists, growling at the dangling bones. “SHERLOCK!” he bellowed, turning his head toward the door, but the only reply was a loud thump and raucous laughter drifting up the stairs.

*****

“Why is that skeleton wearing a fedora?”

“Because no self-respecting live person wears one.”

Sherlock smirked down at the bubbling liquid suspended over his Bunsen burner, eyes quirking over to where the sliding, kitchen doors were open a crack, allowing Lestrade and John’s voices to drift through.

“It’s not a real skeleton, is it?”

“No, much to Sherlock’s dismay.”

“Why do you even have a skeleton in your living room?”

“Hello, welcome to 221B!”

Sherlock bit his lip, listening to Lestrade’s soft chuckle.

“Okay, fair enough, but why is it in the living room?”

“Because it was freaking me out in my closet.”
“And the fedora?”

“That was freaking me out in Sherlock’s closet.”

“It was for a case!” Sherlock shouted in defense over the laughter.

“What, infiltrating a hipster club?” John chuckled, socked footsteps padding across the living room floor before he appeared, pushing open the door and leaning against the doorjamb to smirk smugly down at Sherlock.

“Close,” he replied, lifting his eyes from the experiment. “Vegan café.”

“So?” Lestrade echoed, appearing next to John as the blond threw his head back and laughed. “That’s the same thing!”

Sherlock shrugged, glass beaker of blue liquid bobbing in the air, and John only laughed harder.

“Still in the wind, then, is he?” Lestrade asked, ambling around the kitchen table, but Sherlock swatted him away before he could lean against the edge and jostle his test tubes.

“So it would appear,” Sherlock snipped, but Lestrade didn’t seem able to infer his reluctance to continue the conversation.

“What about the mole at the Yard? You get any further since the last time we talked?”

He winced as he heard John shuffle behind him in the doorway. “No, I-I haven’t made any more progress.”

“Still between those five, then?”

“Five?” John echoed, moving around Sherlock’s back. “There were at least a dozen files in that box.”

“Yeah, well, we talked it through a couple weeks ago and—” Lestrade stalled, seeming to finally—wonder of wonders—scrounge up enough sense to shut up. “I- Er-”

Sherlock could feel John’s eyes narrowing down at him, like a knife slowly being pressed into the back of his neck.

“I should go. We got a couple new recruits and the honor of whipping them into shape has fallen into my lap, of course.” He tried for a chuckle, but it was closer to a wheeze. “Right, I’ll just…see myself out,” he muttered, and was gone with a cough and a flurry of footsteps.

The flat was silent for a long minute in his wake, the liquid over Sherlock’s Bunsen burning bubbling in the stillness, a sick, gurgling sound that sounded thunderous in the taut air.

“I believe,” John said eventually, the cold calm of it making Sherlock’s palms sweat, “this is the part where you explain yourself.”

Maybe something had gone wrong with his experiment, for the air suddenly felt far too thin, and he
couldn’t seem to fill his lungs up enough to form full-length sentences. “I- It- We-”

“You went to see Lestrade,” John seemed content to fill in, rounding the edge of the table to stand at Sherlock’s right, “to talk about the mole.”

Sherlock’s muscles complied enough to spasm a semblance of a nod.

“And someone named…Moriarty?” John folded his arms over his chest, the wrinkle between his eyebrows delving to unprecedented depths. “Who is that? How’s he involved? Is it even a he?”

“It’s a he,” Sherlock offered, because that, at least, seemed safe, but John’s glare only flashed hotter.

“Oh, good,” he said with an ugly sneer, voice deceptively chipper. “It’s a he. Now, for my other 19 questions.”

“John-”

“But you probably wouldn’t answer them anyway,” he continued, unhindered by Sherlock’s attempt to placate. “Or you’d lie. Could go either way, really.” He laughed, sharp and shrill and horrible, and Sherlock wondered for a moment if he wasn’t about to get punched. Instead, John took a breath, swallowing as he stared down at the floor and closed his eyes, breaths slowing as his hands shifted to fists on his hips.

When it felt less dangerous, Sherlock rose from his chair, making his way toward the shorter man with slow movements and outstretched hands. “John,” he started, and the boy flinched, but didn’t flee, “I was going to tell you.”

“When?” John snapped, spinning to glare up at him. “When were you going to tell me? When you had it all figured out? When you could flip up your collar and put on a show? I could’ve helped,” he hissed, “Sherlock!”

“You still can!” he urged, but John matched his step forward with a backward one. “I don’t know who it is yet. I still have a few more leads to track down, and I’ll need assistance infiltrating-”

“Infiltrating?” John blurted, incredulously infuriated. “Jesus, Sherlock,” he hissed, turning away to run a hand through his hair, “what have you gotten yourself into? What is so important that you had to go gallivanting off god knows where WITHOUT TELLING YOUR BEST FRIEND!?” John stared at him, chest undulating with angry heaves of air, but Sherlock had stopped, frozen and blinking as the record skipped over and over those last few words.

“Your…what?” he asked, the phonemes nearly lost in a breath.

John tilted his head, confused, his mouth opening for what promised to be a snide comment, but then he hesitated, lips closing back together as he swallowed. “I-” he stammered, mouth twitching around more words that never came. He then set his jaw, stubborn anger creasing his brow once more. “You know,” he muttered, “now tell me what-”

“No, no,” Sherlock interrupted, shaking his head and hands in tandem as he drew closer. “What did you say?”


Sherlock was still shaking his head softly, an ingrained denial. He didn’t have friends—even the regular, non-superlative kind—and now John thought he was his best friend? Him, John’s best
friend? John! No, there must be a mistake, a miscalculation somewhere along the line, because all the data he had collected about John Watson did in no way suggest that Sherlock Holmes was the type of person he would count amongst his best. John was too good for that.

“I-” Sherlock started, but John held up a hand, stalling him.

“Look, can we…not?” he muttered, looking out the top of his bowed eyes. “Can we just leave it, please? I’m sorry I yelled and everything, I just- I wanna figure out this Moriarty stuff, alright?” His eye contact was fleeting, but there was a hint of desperation in it, a pleading, and Sherlock felt, for once, the fight drain out of him.

“Alright,” he obliged, nodding. “Alright, yeah. Yeah, we can…we can do that.”

“Good.”

“Good.” Sherlock cleared his throat, fingers gripping at his hip bones. “Good.”

John smiled at him, small and meek, and then his countenance shifted to official once more. “So, what is going on with Moriarty? Is he one of the potential moles?”

“No,” Sherlock said, happy to have something else to focus on as he fetched the file, but a corner of his mind palace was still playing ‘best friend’ on repeat, analyzing and cataloging every single arch and twist of John’s mouth as it had formed the words. “I think he’s the one who sent the mole.”

“Sent him?” John questioned, taking the folder from Sherlock’s absolutely-not-trembling hands. “What do you mean sent him?” He looked down at the tab of the file in his hand, eyebrows closing in on one another. “And why did you give me the Jones file?”

“Because Michael Parker knew Moriarty,” Sherlock explained, tapping at the cover of the folder for emphasis. “We hadn’t even heard the name until he mentioned it; said Moriarty had gotten in touch with him via text, one of those know-somebody-who-knows-somebody sort of deals. Apparently it got round to Moriarty that Parker wanted to kill his girlfriend, and Moriarty arranged for someone to get the job done.”

John peeled back the folder, his frown deepening as he flipped through the pages, balancing the manila cover open on his palm. “So, Moriarty is like…a hitman?”

Sherlock shook his head, the familiar thrum of a case buzzing through his brain. “No, he doesn’t actually do anything; he doesn’t want to get his hands dirty.”

John was staring at him now, blinking over the top of the crime scene photos. “Okay, you’ve lost me.”

Sherlock huffed, rolling his eyes, beginning to pace and flick his hands through the air as he explained. “Moriarty doesn’t commit the crime, he arranges it. He knows people, he owns people, and, for a price, he can make a call and make your problem go away. Something like-”

“A homicidal event planner.”

“Exactly!” Sherlock exclaimed, impasioned to the point of breathless. “A little ineloquent, but accurate enough.”

“Ineloquent?” John snapped, folding the file closed. “And what exactly would you have described him as?”
“Well,” Sherlock mumbled, shrugging with a jolt, “I was going to go for a rather elaborate analogy of a spider at the center of a web—plucking at strings, making the players dance, etc.—but your event planner thing works too.”

“My event planner—Ya know what, nevermind,” John muttered, rattling his head as he pinched at the the bridge of his nose. “So, if he’s arranging all of these crimes…why? What’s the payout, what does he get out of it?”

Sherlock couldn’t help it, he grinned, causing John to look more than a little concerned, but he really couldn’t be held responsible for his facial muscles when John was clever like that, clever like always. “That’s the question, isn’t it?” he asked, maybe a touch dramatic, and John’s rising eyebrow confirmed it. “He’s not getting paid—there’s no money trail leading from the perpetrators—and he’s not there for the crimes themselves, so there no visceral, sexual gratification coming from it—”

“You could have used any other word, any other word…”

“-which leaves only one, logical conclusion.”

John stared at him, expectant. “What?” he asked, looking rather impatient with Sherlock’s showboating, but too curious to deny him the climactic reveal.

Sherlock grinned. “He’s a psychopath.”

John blinked, lips parted. “Well don’t look so happy about it!” he snarled when the incredulity wore off.

“But don’t you see, John?” he pleaded, rattling his hands urgently in the air between them. “This makes him different, makes him new! People—ordinary, everyday people—are so basic. They’re easy! It’s all money, revenge, or love, always money, revenge, or love, the same old cycle of petty, predictable emotion, but this? This breaks the mold.”

John took a step back from him, eyes wide as they searched between Sherlock’s. “Sherlock…he’s a murderer. You do know that, right?”

“For a single, terrifying moment, Sherlock thought he had ruined it, that he had finally proven every bad thing John had no doubt heard right, that he had shown beyond a shadow of a doubt that he was just as irredeemably insane as their quarry. He opened his mouth, ready to assure that he wasn’t homicidal, no matter how many elaborate ways he had thought up to kill Mycroft, but John seemed to sense something had gone awry in Sherlock’s head and intervened.

“I mean, I know this is an interesting case for you, I get that,” he supplied, “but surely this man doesn’t deserve any praise for—”

“No, of course not,” Sherlock said, rattling his head, hoping it came across irritated as opposed to chorus-of-angels-level relieved. “It’s never admirable to kill people; I was merely acknowledging his
originality, and the fact that it will be very difficult to catch him.”

“How so?” John queried, clearly still uneasy.

“Because,” he huffed with a roll of his eyes, because this really was obvious, even if John was preoccupied with worrying for Sherlock’s mental state, “he has no motive. No motive beyond the thrill of it, at least, which might as well be no motive at all. There’s no victimology, no comfort zone. We can’t assemble a profile or organize a manhunt; he’s just…a figure in the dark, lurking on the fringes of the crime.”

John swallowed, obviously unnerved, and his brow furrowed as he looked back down at the cover of the folder in his hand. “So, Claire Jones…”

Sherlock nodded. “Was Moriarty’s handiwork, yes.”

“God,” John sighed, shaking his head down at the file. “How many others?”

“Impossible to say,” Sherlock answered with a shrug, “but I would guess at least five of the recent crimes Lestrade has passed on to me.”

John continued to shake his head, his face twisting with nausea as he swallowed, dropping his arm to let the file hang at his side. “Why didn’t you tell me?” he whispered finally, turning his eyes up.

“I didn’t want to worry you,” Sherlock offered, but it was a weak excuse, and John huffed a laugh.

“Didn’t want to worry me?” he chuckled, very little mirth in it. “Sherlock, I worry about you all the time.”

Sherlock didn’t know quite what to say to that, with John standing there smiling at him like he was a naughty child everyone loved anyway, so he kept his mouth closed, bowing his head and twisting his fingers as he stared at the floor.

“So what were you saying about infiltrating?”

“Hmm?” Sherlock hummed, looking up to find John raising an eyebrow at him expectantly. “Oh, right, yes. I have an informant, works with a lot of high-profile people on both sides of the law. We’re going to see her.”

“Okay,” John replied, hesitant, “but why would we have to infiltrate something for that?”

“Er, well,” Sherlock stammered, fiddling at the sleeves of his dress shirt, “people can’t exactly just…meet up with her for coffee. We have to blend in, pretend we’re clients.”

“Alright,” John said, shrugging as he folded his arms, “doesn’t sound too hard. Where does she work?”

~~~~~

“I can’t believe you talked me into this.” John hadn’t stopped glowering since they left Baker Street, and his fingers had hardly left his collar, tugging and twisting at the shiny, pale blue fabric that stretched too-tightly across his chest.

“You wanted to come!”

“ANY OTHER WORD, SHERLOCK!”
Sherlock chuckled, shaking his head as he pulled at the front of his purple dress shirt to straighten it. “I told you, we have to blend in. You’re doing enough damage to our credibility wearing that jacket as it is.”

“It’s cold,” John snapped, tugging his rugby jacket tighter around his body, “and you’re just jealous you didn’t bring your coat.”

“It’s too recognizable,” he replied, leaving the truth of the remark unacknowledged, and hoping John didn’t notice the faint shivers that rattled through his frame.

John scoffed, rolling his eyes, and then went back to fussing with his collar. “A brothel. A brothel! Honestly, Sherlock, you’ve done some barmy things, but this may take the cake.”

“It’s a high-end escort service.”

“See, you say that, and all I hear is brothel.”

“It’ll be fine,” Sherlock sighed, rolling his eyes as he looked back at John following. “I’ve been there loads of times; no one will even notice us.”

“Wait, what?” John sputtered, stopping dead, grabbing at Sherlock’s elbow and spinning him around so he did the same. “You’ve been here before?”

“Yes, of course;” he answered, forehead furrowing in irritation. “I told you, it’s the only way to talk to The Woman.”

“Ah, yes, ‘The Woman’,,” John said scathingly. “And that’s all you did, was it? Talk?”

“Obviously,” Sherlock snapped, pulling his arm from John’s grip and tugging at the sleeves of his shirt to smooth them again.

“You never…sampled the wares?”

Sherlock tilted his head.

“Got your end away? Had it off?”

Sherlock blinked.

“Shagged her, Sherlock, did you ever shag her!?” John finally exclaimed, drawing a few, curious glances from passersby who were probably making hilariously incorrect assumptions. John noticed the attention, eyes shifting back and forth as he licked and then bit over his bottom lip, something of a nervous habit, Sherlock had noticed.

“No, I never shagged her,” Sherlock muttered, the idea ridiculous, but it was a pleasant surprise to see John’s muscles unravel in relief. “She’s a prostitute, John, honestly.”

“I thought they were high-end escorts?” John teased, an easy grin on his face.

“Oh, shut up,” he snapped, and John laughed, drawing up to Sherlock’s side as the detective stormed off.

“So, what do you think she’ll know?” John asked, steps hurried next to Sherlock’s mercilessly long strides.

“Maybe nothing,” he shrugged, “but probably something. She’s made a bit of a name for herself on
the circuit as the go-to for high profile clients who want something a bit, er...unconventional.”

“Unconventional?” John asked, because, apparently, inflection was a lost art.

“BDSM,” Sherlock answered simply, and John choked.

“God, that sounds weird coming out of your mouth,” he said, shaking his head at his shoes. “So how does...that get her information?”

“Sometimes her clients tell her things, other times she rifles through their possessions,” he explained, slowing his pace as they drew near the white-columned entrance, “but, the point is, she has secrets that could bring the government and the black market to its knees.”

“And you think some of those secrets might involve Moriarty?” John surmised, and Sherlock nodded.

“It’s worth a try.” He shrugged, and the gesture immediately devolved into a shiver.

“Oh, for chrissake,” John murmured, fingers firm on the crook of Sherlock’s arm to stop him.

“What- We’re almost there!” Sherlock whined with an irritated wave of his arm at the entrance just up the path.

John rolled his eyes, muttering something under his breath—or perhaps just releasing a long-suffering sigh, Sherlock couldn’t quite tell—as he rattled out of his rugby jacket. “Here,” he said, holding the white and blue bundle out by the collar, “just take it.”

Sherlock looked between the jacket and John, confused and frustrated. “Why?” he snapped. “The entrance is right there, and I won’t have any need for it once we’re inside.”

“It could be cold inside,” John said, almost mechanically cool.

“In a brothel!” Sherlock barked a laugh. “I rather think freezing the patrons would be detrimental to business.”

“Take the jacket, Sherlock.”

“Why?”

“Because I told you to!”

Sherlock blinked, startled, his mouth popping open.

John was nearly glaring at him, jaw set and eyes burning, and, though he couldn’t quite put his finger on it, he knew there was something more to this than just concern for Sherlock’s temperature. It was in the tension of the tan jawline, the tight creases around blue eyes; a sort of anger, but not in the malevolent way. It was almost...jealous, possessive even, and the tentative comprehension sent a numbness trickling down from Sherlock’s brain, like the way schoolchildren used to pretend to be cracking an egg on one another’s skulls.

“Honestly, Sherlock, can you not, for once, just do what you’re told?” John snarled, but there was an edge of sadness to it Sherlock couldn’t quite pin down. “You’re cold, you’re wearing that stupid shirt, so just take the damn jacket!” He rattled it in the air between them, holding Sherlock’s still-shocked gaze for a moment before huffing a sigh, dropping his eyes as his arm lowered slightly. “Please,” he added, perhaps a little more forceful than a polite request ought to be, but his eyes held
at least a hint of contrition.

Sherlock only nodded at first, stretching out his hand while he waited for his mouth to work. “Okay,” he finally murmured, “I’ll take the jacket.”

It was a mark of how good a liar he was that the statement sounded resigned as opposed to eager, that it gave no hint to the fact that he memorized the feel of the leather as he tried to press fingerprints into John’s sleeves, traced a hand over the embroidered ‘Watson’ as he twisted the jacket in his hands, lingered on shifting the too-short sleeves up his arms and over his shoulders, turned his head just slightly to inhale the tea and grass and…was that curry? on the collar. He sounded bitter and grumpy and defeated, and that was much better than giving any hint to the atom bomb currently mushrooming where his lungs used to be.

But, just to make sure there were no hints: “I will have to take it off as soon as we get inside, you know.”

John’s mouth just sat slack, eyes focused somewhere around the embroidery over Sherlock’s heart. “What?” he wheezed, and then lifted a fist to cover a quick cough. “No, you—you can’t. I’m not having my rugby jacket hung up in a closet that would probably light up like Guy Fawkes Day under a blacklight.”

“But I won’t need it,” Sherlock groused, more of a token protest than anything else at this point.

“But I won’t need it,” Sherlock groused, more of a token protest than anything else at this point.

“Tough,” John interjected, tilting his head with a cheeky grin, and Sherlock’s mouth dropped open in affront. “This way, you said?” John pointed past him, avoiding meeting Sherlock’s incredulous stare as he began walking again, shirt catching in the light from the lampposts—it truly was a horrible material, if Sherlock were being honest—as he moved.

“Wait!” he called when he could move again, chasing after the blond. “You can’t go first; I have to go first.”

“Why?”

“Because,” Sherlock hissed, pulling John back as the boy began to climb the steps, “they don’t know you. They don’t exactly open the doors for anyone.”

John lifted his eyebrows dropping his gaze to the ground as he held his palms up at his shoulders. “Fine, fine, by all means, you ring the brothel doorbell.” He swung a hand out at the black door with a Cheshire grin, and Sherlock glared as he swept past, effect dampened slightly without his coat.

He pressed the button, sounding the chime inside, and then waited, trying to look as dignified as possible for the security camera while the sleeves of John’s jacket rode up his wrists. He could feel John shifting beside him defensively, the atmosphere growing tense, and the seconds seemed to stretch as muffled heels clicked toward them.

A woman opened the door—attractive in an objective sort of way, he supposed—and looked over them with curious, black-rimmed eyes. “Yes?” she purred through pink lips, obnoxious compared to the demure appearance of her white blouse and black skirt. “Can I help you boys?”

“Down, girl,” a familiar voice lilting in from behind the door, and the redheaded woman in the blouse turned and backed away. “I’ve got this one.”

Irene Adler appeared in the opening, wearing a black lace corset and garter belt that strapped to thigh-high stockings, leading down to high, black heels. Her dark hair was pinned up in soft curls, exposing the sharp structure of her face and piercing eyes, and making her skin look all the paler
against the deep red of her lipstick, which pulled back over white teeth as she smiled. “Sherlock Holmes,” she crooned, blue eyes dancing as she leaned against the doorframe, scanning him. “New wardrobe?” Her eyebrows flicked teasingly, but the taunt faltered when she caught sight of John hovering at his shoulder. “Oh, and this must be your new pet,” she chirped with a saccharine smile. “The famous John Watson. A pleasure, truly,” she added with a nod, and Sherlock would swear he heard John’s jaw click, “although, I had thought you’d be taller.”

“Aren’t you cold?” John snapped, looking down Irene’s body for emphasis, but not lingering, which somewhat loosened the knot in Sherlock’s stomach.

Irene laughed, deceptively light. “My, you are something, aren’t you? Guess it’s true what they say about small packages. Although…” Her eyes trailed down John’s torso, and Sherlock shifted just slightly to the left to block her gaze. She turned to him, eyes narrow and searching, and then seemed to find it, blue stare widening as her lips twisted into a dazed smile. “Ah,” she breathed, smile shifting to a smirk, and she flashed a wink as Sherlock glared at her. “Well, I suppose you want to come in,” she said, suddenly nonchalant, and pulled the door back to allow them admittance.

It looked like just an ordinary house, nothing distinguishing it from any of the other row houses on the block, but, to those who knew, it was known as ‘The House’, the matching piece to Irene’s ‘The Woman’. The interior was all dark wood and rich rugs, nothing obviously unseemly, but the rooms were almost too neat, too fragrant, the kind of clean that always covers up the ugliest of dirt.

Sherlock hated it, all the pathetic people with their pathetic stories written on their pathetic faces, but Irene always refused to talk to him unless he came there. He suspected it was her way of getting back at him for bothering her, and she was only 22, after all; a certain level of immaturity was to be expected.

“This way,” she beckoned, nodding as she began to climb the steps, and Sherlock rolled his eyes at the exaggerated swagger of her hips.

He turned back, expecting to find John looking similarly offended, but the man had his cheek tucked tightly between his teeth, biting at the inside while his furious gaze held to the floor. Sherlock tilted his head, opening his mouth to ask why John looked ready to strangle someone, but Irene’s voice broke his thoughts.

“We won’t be disturbed in here,” she said, pushing open a door and waving them in ahead of her.

Sherlock flashed one last look back at John—who was studiously not looking at anything—before heading inside, careful not to let his trousers brush against any of the furniture.

“So,” Irene chirped as she latched the door, “what can I do for you, Sherlock? The usual?”

“Preferably not,” Sherlock snapped, pulling at the collar of John’s jacket, “as your usual tends to involve wasting a lot of my time before getting to the point.”

“I would hardly call it wasting your time,” she emphasized, slickening the words with innuendo as they rolled over her blood-painted lips, “but, I suppose, if it makes you feel better-”

Sherlock opened his mouth to interrupt, but John’s draw was quicker.

“We’re here about a man named Moriarty,” he said, his consonants daggers as he shifted forward, his posture easy but coiled where he stood at Sherlock’s shoulder. “Rumor has it, you might know something about him.”

Irene scoffed through her nose as she smirked. “Oh, I know lots of things. About lots of people. Like
you, for instance.”

Sherlock back stiffened as he watched Irene twist a finger in John’s direction, tilting her head tauntingly, but John didn’t respond other than to dig his fingers more firmly into his skin where his arms were crossed.

“John Watson, transferred to Langley for your second year—impressive, that—roommate to one Sherlock Holmes,” she rattled off, pausing to flash Sherlock a beaming smile that curdled his insides, “ambitions to become a doctor—probably A&E, but you’re not certain just yet—and you prefer sour cream and onion crisps, but will take smoky bacon in a pinch.” She folded her arms smugly, red nails glinting in the dim light from the lamps scattered around the room.

John, shockingly, didn’t look the slightest bit thrown, only flicking his eyebrows and bobbing his head in a gesture of impressed amusement. “Not bad,” he replied. “I would put roast chicken between sour cream and smoky bacon, but you were close enough.”

Irene narrowed her eyes at him, but John continued to smile, strategically oblivious.

“How’d you know all that, though? Out of curiosity.” He waved a hand through the air, an idle gesture, as if the answer, and even Irene herself, hardly mattered one way or the other, and Sherlock reveled in the prompted twitch of Irene’s eye.

“I know someone at the Yard,” she replied, stiff expression swiftly turning back into a smirk. “Or, rather, I know what he likes.” She waggled her eyebrows in obvious implication, and John huffed a laugh, shaking his head as he looked away a moment. Irene didn’t seem to like that. “I know what everyone likes, you know.” she continued, heels clicking against the floor as she began to glide over the room. “I can see it on them. The same way Sherlock can tell what you had for breakfast, I can tell if someone likes being tied or doing the tying.”

“Good for you,” John deadpanned, and Sherlock didn’t know who was more startled by the rebuke, himself or Irene. Irene probably wasn’t also having strange, heated, leaping sensations skittering over her chest, but he wasn’t going to rule anything out. “Now, do you know what Moriarty likes?” John crooned, voice rising through the sentence, like asking a question of a child.

Irene’s teeth clicked together as she snapped her jaw, but she quickly pushed the anger from her face, melting into an easy chuckle that spelled nothing but trouble. “You know, you’re my favorite type, John,” she began, and Sherlock felt the air charge with the incoming threat. “All big and strong, your typical alpha male. And then I get to tie you up and tear you apart at the seams, rip down all your tough-talking walls until there’s nothing left but a sniveling pile of muscle begging for more.”

Sherlock shifted uncomfortably, swallowing against his nausea, physically repulsed by the thought of John doing that, being that with anyone.

John, on the other hand, only raised an eyebrow, and since when did he become the collected one!?

Irene tilted her head, expression turning thoughtful. “No,” she murmured, shaking her head dimly as her eyes scanned John’s marble face. “No, you wouldn’t let me do that, would you?” Something changed then, something Sherlock couldn’t have expected. Irene turned serious, almost sad, and her posture shifted back as she recanted her offensive. “You don’t ever want to lose control again. You don’t ever want to be helpless.”

John inhaled sharply, jaw quivering, and Sherlock watched as something broke in his eyes, a wealth of emotions flashing through that he’d never seen before, never analyzed before, but the one that shone out more than anything as John turned to him was pain, and Sherlock’s throat thickened at the
sight. A second later, it was gone, and the stone John Watson who had threatened Victor Trevor to trembling was in its place. “I’ll wait outside,” he murmured, looking briefly back at Irene over his shoulder—the glare more threatening than angry—before closing the door behind him.

Sherlock was frozen, staring after him as he listened to his own breathing, out of time with the echo of his heart in his ears.

“Sherlock-” Irene began, small and penitent, and somehow that shocked him out of it.

“What did you mean?” he snarled, turning back to her, and she grew even whiter.

“I-I don’t-,” she stammered, rattling her head.

“What did you mean?” he repeated, inches from her wide eyes. “All that about him being helpless, being out of control, what did you mean?”

Irene watched him, mouth quivering, and then ducked her head and swallowed. “I can’t tell you, Sherlock,” she said, shaking her head in remorse. “It wouldn’t be right. I wouldn’t have pressed it myself if I’d known.”

“Known what?”

“I can’t tell you!” she exclaimed, and the flare in her gaze showed her resolve was absolute. “If you want to know so badly, you’ll have to ask him.”

Sherlock glared at her, hoping for a crack, but The Woman hadn’t earned the name by being weak, and, after an eye-burningly long time, he sighed, turning his face away. “Do you know anything about Moriarty?” he asked.

Irene shrugged. “Not really. Not about him directly, at least. I know a bit about one of his men, though; I think he’s Moriarty’s second-in-command.”

Sherlock’s mouth fluttered open, surprised. He hadn’t expected to get even that much out of her; he usually had to come back several times before she’d get around to anything useful. “What about him?”

“A name,” she said with a small smile. “It might not be his real one, mind you, but I know he’s been working undercover at the Yard. He’s that source I was talking about earlier.”

“The mole,” Sherlock breathed, fingers sliding under his chin. “How do you know it’s him?”

“He talks a lot,” she muttered, rolling her eyes. “Never shuts up, actually. Always going on about how he’s right under their noses and they don’t suspect a thing; guy’s a classic narcissist. Got a temper on him too; I’ve had to toss him out of here a time or two for going overboard with some of the girls.”

“What name did he give you?” Sherlock asked, mind palace cataloging every word.

“Sebastian Moran,” she said slowly, watching him. “Mean anything to you?”

“Not yet,” he answered, teeth grinding into his bottom lip. “Do you know what name he’s using at the Yard?”

Irene shook her head. “No, he never let that slip. All I can tell you is he’s blond, well-built. Pretty average looking guy, really,” she finished with a shrug.
“That’s more than enough,” he replied, brain already spiraling through the five possibilities left to eliminate who he could. “Thank you,” he said, mechanically, turning to the door. He paused, however, hand outstretched to the handle. “Why are you telling me all this?” he asked, because he had the information now, he might as well satisfy his curiosity.

Irene laughed, a pitiful, dying sort of sound. “Because I like you, Sherlock Holmes,” she said, soft with sincerity, and Sherlock immediately regretted asking. “I know it might not seem like it—hazard of the profession—“ she chuckled, waving a hand down over her body, “but I liked to think, maybe…you’d see.”

Sherlock didn’t know what to do, couldn’t have done anything even if he had known what to do; all he could manage was blinking and staring at the suddenly so young woman in front of him as a million ignored clues added up in his head. “I-I didn’t know.”

“But it wouldn’t have mattered,” she stated with a painful smile, and Sherlock stayed silent, unwilling to lie for once—twice now, he supposed, considering John. “Oh well,” she sighed, “we can’t all be Julia Roberts, right?” She chuckled, and Sherlock winced slightly at the forced sound.

“Irene, I-”

“Don’t,” she interjected, raising a palm and looking a little more normal. “You’re not sorry, and I don’t need your pity.”

Sherlock watched her a moment, lips still working around potential lies, but Irene’s eyes were firm again, and he finally just closed his mouth.

“I suppose I should’ve known,” she said, heavy with dramatics, and she looked forlorn for all of half a second before lifting her eyebrows and smirking. “The cute ones are always gay.”

“What!?” Sherlock spluttered, leaning back to physically recoil from the conversation. “I’m not- What!?”

“Calm down,” Irene soothed batting her palms toward him. “I didn’t mean to start an identity crisis. I just assumed you and John-”

“Me and John!” His throat choked and gasped around so many exclamations of ridiculousness, it never actually managed to pick one. “That’s- We- I- John’s straight!”

“Just John?”

Sherlock stalled, caught in the trap he’d practically laid himself. “I-“ he started, but Irene had that knowing smirk on her face, and he quickly shifted back to glaring. “It’s not like that,” he snapped. “You don’t know anything about-”

“Particle physics, I know nothing about, but this?” She pointed a finger toward the stitched name on the front of John’s jacket. “Sweetheart,” she purred, crossing her arms and cocking her head, “this is my area of expertise.” She said nothing more, just looking at him with a smug smirk slowly growing on her face, and, eventually, Sherlock couldn’t take it. “See ya, Sherls!” she called after him as he flung open the door and hurried down the steps. “Don’t keep me waiting!”

Everything was blurring, and he leaned against a wall at the bottom of the stairs, hidden from view from most of the room by a large grandfather clock. His skull thunked against the plaster, and he closed his eyes, breathing slow and deep. He could feel the embroidered surname digging into his back, and it almost seemed to burn, like a brand, a brand he hadn’t realized had gone so deep, become so obvious. How many other people could see what Sherlock was barely coming to terms
with himself? How long before someone told John, before John got spooked and left, because bloody crime scenes hadn’t broken him, but Sherlock was fairly certain finding out your roommate wanted to lick your neck would do the trick.

“Sherlock?”

The floorboards squeaked, because, obviously, he would never make such a sound. “John,” he panted, startled heart rate returning to normal, “what are you doing?”

“I thought I heard you come down the stairs,” the boy replied, forehead creasing as those physician’s eyes looked over him. “Are you alright? You look a bit pale.” He lifted a hand toward Sherlock’s forehead, and Sherlock grabbed it by the wrist, pushing it away.

“I’m fine, just…haven’t eaten in a while,” Sherlock said, and it was technically true. Plus, John would be concerned and focused on feeding him instead of further interrogation.

Predictably, John sighed, exasperatedly rolling his eyes. “Of course you haven’t,” he muttered, shaking his head. “Well, come on, then. There’s a Nando’s up the road; I saw it on the way in.” John waited for him to push off from the wall, arm twitching, ready to catch him if he swooned like some bloody Victorian lady.

“I’m not sure it’s still open,” Sherlock said, and John pushed him lightly on the back to quicken his pace.

“Nope, not gonna work. You’re going to eat Peri-Peri and chips until those kcals add up to a thousand.”

“A thousand!?”

“Yes, John clipped, closing the door behind them and guiding Sherlock off the steps by the shoulders, “and it will go lot smoother if you stop whining.”

So Sherlock settled for pouting, but whether it because he was going to be force-fed chicken, or because John had stopped pushing him along, he wasn’t sure.

They sat opposite one another in the booth, one of those tiny, two-seater ones that got nailed along a wall they didn’t know what else to do with.

“We’re not moving seats, Sherlock,” John said, not even bothering to look up over his menu, but the top half of his face looked unmoved by Sherlock’s concerns.

“But we’re not against a wall!” Sherlock argued, arms flat over his unopened menu as he leaned across the table. “Someone could sneak up on us!”

“Who are you, Don Corleone?” John snorted, dipping his menu to raise an eyebrow at Sherlock, a crooked smile on his face. “No one is going to whack us in a Nando’s, Sherlock. Now”—he flipped the menu out between them with a snap—“medium or mango lime?”

Sherlock scowled.

“Yeah, I was thinking medium too,” John mused, nodding down at the menu as he turned it back to himself. “What about sides? Chips are a given, of course, but what about the other one? I was thinking corn or peas.”

Sherlock shifted to a glower.
John smiled, pressing the menu to the table as he folded his arms to mimic Sherlock’s posture. “I do so love our little chats.” He just stared across the table, smiling, and Sherlock quickly cracked.

“Peas,” he muttered, leaning back to bounce against the booth. “You complain about corn being in your teeth for days.”

John only chuckled, folding the menu up. “Alright, peas it is.”

The waiter appeared with the food shortly thereafter, giving them a parting wink that made Sherlock exceptionally uncomfortable, but he did not blush, no matter what trick of the light John thought he saw.

They ate silently, John pushing more and more bits of their shared meal to Sherlock’s side of the dish when he thought Sherlock wasn’t looking. Nearly through the plate of chips, Sherlock was slowly biting through the fried skin when John broke the quiet.

“It was my dad,” he said, fingers idly twirling his straw through his water, ice crashing against the sides with dull clicks. He looked up, meeting Sherlock’s puzzled expression with a wounded smile. “You’re curious,” he shrugged.

“I wouldn’t have asked,” Sherlock answered quietly, and John nodded down at the table.

“I know, I just- I don’t mind talking about it. Not really. Not with you.”

Sherlock considered he might be choking on a chip, but it was just his throat constricting. He didn’t say anything, though, didn’t even attempt to, and, after a minute, John continued.

“He drank too, my dad,” he began, watching the ice spin in circles around his plastic cup. “Most of the time, it wasn’t so bad. We went on family trips and stuff; we were happy.” He sighed, half a laugh as he shook his head down at his lap. “I don’t know why that’s important to say,” he whispered. “I guess it’s just- It’s not what people think, you know? He didn’t come home from the bar every night and come into my room with a belt. He wasn’t a monster.”

“I’m sure he wasn’t,” Sherlock said, because John seemed to need the reassurance, even though Sherlock had no idea who he was really trying to convince.

John looked at him, a trace of desperate fear in his eyes, and then he took a breath, watching the ice now spinning on its own. “But it was…bad. Sometimes.” He swallowed, focusing on the salt shaker in the holder to his right. “And it’s typical, I guess, because I thought I could handle it,” he said, not able to meet Sherlock’s eyes even as his gaze shifted around. “I thought, so long as it was me, it’d be alright. And Mom didn’t have a degree or anything, and I was too young to get a job, so…well…” He shrugged, a quick spasm of his shoulders that finished the sentence. “And then, one day, it was really bad. Really bad. I-I’d not done the washing up after lunch and he just…lost it,” John breathed, shaking his head and biting hard at his bottom lip as his eyebrows creased.

He took a breath, and his face reset. “We ended up at the A&E, and my mum…my mum lied.” He puffed out a mirthless laugh, gaze drawn to the ceiling. “Said I’d fallen down the stairs or something, I don’t rightly remember,” he muttered, rattling his head, “but, the point is, I knew then that I hadn’t been protecting anyone. I had thought I was being strong, that I was doing something for her…but it wasn’t like that at all.” He dropped his head, plucking at one of the remaining chips with faintly trembling fingers. “She was supposed to be protecting me,” he added, fierce and determined and exactly John Watson, “not the other way around. And I knew from then on that it was just me. I couldn’t count on anyone, I had to look out for me, I had to look out for Harry.” He leaned back in the booth with a sigh. “So, I reported him. Child services came, my mother was screaming, we got a
restraining order, the whole nine. She was allowed to keep us, obviously, my mum. She wasn’t bad back then, only went off the rails after Dad left—and he did leave, just up and disappeared without a word not a week after that.” He looked to his lap for a moment, steeling himself, it seemed. “I don’t think she ever forgave me,” he whispered.

Sherlock could count on a single hand the things that had struck him speechless. One of them was his mother’s death, the other was Redbeard’s, and the rest were taken up by John Watson. John Watson and his unfailing loyalty and faith and courage, and Sherlock would almost call it stupid except that it was so damn noble. And the worst part was, John had absolutely no idea.

“I’m sorry,” Sherlock said, because it felt like the right thing to say, the only thing to say.

John chuckled, breathy and feigned. “Why? It’s not your fault.”

“I’m still sorry,” he answered, never letting his eyes leave John’s, because, for some, instinctive reason, that felt important.

John stared right back, and then, finally, a soft smile bloomed on his face. He stretched an arm across the table, touching his fingertips to the back of Sherlock’s hand. “Thank you, Sherlock,” he said, and Sherlock had to move on to another hand to count, because here, this moment, with John’s fingertips burning hot on his skin and the yellow light of the restaurant filtering through John’s hair and catching in his eyes, Sherlock was, once again, struck mute. John tapped his fingers against Sherlock’s skin, a signal of completion. “So,” he clipped, clearing his throat, “dessert here, or hit the crêperie on the way back?”

The shift threw Sherlock a little, and he fumbled as his brain raced to catch up. “Um, er, crêperie,” he mumbled, swallowing to buy himself an extra moment to become coherent. “If you’re going to insist on dessert.”

“Oh, I am,” John chirped, beaming. “I don’t think you’re quite at a thousand yet.”

“What?” Sherlock blurted. “But I ate half of everything!”

“Please,” John scoffed, sliding out of the booth, “most of those chips you just pushed around the plate.”

Sherlock’s mouth dropped. He thought he was being so clever, but, then again, John did have a habit of pulling that particular rug out from under him.

Somewhere in the midst of a quick argument over who paid—“You paid at the Thai place!” “Yes, but then you got grumpy at the noodle to chicken ratio and insisted on ordering again from a different Thai place.” “I did not get grumpy!” “I don’t know what else you call a grown man muttering about the surface area of rice noodles.”—and another argument about what crêpe to get—“We got Nutella last time.” “So? It’s Nutella; you can never have enough Nutella.” “At least get bananas in it or something.” “And sully the chocolatey-hazelnut goodness!? I don’t even know who you are anymore!”—and yet another argument over what show to watch—“Oh my god, I think I’m dying!” “You’re not dying, Sherlock.” “This drivel is liquefying my brain!” “This is an extremely popular show, Sherlock.” “It’s a bunch of old people bickering and young people having sex.” “This season on ‘Downton Abbey’!”—Sherlock realized he didn’t ever want to do anything but argue over nothing with John Watson, and that’s when he knew he was well and truly lost.
This is another massive chapter, 13k! This fic is so long, guys, I'm sorry. Anyway, the reason I'm kidnapping the notes again is to say that I am going to the London Film and Comic Con coming up in July (11th - 13th)!! I'm super excited about it, so if any of you are dropping in to that as well, give me a shout!

Also, I get a lot of requests to read fics/beta fics/bounce ideas off of/or just to talk, and I love getting those messages, don't get me wrong, but it is cluttering up my personal email a bit, so I made one especially for fic things! So, from here on out, if you have something you want me to beta/check out, or just wanna chat, email me at prettysherlocksoldier@gmail.com. If you already have my personal email, go ahead and keep using that, this is just going forward for whoever else wants to contact me in the future.

“Vatican cameos,” Sherlock repeated, frustrated, as usual, with the need to reiterate.

“Vatican cameos?” John echoed, and Sherlock rolled his eyes but nodded. John looked at him, waiting for the punchline. “Why Vatican cameos?” he asked when none was forthcoming.

Sherlock’s posture stiffened beneath the bulky jacket. “Well, it’s not likely to come up in everyday conversation, is it?”

“What if I’m talking to someone about the pope and also antique brooches?”

“That, I believe, is exactly the type of conversation the code word was intended for.”

“Why aren’t you dressed!!?”

“I’m dressed.”

“Not for the party.”

“Oh, you were serious about that?”

John sighed, trying to cut off a headache by gripping at the crease between his brows. “You bloody well know I was serious, Sherlock, now where’s your costume?”

“You’re not wearing one,” Sherlock remarked, flicking a glance up over his book. He looked like he was in a costume already, with his forest green dress shirt tucked into dark grey trousers. He made an extremely convincing ‘smartest man alive playing stupid like a prick’.

“No, but I’m about to be,” John said, syllables slow and measured with restraint. “I just came down to check on you first, because, for some uncanny reason, it occurred to me that you might not be getting ready.”

“I can’t go, I’m sick,” Sherlock muttered, burrowing back into the book, leaving John to glare at a
faded midnight-blue cover.

“Oh really?” John slurred, folding his arms. “And what, pray tell, do you have?”

“Avian flu.”

“That is so five years ago, Sherlock.”

“Malaria.”

“It’s October.”

“Mad cow disease.”

“Humans don’t get mad cow disease.”

“I did.”

“Well aren’t you just a special little snowflake.”

Sherlock snapped the book to his lap to glower at him, and John grinned with vindictive triumph.

“Now, go get dressed. Properly,” he added, pointing a stern finger at the detective, his eyes narrowing right along with Sherlock’s.

Eventually, however, Sherlock relented, huffing as he clapped the book shut and placed it on the side table, rising from the leather chair.

John barely contained the condescending praise on the tip of his tongue, knowing that wouldn’t earn him anything but more time spent arguing. He climbed the stairs back up to his room—the room he was temporarily staying in at Sherlock’s, rather, but he kept forgetting that—and closed the door behind him, double-checking the lock before moving quietly to the closet. He doubted Sherlock could hear by his footsteps what his costume was, but he wasn’t taking any chances, so he stealthily opened the door, pushing through the hangars until he found the right one.

The clothes were easy. The wig? Not so much, and he struggled for several minutes before an exasperated whine of his name began drifting up the stairs.

“Alright, keep your pants on!” he snapped, giving the gnarled thing a final tug, satisfied it wasn’t going anywhere.

A knot began to grow in his stomach as he opened the door, spreading through his lungs and up his throat, but there was nothing for it now, and, besides, he thought his costume was quite clever. On the final step before the twist in the landing, he stopped, closing his eyes and exhaling a breath through the tight circle of his mouth. With a fortifying nod, he rounded the corner, bracing his hands on the railing to leap the last length of steps, startling Sherlock as he landed heavy on the rug in front of him.

“Ta-da!” he exclaimed, arms flailing out to his sides, swirling the long grey-flecked coat out around him. A curl of the brown wig fell over his forehead, and he narrowed his eyes at it, blowing a heavy puff of air up over his face to push it aside. “Whadya think?”

Sherlock stared at him, body shock still while his eyes went everywhere, an unfathomable expression on his face.

“Don’t you get it?” John asked, because this silence definitely needed to be filled. “I’m you!” He
drew his face into a haughty scowl, flicking up the collar of the old coat Mrs. Hudson had let him borrow, the one she had held onto after Sherlock had outgrown it. “The game is on!” he barked in the poshest accent he could manage, and then immediately broke character, letting his hands slide off the collar as he smiled expectantly at Sherlock, who looked decidedly less amused.

“You’re…me?” he murmured, dipping his head, forehead probably permanently creasing.

John nodded, hands ducking into his pockets. “Yeah. Mrs. Hudson had the coat, and the wig was really cheap, and I thought it might be fun to call everyone an idiot for the evening.” He grinned, anticipating a laugh, but Sherlock turned stony, eyes a cool slate as he snapped his mouth closed.

His jaw twitched, just slightly, and then he pushed past John, rushing up the stairs like John had just declared a race.

“What the- Sherlock! Sherlock, what are you doing!?” He clamored up after him, reaching the landing just seconds after his bedroom door thwacked open against the wall.

“You want to be me?” Sherlock snarled as John entered the room, wrestling a jacket off the back of John’s chair and furiously tugging it up his arms. “Fine! Then I’ll just be you.” He tugged at the front of John’s rugby jacket, settling it on his shoulders. “Oh, look at that kitten, isn’t it cute?” Sherlock began, voice gratingly high as he folded his hands under his chin. “I just love kittens and puppies and children and skipping through fields of flowers in ignorant bliss!” He stopped, shifting back to perhaps the fiercest glare John had ever seen on him.

John could only blink for a long moment, scrambling to piece together what he’d missed. “Okay, first of all,” he murmured, lifting a finger in the air, “I don’t sound like that. Second,” he snapped when Sherlock scoffed, “I’m allergic to cats, and everyone likes puppies, you can hardly fault me for that.”

“Children, though?” Sherlock muttered acerbically.

John shrugged. “They’re alright, once you get used to their voices being so high. And loud.”

Sherlock snorted skeptically, folding his arms and turning his head to the side, John’s sleeves riding even further up his arms.

“But that’s not the point,” John continued, stepping closer, and Sherlock turned a wary corner of his eye to him. “Why are you so upset about this?”

“I’m not upset,” Sherlock spat, as if the very word was beneath his lips to form.

“Sherlock, you just stormed upstairs and put on a pantomime,” John replied, waving a hand between Sherlock’s discarded coat on his bed and the faux-Watson in front of him. “That’s not exactly normal behavior, even by your standards.”

“Ah, yes, by my standards,” Sherlock snarled, “because those are so abnormal, aren’t they? Because I’m just a freak who flaps around in a trench coat and insults people for fun!”

John staggered back, pushed by the shockwave let loose with Sherlock’s words. “Sherlock, I-I would never- You know I don’t think that.”

“Then why are you mocking me!?” Sherlock bellowed, voice cracking a little as he rounded on John with wide, frantic eyes.

John had seen lots of things, too many things, a veritable parade of nightmare fodder to last him
longer than his lifetime, but nothing, *nothing* could have prepared him for what Sherlock Holmes looked like hurt.

His grey eyes were lost, searching and sad, and his lips trembled faintly with every heavy breath that passed between them. He looked how John would imagine a wounded animal to be, lashing out in fear and confusion because they didn’t know where the hurt was coming from, or how to make it stop.

“I’m not mocking you, Sherlock,” John said softly, moving with slow, unthreatening steps. “That’s not what I meant to do at all.”

Sherlock turned away from him, wrapping his arms around himself and looking down at the floor, and John was at a loss.

He bit at his lip, searching over the folds of fabric on his duvet as if the wrinkles would spell out the answers. “Sherlock,” he began, resigned to doing this the long way round, “you remember when we were first talking about the fancy dress party? Those ideas I listed?”

“You mean the hot dog vendor?” Sherlock muttered, lifting an eyebrow.

“No,” John said, rolling his head with exasperation as he moved closer. “The other ones. Astronaut? Fireman?”

Sherlock watched him speculatively for a moment, and then nodded.

“Well, that’s the sort of thing people dress up as for Halloween,” he explained, genuinely uncertain if Sherlock would know, considering John had seen more American high school movies than his counterpart—which was to say he had seen any at all. “Policemen, doctors, loads of superheroes.”

“I do understand the concept of Halloween, John,” Sherlock snapped, but it was almost comforting, a sign he was returning to normal. “What I don’t understand is how it pertains to your…costume,” he finished scathingly, gaze disparaging as it spanned John’s height.

John tilted his head, smiling with a soft, fond sigh. “It pertains, Sherlock,” he said, closing the last of the distance between them that he could without it getting awkward, “because that’s what you are.” He smiled at Sherlock’s bemused frown, shrugging through some of the tension in his body before he concluded. “You’re a superhero.”

Sherlock stared at him, blinking, and then barked a delayed scoff. “Don’t be ridiculous,” he muttered, fighting a losing battle with the sleeves as he attempted to tug them down. “I told you. Heroes don’t exist, and I wouldn’t be one even if they did.”

“Well, you’re a superhero to me, then,” John countered, quickly sputtering through it before he asphyxiated. “I mean, you’ve nearly got the cape,”—he swept to the side, letting the coat fan out around him—“now all that’s left is a mask.” He grinned, hoping Sherlock would just let this go, let him change the subject and make a joke and run far away from deeply revealing conversations.

For a moment, it was touch and go, Sherlock’s brow folding and unfolding in intervals with his twitching mouth, but, finally, he looked simply puzzled. “Why would I need a mask?”

“Why would strips of material around my eyes have any effect on me being recognizable?”

John opened his mouth to argue that it obviously would, and then realized, as often happened—but
not quite as often as the detective thought—that Sherlock had a point. “I have no idea, to be honest.” He shrugged, shaking his head as he frowned down at Sherlock’s shoes, reevaluating every cartoon he had ever watched. “Really doesn’t make sense, does it?”

Sherlock hummed, shaking his head. He seemed to be waiting for John to say something, but John was still rattled from the butchering of his childhood—would Batman’s mask work? It was bigger, after all—so he cleared his throat and spoke. “Well, I suppose I can’t wear my coat now,” Sherlock murmured, waving a hand toward the discarded article on the bed.

“Yeah, this would be really embarrassing if we matched,” John said sarcastically, smiling as Sherlock chuckled. “Although, I don’t think anyone would be surprised if you went as yourself for Halloween.”

“Naturally,” Sherlock gloated with a smug tilt of his head. “After all, I have it on fairly good authority that I’m a superhero.”

John’s toes were probably blushing. “Git,” he muttered, and Sherlock laughed.

“Actually,” he said, dropping his head as he watched his fingers idly picking at John’s buttons, “I may just wear this. If you don’t mind.”

“Er, no,” John replied, frowning. “But—Well, it’s not really a costume.”

“Sure it is,” Sherlock argued, voice lifting along with his shrugging shoulder. “Now I’m a superhero too.”

Sherlock smiled at him, and John’s face went numb, so he couldn’t tell if any of his shock was showing on it. “Um,” he murmured after a moment, rubbing his lips together until he could feel them again, “I think most people would probably consider me the sidekick.”

The brunette ducked his head, lifting his palms into the air. “You said it, not me,” he clipped, and then quickly bustled past John toward the door.

After a moment of outraged gaping, John followed. “I am not your sidekick!” he shouted at the back bearing his surname that bobbed down the stairs in front of him.

“I didn’t say you were,” Sherlock chirped, catching John’s eye as he rounded the landing.

John growled, barreling after him. “I’m not!”

“I know!” Sherlock bleated, half laughing as he plucked his scarf off the hook and began wrapping it around his neck.

John glared at him, jaw grinding. “Alright, you know what,” he snipped, wrenching the scarf from Sherlock’s hands, “tonight you’re the sidekick.” He twisted the blue fabric around his neck, flipping it sealed with a flourish and curt nod before starting past Sherlock down the stairs.

“What are you talking a—”

“I’m you, remember?” John said, turning his head so the words carried over his shoulder. “So, tonight, I’m in charge.”

“You’re always in charge,” Sherlock muttered under his breath, and John twisted at the bottom of the steps to glare at him. “Fine,” he sighed, rolling his eyes as he leapt the last few stairs, landing with a bob of soft knees, “then what am I supposed to do?”
“Whatever I normally do.”

“Eat crisps and blog?”

“Ha ha,” John drawled, sneering, and Sherlock grinned. “No, just- I don’t know, whatever comes to mind. Whatever you think I would do.”

Sherlock turned thoughtful for a moment, mouth slowly pulling down. “Alright,” he eventually agreed, nodding. “We should get go-” He reached past John for the doorknob, but John batted his arm away.

He lifted a finger, simultaneously scolding and signaling to wait, and then made a deliberate turn to the door, tugging it open in a grand swoop before looking back to Sherlock. He popped his eyebrows, driving home the point, and Sherlock performed a gold-medal-worthy eye-roll before gesturing for John to go ahead. John grinned, stepping down to the path, Sherlock closing the door behind them. “Did you-”

“Lock it?” Sherlock finished, giving the keys a single toss before pocketing them. “Of course I did. I’m you, remember?”

John had to remind himself he had asked for this, that he had, in some ways, expected it from the moment he had seen this old coat in Mrs. Hudson’s closet and decided to play consulting detective. “Right,” he forced, and Sherlock seemed to barely repress a laugh. John moved to the edge of the path, looking down the street and waiting for a taxi to pass.

“I can-”

“No,” he snapped, flashing as quick a glare as he dared at Sherlock, not wanting to miss a cab. “You always get the taxi.”

“But they never stop for you.”

“I can do it, Sherlock!”

“But-”

John garbled meaninglessly, cutting him off with the frustrated sound just as a cabbie rounded a corner down the road. Stepping to the curb, John flung a hand out, and was fairly certain Sherlock must have slipped him something to cause the hallucination of the black car actually pulling toward them. He stared, mouth gaping a little, and turned to find Sherlock equally surprised, although he quickly hid it. “Woah,” John murmured as the cab came to a stop in front of them, his stunned face reflected in the shining metal. He looked down at his attire, fingers clutching idly at the edges of the wool. “Coat, you think?”

“Must be,” Sherlock replied, voice still a little breathless even if his face was composed.

“Hmm,” John hummed cheerily, nodding in appraisal as he tugged up the collar, opening the door and waving Sherlock to go ahead, because there was no way he was climbing over the seats with all this fabric to battle with. “Well, you know what they say about great power,” he chirped, grin a little ludicrous for someone who had, by all means, just hailed a cab.

“It corrupts?” Sherlock tried, and John laughed.

“No, it comes with great responsibility,” he said, smiling at Sherlock’s puzzled frown. “Didn’t you ever read Spiderman? Or watch it, at least?”
Sherlock blinked.

“Oh, Sherlock,” John sighed, shaking his head out the window, Sherlock’s pale reflection watching him in the darkness between eclipsing streetlamps. “I’ve said it before, and I’ll say it again. We have so much work to do.”

“Perhaps you should make a list in order of importance,” Sherlock replied, and John laughed.

“Perhaps I will. Come to think of it, we could’ve been doing that all along. It’s already Thursday and we haven’t started Doctor Who.”

“I don’t have Doctor Who.”

“I brought my box sets.”

“Wonderful.”

John chuckled, looking back to the detective, who did, at least, seem not entirely serious about his aversion, considering the small smile playing on his lips.

Sherlock turned away to the window, the red of a streetlight painting his face in stained shadows, and John sat in silence, captured by the illuminated angles. The jacket was big on the detective, sagging at the shoulders and through the torso, but pulled tight down the arms, and sat much shorter on his frame than John’s. Another streetlamp passed overhead, striping the interior of the cab with a flash of yellow light, and the white print of John’s surname on the left panel reached out from the dark, hovering proudly over Sherlock’s heart.

John coughed. “So, what were you gonna go as? Before?”

Sherlock rolled his head on the window, his curls flattening where they were pressed against the glass. “Honestly, we had very similar ideas,” he said, and John tilted his head, eyes narrowing warily as Sherlock smiled, stretching his legs to dig into a pocket of his trousers. He held out a hand, opening the palm to reveal two small, pointed teeth caps. “Vampire superhero,” he said, grin growing as he no doubt saw John’s gut-wrenching horror playing out on his face.

“Oh my god.”

“It wasn’t going to be much of a costume—”

“Oh my god!”

“-but I had the teeth already, so I figured I might as well.”

“I’m going to kill Mike! And who the hell just has vampire teeth lying around?”

“I feel as though you missed an opportunity there by not using ‘hanging’, but”—he shrugged, lifting his hips to pocket the pieces again—“if you must know, they were for a case involving members of a certain, shall we say…subculture.”

John watched him, but Sherlock didn’t laugh. “Vampires,” he muttered, voice toneless with disbelief. “You had a case involving vampires.”

“Well, not real ones, obviously,” Sherlock said with a snort, as if that were the point John was confused on. “Just one of those clubs, you know the type. There was a series of murders a couple years ago, all the victims exsanguinated, but not nearly enough blood on the scene to account for it.
The police thought someone in that sect might have gotten a little too literal, so I went undercover as the new bartender at one of the clubs.”

“Bartender?” John echoed, somehow that bit only slightly more difficult to picture than Sherlock wearing the fangs. “You would’ve been, what, 16? 15, even? How did you pass off as a bartender?”

Sherlock smiled, the glint in his eye that always indicated he was about to show off. “It’s hardly a matter of what age you are, John; it’s all about how old you act. The right clothes, the right tone, the right body language, and people so easily assume you belong there, they don’t even question you looking a bit young.”

“So you were…a bartender?” John asked, just to be sure. “Like…a real bottle-tossing, drink-mixing, sob-story-listening bartender?”

“Well, I wouldn’t say I listened,” Sherlock scathed, “but I can make a mean Dracula’s Kiss.” He winked, and John, after a moment of waiting to come out of a dream, laughed so hard something popped in his side.

“Oh my god,” he wheezed, covering his mouth with a hand and trying to rein it in. “What would that even look like, I mean, what did you wear!?”

“I think Lestrade has pictures,” Sherlock replied, not the slightest bit chagrined, and he grinned broadly as John set back into fits of laughter.

“Oh, I need to see those,” he strained, trying to suck in enough air to form the words. “I need to see them and print them and wallpaper the dormitory.”

“I highly doubt Mr. Parish would approve of that.”

“Well then you can just threaten to suck his blood.”

“I would sooner starve.”

John laughed again, and Sherlock smiled, and he was only just done gasping back to normal when they pulled up in front of the Met.

Sherlock insisted on paying, making John feel more than a little guilty—he was only here on John’s insistence, after all—and they headed toward the massive building, the innumerable windows reflecting the city lights in spots and streaks. Just short of rounding the corner to the main entrance, Sherlock stopped, grabbing John’s arm and holding him fast.

“What?” John asked, looking to the brunette, whose eyes were focused upward, likely the exact spot he knew the party was taking place. “Sherlock?” he prompted again when the man did not reply.

“I—” Sherlock stammered, shakily releasing John’s arm from his grip, “I’m not so certain we should attend after all.”

“What, why not?” John turned to face him, leaning closer to more clearly see the pale face in the dim light provided by the edge of a streetlamp’s sphere.

“I-I just…don’t think it’s a good idea. The mole and—”

“Sherlock.” John smiled up at him, a spasm jerking at his wrist in a sudden urge to take his roommate’s hand. “It’s gonna be fine. It’s Halloween; everyone is going to look ridiculous!”
Sherlock opened his mouth, as if to argue that wasn’t his concern at all, but John cut him off.

“No one is going to make fun of you,” he stated, and Sherlock’s eyes widened in a flash of surprise, his mouth closing. “And, if they do,” John continued with a bob of his head, “just do what I would do.”

“Punch them?”

“That’s my boy!” John teased, slinging an arm around Sherlock’s back and squeezing him tightly around the arms.

“Don’t!” Sherlock yelped, skittering out of John’s grip, and John laughed as he watched the man tugging at the collar of the jacket, trying to shake and smooth out whatever creases John may have created.

John shook his head, smiling down at his dress shoes as he slid his hands in his pockets, considering the possibility that nervous Sherlock might be his favorite, if not an extremely close second to pliable, being-read-things-he-should-be-reading-his-damn-self Sherlock.

The security guard nodded them through, hitting the button to call the lift, and, if he noticed anything amiss with who was wearing what, he gave no indication. Although, as a security guard at Scotland Yard, there probably wasn’t much that could rattle him. They didn’t meet anyone else until they reached the cafeteria where the party was being held, and, on unspoken agreement, they both stopped just shy of being exposed by the windows, spying without yet being spied.

It was a large room, the walls lined with black-clothed tables displaying cliché colors of drinks and snacks, and there were a handful of high-top tables scattered around the interior, providing a place for smaller groups to gather and not have to hold their drinks. There were flickering candles—LED, John noted—placed haphazardly around the entire space, redundant in the still-fluorescent-lit room, and small bowls of imported candy corn stared up at him from every angle, apparently intent on ruining his appetite on sight alone.

And then, there were the people. Lestrade actually fared alright, dressed as what appeared to be Han Solo, his on-again, off-again wife the very picture of Leia beside him. Anderson and his fiancée, a pretty, petite girl with bright red hair, were Ten and Donna, respectively, and Donovan was in the corner, glaring at them from beneath her silver-twined halo. She was portraying an angel, because, sometimes, life just gave you little gifts like that.

“We need an exit strategy.”

“Yes.” John retreated, Sherlock following as they removed themselves entirely from potential sightings. “What are you thinking? Code word or something?”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know,” John shrugged, rolling his eyes and trying to put as much exasperation as he could into a whisper. “Something we wouldn’t be likely to say in just normal conversation.”

Sherlock thought for a moment, fingers lifting to his chin as he frowned. He lowered them a moment later, decision seemingly made. “Vatican cameos,” he said with a decisive nod.

John’s face scrunched with confusion. “What?”

“Vatican cameos,” Sherlock repeated, frustrated, as usual, with the need to reiterate.
“Vatican cameos?” John echoed, and Sherlock rolled his eyes but nodded. John looked at him, waiting for the punchline. “Why Vatican cameos?” he asked when none was forthcoming.

Sherlock’s posture stiffened beneath the bulky jacket. “Well, it’s not likely to come up in everyday conversation, is it?”

“What if I’m talking to someone about the pope and also antique brooches?”

“That, I believe, is exactly the type of conversation the code word was intended for.”

John chuckled. “Fair enough,” he obliged with a shrug. “Vatican cameos it is. So, if either of us want to leave-”

“We say ‘Vatican cameos’, yes, John, it’s not exactly a difficult concept.”

John blinked, eyebrows rising in surprise as he leaned back from the sniping detective. “You’re in a mood tonight, aren’t you?”

Sherlock sighed, rattling his head as he looked around John’s shoulder in the direction of the cafeteria door. “This sort of thing, it isn’t really…”

“Your area?” John suggested, and Sherlock gave him a small, self-conscious smile. “I know, and we’ll probably leave early anyway—there’s only so much of Donovan even I can take—but, Sherlock?” He dared to stretch out a hand, laying it gently on the sleeve of his jacket and gripping a bit into the man’s forearm. “I am glad you came. I know you only did it for me.”

Sherlock focused at some point on the floor to John’s right as he shrugged, dislodging John’s hand in the process. “Maybe,” he muttered, and then looked up with a teasing grin, “or maybe I just have a hidden fondness for candy corn.”

“Oh, god,” John groaned, rolling his head back. “I don’t think we can be friends anymore if you like candy corn.”


“Thank you!” John exclaimed, waving a hand at the man opposite. “What the bloody fascination is with the awful stuff, I will never understand.”

Sherlock laughed just as a voice broke in from behind him.

“Oh, good, I’m not the only one who’s late.”

John shifted to see around Sherlock, who spun at the sound. “Ryan!” John said, stepping forward to shake the man’s hand. “Thought you were gonna be on duty tonight.”

“Got out of it, thank god,” he replied, adjusting his tie as he huffed in relief. “Apparently there’s loo roll all over Camden.”

John laughed, scanning what he supposed was the young man’s costume.

Police Constable Ryan Dimmock was on the short list of officers John had met and liked, the rest of the list being Lestrade. He was 22, one of the youngest they had, and had played rugby all through secondary and uni, which, in John’s book, automatically put him a step or two above the rest. He also got on quite well with Sherlock, taking his opinions and advice seriously, and never ever had
John heard him insult the detective. They kept meaning to go out for a pint after one of the cases he worked with them, but it had yet to come to fruition. The work Halloween party would have to do for socializing, it seemed, and John snapped his fingers as the realization of what Dimmock had come as finally clicked.

“Clark Kent,” he surmised, and Dimmock beamed.

“Yeah,” he replied, shifting his unnecessary glasses on his nose. “Wasn’t sure anyone would get it.”

“The press badge from *The Daily Planet* helps,” John said, pointing to the man’s chest, and Dimmock plucked at it, laughing.

“Oh, yeah, forgot ‘bout that.” He let the tag fall back to his chest as he turned to Sherlock. “Well, didn’t think I’d be seeing you at this thing,” he said, smiling at the detective. “How much he payin’ ya?” He jerked his head toward John with a wink.

“Nothing,” Sherlock replied, making a stiff attempt at a smile, “I never thought of extortion.”

“Well, too late, you’re here now,” John snapped, Dimmock laughing over it.

“So, I suppose it’s obvious, but you two are each other, right?” he asked, pointing between them.

John nodded. “Yep! I’m taciturn for the evening, and he’s-”

“Woefully ignorant to the inherent idiocy of mankind,” Sherlock finished, lifting his eyebrows with a mocking smile.

“Well,” John chirped, turning to Dimmock as he bobbed his head at Sherlock, “guess he’s gonna be taciturn as well.”

Dimmock laughed again, and Sherlock’s lips twitched with an almost-smile before he forced his face into a glare.

“Shall we go in then?” Dimmock suggested, waving past them to the door. “Sooner ya start, sooner it’s over.”

“Yeah,” John sighed, turning to face the dreaded opening leaking light and music. He twisted his body back to their impromptu meeting. “Let slip the dogs of war!” he proclaimed, lifting an arm toward the door in charge, and Sherlock shook his head as Dimmock laughed, but they both followed him toward the party.

As they passed the windows, however, John suddenly stopped, whirling to catch Sherlock on the arm. “Give me a deduction!” he hissed urgently, prompting a dark eyebrow to curl up at him.

“Something to say when I get in there.”

Sherlock gave him an indecipherable look somewhere on the spectrum of quizzical and fond, and then looked through the glass to the scene beyond. “Something you’d be comfortable saying, I presume.”

“Yeah, yeah,” John muttered, rolling his head exasperatedly. “No exposing affairs or anything like that.”

Sherlock’s grin suggested he could have done just that, but, instead, he turned back to the festivities. “Anderson and his fiancé just bought a new flat. Somewhere in Dulwich, god help them. That awful woman in HR who always wears the red nail varnish-”
“Louise.”

“Immaterial. She just got a cat—black and white, not very friendly—and the night guard with gingivitis—”

“Paul.”

“-has his in-laws visiting, probably for the week.”

Dimmock gave a low whistle. “Blimey, is that all?”

“No,” Sherlock muttered. “I left out the more unsavory ones.”

“Like what?”

“Don’t ask him that, we’ll be here all night,” John muttered, giving Sherlock a shove forward with his elbow as the man made to open his mouth.

He flashed a sharp glare over his shoulder, but made no comment. He did linger back to allow John to get ahead of him again though.

“Alright,” John said, taking a breath. “Ready?” The tall, brunette version of himself and definitely-not-Superman beside him nodded, and they stepped through the door, holding in stiff formation as a line of three.

It would be a bit of an exaggeration to say the room went silent, and there was no scratching stop to the music or anything dramatic like that, but the conversation did dip, more eyes turning to them than stayed focused.

“Ya made it!” Thank god for Lestrade, striding up to them with arms stretched wide, a beer bottle in one hand. “Thought I was seeing things for a second there! Nice wig,” he said, nodding at John’s head.

“Cheers,” John answered with a grin, and the Sergeant laughed.

“And I see you put in as little effort as possible,” he added, chuckling as he looked over Sherlock—still clad in suit everything except for John’s jacket.

“I came,” Sherlock countered, and Lestrade continued laughing, softly nodding his head.

“Fair point. Glad ya did, too. And you’re…that Superman guy, right?”

“Clark Kent,” Dimmock answered with a nod, and Lestrade leaned his head back, opening his mouth with recognition.

“Aah, right, Clark Kent. Glasses.” He waggled a finger in front of an eye, and John ducked his head to hide a smile. Good to know Lestrade went the super social drunk route rather than the angry one. “Well, come on, come in, grab a drink! Not you,” he added, sobering long enough to give Sherlock a firm look.

Sherlock rolled his eyes. “You know I don’t drink.”

“You can’t drink.”

“I’m fairly certain I’m capable.”
“Aren’t you supposed to be acting like John?”

“Well then I could drink.”

Lestrade blinked at Sherlock, puzzling over the comment a little longer than he would normally require. He then barked a laugh, turning away with a beckoning wave to lead them toward the beverage table. He was chatting amicably, explaining where this or that was, as well as what was vegetarian for some odd reason, when they were interrupted by Donovan stepping in front of them.

She simply stood there, arms folded and scanning gaze reproachful as her wire halo bobbed piteously over her curls.

John stared back at her, looking over her costume again now that he was closer. “Did it hurt?” he asked, lifting an eyebrow, the twin snorts of Sherlock and Dimmock grating out from behind him.

Donovan’s eyes narrowed sharply. “You’re one to talk,” she snapped. “I’d rather be run over by a lorry than be Sherlock Holmes.”

John felt Sherlock bristle behind him, but produced a cloying smile for the constable. “Look, Sally,” he began, never having used her first name before, and the popping of her mouth suggested she noticed, “I’m sure you’re having a rough go of it, what with Anderson and his fiancée moving into that nice little family flat in Dulwich”—her eyes blew out, and she took an involuntary half-step back—“but that’s no reason to take it out on us.” He then continued past her, her face seemingly frozen in shock, and Lestrade was wearing a similar expression as he hurried ahead so as not to get trod on.

“Jesus, John,” he breathed. “Not exactly pulling your punches. How’d you know that, anyway? They only just told us tonight.”

John shrugged. “Must be the wig,” he replied, and Lestrade was shaken out of his reverie with a snort.

“Well, you’ll be paying for that one later, no doubt,” he warned with a pointed glance over his shoulder. “Now,” he clipped, stopping in front of a long table littered with liquor bottles and glinting canned drinks, “what’ll ya have?”

They busied themselves getting drinks. Sherlock adamantly refused to make John a Dracula’s Kiss —“Oh, come on!” “No! I told you, there are pictures.” “But it’s not the saaaaame!”—and then moved on to the various snack tables, picking at meat and cheese plates and veggie platters. Dimmock disappeared to talk to someone or other, and the remaining duo mingled about, John making sure to find Louise and Paul so he could drop their deduction bombs.

“Do they always pull that face?” he asked after they’d left Paul wide-eyed and gaping, forgotten celery stick halfway to his mouth and dripping Ranch back onto his plate.

“Generally,” Sherlock shrugged. “Or they turn red and shout. One time, I got a drink thrown in my face.”

“Only once?”

“Yes,” Sherlock snapped, and John grinned down into his Coke can, “and then she slapped me when I informed her that tossing her drink was the pettiest, most stereotypical thing she could possibly have done.”

“Woah, watch it, Casanova, or you’ll be beatin’ ‘em off with a stick.”
Sherlock sneered at him, an unamused hum vibrating through his throat, and John laughed just as they were approached by a short, portly man wearing a long, blood-stained lab coat.

“Sherlock!” the man said, and John prepared himself to intervene as he seemed to be going in for a hug, but he then lowered his outstretched arms. “Didn’t expect to see you here! Molly didn’t mention you two were coming.”

Sherlock smiled, and John wondered how other people didn’t notice how fake it was. “It was kinda last minute. Didn’t get a chance to mention it to her.”

John’s grip tightened on the red can as he tried to keep his eye-widening in check. He had seen Sherlock perform before, but the speech patterns changing? Maybe John needed a proper drink after all if he was gonna have to go along with this.

“Ah, of course, of course,” the man said, shaking his head and batting a hand, as if to say all was forgiven and forgotten. “And this must be that John I’ve heard so much about! Or should I say Sherlock 2.0?” He laughed, clearly highly amused by his jest.

John smiled. “I don’t know about 2.0; I think I’m the one pulling the coat off better,” he replied, and the man laughed. “But, yes, I’m John Watson. It’s a pleasure to meet you, sir.”

“Oh, none of that,” the man spluttered as he took John’s extended hand. “It’s Ben, Ben Hooper, Molly’s uncle.”

“Right, of course,” John said, brightening a little. “I’ve heard a lot about you from Molly,” he added, catching the lightning sidelong glance Sherlock shot him at the lie.

“And this one too, no doubt,” Ben guffawed, elbowing Sherlock in the arm, and the detective barely managed to twist a smile out of a wince. “Swear I see him more than my own lads!”

Everyone laughed, although two of them less enthusiastically.

“So you have sons, then, Mr. Hooper?” John inquired, because he had manners, unlike some people who were actually twitching to leave.

“Ben,” the man reminded, “and, yeah, two. Ten and fourteen. Both of ‘em in football.” He smiled, clearly proud, and John genuinely returned the gesture.

It was always nice to see parents being what they should.

“How ’bout you? You play?”

John shook his head. “Not football, no. My feet are useless, I’m afraid,” he replied, earning a chuckle. “No, rugby’s more my sport. I’m on the team at Langley.”


“Oh, yes,” John chuckled, nodding deeply. “Yes, indeed. I probably won’t continue at uni. Keep all my teeth and whatnot.”

They both started as Ben let out a booming laugh. “Good thinkin’! Well, it was good to finally meet you, John. Put a face to all Sherlock’s mumblin’.”
John didn’t have to look to know the brunette had panicked, feeling the shot of nervous energy spark across to his arm. “Oh no, I hate to think what impression you had from that!” John joked, and Ben chuckled.

“Nothing, really, to be honest. Didn’t ever say much in the way of impressions, just muttered through stuff as he went over my reports and such a few weeks back. Always talks like he’s bouncing it off you.” He smiled at Sherlock in a way that was downright familial in its idle teasing, and Sherlock managed to crack his lips into vaguely upward curves. “Well, I’m gonna head over to the snack tables. People keep walking by with this quiche thing I wanna try. See you boys!” He gave a quick flick of a wave and a smile, and then disappeared through the crowd.

John gave Sherlock a moment to look less wax before he spoke. “So,” he said as he looked up, “you *mumble* about me.”

“No,” Sherlock snapped, swallowing anxiously.

“What sort of stuff do you say?”

“I don’t mumble about you.”

“Fine, *at* me, then,” John amended as Sherlock continued to look unfocused at the crowd. “What do you say?”

“I don’t know!” Sherlock muttered, irritated but blushing. “I hardly keep track of what I’m *saying* while I’m working through a cause of death!”

“Okay,” John said, edging cautiously away from the topic. “Sorry. I was just curious.”

“Well I can’t remember.”

“Alright, you can’t remember.”

John’s heart marked time as he stood there, pounding against his chest as they avoided one another’s eyes.

“I should-”

“I have to-”

“…”

“…”

“Right.”

“Yeah.” He rocketed left, Sherlock going the opposite direction, and didn’t stop his frantic shuffle of legs and feet until he was out the cafeteria, down the corridor, and around a corner, far, *far* from the epicenter of humiliation.

Leaning against the grey-painted plaster, he breathed up at the ceiling, wig shifting as his skull moved against the wall. As his pulse returned into normal ranges, the heady panic gave way to pondering, and he blinked up into the shadows that stretched along the unlit corridor. A bubble of warmth grew beneath his sternum, pushing the corners of his mouth up, and, before he knew it, he was grinning to himself in the dark.

Sherlock talked to him. Even when he wasn’t there, Sherlock talked to him, collaborated with him.
Even when they hadn’t been talking at all, Sherlock had talked to him, if only subconsciously. In fact, subconsciously might make it even better.

He chuckled, peeling his head off the wall as he pushed away, and then stilled as a noise came from further down the corridor.

The lights were on in one of the offices branching off the corridor, illuminating the door of the filing room opening. John was on the wrong side to immediately see who emerged, the wood blocking his view, and his body lit with adrenaline, mind going through every possible escape route. All the rooms closest to him were dark, probably locked, and he couldn’t even risk so much as moving without the chance a squeaky shoe or rustle of fabric would give him away, but, a second later, the choice between fight or flight was taken away from him.

A figure stepped out, slowly turning to close the door with a soft creak, and a strip of light caught clearly on his face, capturing the moment he saw John standing there, a silhouette in the shadows.

Rob Morgan looked surprised for all of a second before he turned, twisting on the spot and tearing the opposite direction, and a million things collided in John’s head at once.

He registered the folder clutched in the fleeing man’s hand, realized he was most likely the mole they’d been looking for, and recognized that that probably meant he was really Sebastian Moran, and therefore *not* the type of person John should go up against alone and unarmed.

But he couldn’t let him get away either.

“HEY!” he shouted as he chased after him. “STOP!”

Of course, Moran didn’t, racing through the strips of light that lined the next corridor, the lampposts outside forming a strobe light as they shone through the exterior windows, the man coming in and out of view as they ran.

He thought he heard more footfalls, a distant voice behind him, but he couldn’t spare the concentration to check. “STOP!” he bellowed just before Moran reached the end of the corridor, skidding around the corner, and John snarled, putting on a burst of speed.

Seconds later, he turned the bend, and time abruptly moved into slow motion. He couldn’t say exactly when he realized what was happening: at the glint of the gun held aloft halfway down the hall ahead of him, the flash of the pistol as it was fired, or the cataclysmic bang that shattered through his body, but, either way, John was diving into the alcove of an office and hoping, of all things, that he wouldn’t be buried next to his father.

*****

Sherlock wandered around the party as long as he could bear it, attempting to make small talk without also making people cry. He managed, but only just, and, as the tedium of conversations reached dangerous levels, he removed himself from the intellect-sucking leeches with a muttered need to get more punch. Whether they noticed he hadn’t had any punch to start with, he didn’t really care, he only knew that, if he didn’t get out of this room in the next ten seconds, John would be glaring at him for the next week over the stuff that would come out of his mouth. Where *was* John?

He looked around the room as he made for an exit, tall enough already to scan over most of the “adult’s” heads. Had John left him here? Left him to rot in this detritus that passed as the police force? No, that’s something he would do, not John. So then, where was he?

Following the direction he had last seen John go when they made their great escapes from sentiment
several minutes ago, he found himself in the corridor, but there was no figure visible either side in the dim light. Assuming that John would likely, even subconsciously, head in the direction of his favorite vending machine—“The other one only has Tyrell’s!”—he made a right, following the hall toward the appropriate turn. Just before he reached the corner, he slowed, his attention drawn by loud noises bouncing between the walls ahead.

“HEY! STOP!” a voice too much like John’s shouted, and then hurried footfalls took off, thundering away from Sherlock.

He rushed forward just in time to see the tail end of John’s coat whipping around the corner at the other end, and cursed under his breath as he ran, no doubt in his mind who the other set of racing footsteps belonged to.

Rob Morgan, aka Sebastian Moran: the obvious choice for the mole in Scotland Yard, considering Irene’s description, and the man John was currently attempting to chase down, for the love of god John, what are you thinking!?

“JOHN!” Sherlock shouted as he skidded the next angle, earning himself a brief glimpse of Moran at the other end of the hall before he vanished around another bend. “JOHN!” he called again, but the cloaked figure in front of him—did his coat always billow out like that at the back?—did not stop, or even slow, and disappeared behind the wall after Moran.

Sherlock snarled, putting on a burst of speed, and then stuttered to a stop as the explosion of a gunshot reverberated back to him, each new wave of sound washing over him like ice. It seemed to go on forever, echo after echo cutting into him anew, and he couldn’t see John, he couldn’t see him!

“JOHN!” he shouted. He bolted forward again, his legs seeming to move in slow motion as he mind screamed at them. “JOHN!”

It was like one of those awful movies from before special effects were decent where the corridor stretches on and on no matter how fast you run, and he couldn’t reach the end of it, couldn’t get to John, couldn’t help him. What if he was hit, what if he was hit, and it would be all Sherlock’s fault, all Sherlock’s fault for letting him get involved, for not kicking him out of his room and his cases and his life from the moment he set eyes on him, because Sherlock Holmes couldn’t hold onto things. His mother had called him her star, but he knew he was a black hole, an inevitable death to anything that ventured too close, drowning it in darkness. And now he had torn John apart.

“John?” he nearly choked as he finally turned the corner, not caring for whether the gunman was still there or not. He wasn’t, but there was something, a corner of dark cloth sticking out from a small alcove. “JOHN!” He rushed to the shrouded figure, kneeling down on the cold tile as trembling hands outstretched. “John?” he asked, or maybe pleaded, because he couldn’t be- He couldn’t…

A groan, a twist of limbs, and then a tousled, half-wigged head—short blond and curled brown meeting in perfect halves—turned toward him, blue eyes wrinkled with a grimace. “Vatican cameos,” John muttered, nodding with a wince as he clutched at the shoulder that seemed to have taken the brunt of the fall. “Vatican cameos.”

Sherlock stared at him a moment, and then laughed, a little hysterical with relief, and he bowed his head to his lap so he didn’t do something stupid, like hug him or- Well, worse. He shifted back, allowing John room as he made to sit up, but lunged forward again as soon as the other boy hissed in pain, leaning back and clutching at his side. “John!? Are you alright? Did he hit you?”

John shook his head, mouth moving as he no doubt began offering a different explanation for the pain, but Sherlock wasn’t listening, his hands pushing aside the borrowed coat to scan for injuries.
“Legs…” He muttered, running a hand up each leg of John’s trousers, feeling for any holes, or, for that matter, blood. “Torso.”

“What are you- Oi!” John tried to wriggle away, planting his hands to the tile for leverage. “What are you doing!?”

“Checking for injuries,” Sherlock replied, eyes never leaving his mark, and he pushed the sides of the coat away to look over John’s chest, hands grazing across the fabric as his eyes squinted in the dim, seeking darker patches over the suit and shirt. He leaned closer, moving his hands to sweep down John’s sides.

“Sherlock…” John said, or was he asking? A small tremor ran through him as Sherlock brushed over his right side, and Sherlock stored it all away for later examination: the hesitant voice, the leaping artery in his neck, the stuttering breaths, the twitches of muscles beneath Sherlock’s searching hands.

He moved to the arms next, leaning away a little, and John’s breathing seemed to ease in the extra space as he allowed his left arm to be plucked up. Sherlock turned it over in his hands, eyes sharp and narrow as they searched over the uninterrupted fabric of the coat. John was passing over his right arm before Sherlock could grab for it, a small smile twitching at his lips, but Sherlock couldn’t think about that now, and focused back down at the wool. “Oh my god,” he breathed, rattling John’s arm a bit as his hands started to shake, eyes unblinkingly fixed on a point on the sleeve.

“What?” John asked, twisting the limb and craning his head to try and see for himself, but Sherlock’s fingers couldn’t let go.

“You were shot,” he whispered, every frayed fiber stretching out from the torn strip etching itself permanently into his mind.

“What? No I wasn’t.” John wrenched his arm back, tugging at the coat to turn it as he placed his chin on his shoulder, stretching to peer down at the damage. “Oh, look at that,” he practically chirped, fingers pushing into the newfound hole, “I guess I was.”

“You were shot!” Sherlock repeated, growing frantic now, because John didn’t seem to be properly grasping the seriousness of the situation.

“It’s only a graze,” he offered, and actually shrugged, yanking the barely dangling wig off his head. “Look, see? It just clipped the coat. My shirt’s not even torn.” He pushed his arm toward the detective, stretching out the sleeve so Sherlock could clearly see the damage.

Sherlock just stared at him. “Only a graze?” he echoed, incredulous in his growing fury. “Only a graze!? Are you listening to yourself? You were shot! He shot at you! And, if you hadn’t gotten out of the way, that bullet’s most likely trajectory would have been right at your-”

“Sherlock!”

He didn’t notice everything had gotten blurry until he couldn’t focus on John’s face, which was inches away from his now that the blond had moved forward, hands warm where they dug into Sherlock’s arms and held him fast. He blinked, wilting a little into John’s grip as the wide, concerned eyes grew clearer, the blue distinguishable even in the faint light filtering in from streetlamps outside.

He loosened his hands to let them slide down Sherlock’s arms, tucking the tips of his fingers underneath Sherlock’s, and Sherlock stared down at the contact, confused and awed. “I’m fine, alright? I’m not planning to go out being shot in Scotland Yard.”

Sherlock chuckled, trying not to blink lest he miss a single moment of John’s hands around his.
“How are you planning it, then?” he murmured, lifting his eyes for the sparest second to flash a weak smile.

“On the toilet, like Elvis,” John replied with an easy smile, and Sherlock laughed, but the sound quickly tapered off.

His fingers twitched within John’s, and he opened his mouth, taking a few breaths before he could make words come out with them. “Don’t do that,” he said, swallowing hard against the weakness rising in his throat.

“What, die on the toilet?”

“No,” Sherlock whispered, shaking his head. He forced himself to meet John’s eyes, the points of contact between their skin buzzing. “Don’t die.”

John blinked, visibly thrown as his lips parted. “Sherlock-”

“Clear!” a loud voice interrupted, following swiftly by a more familiar one.

“Sherlock!? John!?”

He looked back from where he had turned toward the voices, John’s eyes moving back to his from where they too had shifted. With a twitch of a smile, the boy slid out from under Sherlock’s hands, and Sherlock tried not to look too affected as he rose to his feet, extending a hand to pull John up with him.

The blond winced as he stood, clutching again at his shoulder, but only gave Sherlock a dismissive rattle of his head when the detective looked at him sharply. “Over here!” John called, and Sherlock rearranged his face to impassive as footsteps hurried toward him.

Lestrade leapt in front of the alcove, flashlight shining directly in their eyes, and Sherlock lifted his arm as a shield while John hissed.

“Jesus! Do you mind?” John sputtered, and the light vanished.

“Sorry,” Lestrade muttered as he lowered the flashlight to his side along with his gun. “You hurt?” he asked, nodding toward John’s hand gripped around his shoulder.

John pointedly avoided Sherlock’s glare as he shook his head. “Naw, just banged it up a bit when I dove in here for cover. It’ll be fine after I ice it.”

“You see the shooter?” Lestrade asked, not sounding particularly surprised that they had been the targets. Although, that was hardly one for the record books.

They both nodded, but John stayed silent, apparently content to now let Sherlock take the lead. “Rob Morgan,” Sherlock said, and Lestrade nodded. This wasn’t entirely unexpected for either of them. “Although, I suspect his real name, or at least another alias, is Sebastian Moran.”

At this, Lestrade’s eyes did widen. “And how do you know that?”

Sherlock straightened his spine, sliding his hands into his pockets, although the gesture was probably somewhat lessened in effect, as the pockets of John’s coat were much smaller and higher than his usual ones. “I have my sources.”

John snorted.
“Fine,” Lestrade muttered with an irritated quiver of his head. “You know if he’s still in the building?”

“No, but I doubt it,” John replied. “He was carrying something, a folder. Looked like a case file. He came out of the file room back there.” He tried to point back up the way they had run, but his arm crumpled as he clutched his bicep back to him with a pained twist of his mouth.

“Right, you two, come with me,” Lestrade commanded, every inch the Sergeant. “We called the EMTs as soon as we heard the shot; they should be downstairs by now. We’ll see what they make of that shoulder, and then I’ll need both your statements.”

They both nodded, and then followed, no one speaking as Lestrade led them down the stairs, gun held aloft and ready. As they neared the ground floor, the calls on the radio strapped to Lestrade’s belt started coming in all clear, and Lestrade picked it up.

“Are you sure?” he snarled, releasing the button as he waited.

“Yes, sir,” came the unmistakable voice of Constable Donovan, and Sherlock had a sudden but vivid image of a white-cloaked angel running through the halls, brandishing a gun and holding her halo back when she peered around corners.

It was almost enough to make him laugh. Almost.

“We searched every inch of the place, sir,” said the technologically warbled voice of Dimmock. “No sign of him.”

“Agh!” Lestrade growled, thrusting the radio back into its slot. “How did he get past us!? We were all over this place the second that gun went off!”

“He’s a highly trained mercenary, probably ex-military,” Sherlock offered. “It might be better that he did get past you.”

Lestrade’s expression hardened, but he said no more, and, within another few minutes of tense silence, they were outside, bathed in the flashing lights of no less than four ambulances.

“Wow,” John murmured, his arm brushing against Sherlock’s as he shifted to get a better look. “I don’t know which one to pick.”

“The closest one,” Sherlock snapped, moving to stand behind the man and marching him forward by his good shoulder.

“Sherlock!” John spluttered, feet moving quickly to keep up with Sherlock’s momentum. “I’m fine, really! They’re just gonna tell me it’s bruised.”

“Then let them tell you it’s bruised,” he muttered out of the corner of his mouth as one of the EMTs approached, a younger man with dark skin and sharp, brown eyes.

“What happened?” he asked, eyes catching on where John gripped his shoulder.

The shorter man immediately released his arm, trying to let them hang nonchalantly at his side, but Sherlock could see the stiffness that denoted pain. “Nothing,” John said, and Sherlock physically bit his tongue. “I fell.”

The EMT raised an eyebrow. “You fell?” he asked, clearly frustrated his chance at being a hero was being wasted on a kid who took a tumble.
“Yes, he fell,” Sherlock said with icy serenity. “Diving out of the way of a bullet.”

“Sherlock!” John hissed, but it was too late, the EMT was already there, grabbing John by the uninjured arm and leading him toward the back of one of the vans. “No, it’s fine, really. Just a graze. Look, see?” John was trying very hard, Sherlock would give him that, but the EMT was having none of it.

“I still have to check you over,” he said, attempting to guide John up into the ambulance, but John jerked his arm away and walked up the collapsible steps himself, glowering at Sherlock. “You may not feel the extent of your injuries due to shock.”

“What?” John bleated, whirling around to keep sight of the man as he walked back into the ambulance, lifting a hatch on the side and producing a lurid orange blanket that made Sherlock’s eyes water. “But I’m not-”

“Just try to relax,” the EMT interjected, draping the blanket around John’s back, and John stared down at the orange fabric, gaping with incredulity. “Now, let me see that shoulder.”

If Sherlock hadn’t been putting all of his effort into restraining himself from shouting at the man every time he pulled or prodded or twisted something that made John wince, he may have found it funny, John blustering on about being perfectly alright while periodically hissing in discomfort. As it was, he didn’t even so much as smile, let alone speak, and merely watched on in silence until the EMT left, ordering John to stay there and keep the blanket tight. He watched the EMT as he retreated out of sight, knowing what was coming.

“Alright,” John chirped, shrugging the blanket off as he made to slide to the ground. “Let’s go.”

“No.” Sherlock turned, blocking John even as he reached back behind him to grab the discarded blanket. “We haven’t given Lestrade our statements yet.”

John gaped at him, eyes bulging, and didn’t even seem to notice as Sherlock tossed the blanket back around him. “Because you were an idiot and got yourself shot,” Sherlock snapped, dormant anger rising back to the surface.

“Shot at, not shot,” John reminded, inclining his head, and Sherlock grit his teeth.

“Regardless, you’re in shock,” he snapped, folding his arms and leaning his hip against the side of the ambulance near John’s feet.

“No, I’m not,” John calmly countered, only frustrating Sherlock even further.

“You were shot at, of course you’re in shock!”

“I think I would know if I was-”

“You can’t possibly accurately assess your condition right now,” Sherlock clipped, because why couldn’t John let someone else be the doctor for a change?

“Right,” John muttered, clearly less than convinced. “So the blanket…?”

“To help ward off the effects of shock.”
"But I’m not in-"

"John," Sherlock snapped, silencing the whining protest, and John rolled his eyes, heaving an exasperated sigh.

They sat there for a few moments, John shifting within his blanket, thumbing the material as he pulled it around to his chest. "It is warm though," he conceded, shifting the fabric higher over his shoulders. "What’s this made of, you think?"

"John," Sherlock admonished.

"Is it like wool or something?" the boy continued, lifting one side to scan over the drape.

"You should be resting," Sherlock reminded, because, hit or not, John had been through a shooting.

"Poly-blend?" John plowed on, and Sherlock couldn’t stop himself from chuckling, shaking his head down at his shoes.

He knew what John was doing, of course. Trying to distract him with something to analyze, something to deduce, something to puzzle over instead of going through every way in which John could have died, and Sherlock figured he could allow it, just this once. "It’s 100% cotton," he replied.

"Really?" John questioned, surprised, and he pulled a corner of the blanket up for closer inspection. "Feels heavier than that."

"It’s heavy-duty cotton," Sherlock explained, turning to face John properly. "It’s meant to be windproof."

"Windproof?" John echoed, face wrinkled in curiosity, and Sherlock nodded. John’s eyebrows lifted as he looked back down to the blanket, clearly impressed. "Yep, that’s it," he muttered, tugging the blanket tight to his arms, "this is coming home with us."

Sherlock spluttered a surprised laugh. "You want to steal an ambulance blanket?"

"I need it; I’m in shock," John said, somewhat haughty as he flicked Sherlock a nod. Sherlock’s jaw snapped open in affront. "You just said-!"

"I’m in shock and have formed an emotional attachment to this blanket," John interjected, wriggling himself further into the fabric. "Happens all the time."

"I’m fairly certain that-" Sherlock began, but John cut him off again.

"Don’t argue with me, I’m in shock," he said, affecting weak and pathetic, but Sherlock just glared.

"You can’t just decide to be in shock when it’s convenient!"

"Stop shouting, you’re upsetting my already delicate emotional state."

"You-!" he snarled, but could go no further with John beaming and blinking at him like that. "Fine," he spat with a wave of his hand, dismissing the pointless argument, "take the blanket."

John grinned, grabbing fists of the orange material and cocooning himself tightly. "You want one?" he asked, jerking his head backward where the EMT had removed a small stack.
Sherlock raised an eyebrow. “You’re going to form an emotional attachment to two blankets?”

John shrugged. “Why not?” he replied, smiling with mischief, and Sherlock found whatever residual anger still remained slipping away under the teasing, blue eyes.

“Okay, grab a green one,” he muttered, because there was no way he was getting one of those horrid orange things, and he couldn’t very well let John down when he looked so delighted at the prospect of larceny.

Indeed, the blond bounced on his seat, the blanket falling from his shoulders as he leaned back to snag one of the folded, green bundles. “Aye, aye, Captain!”

“Stop saying that!” Sherlock exclaimed, and John laughed, sliding off the ambulance to the ground, bundling his blanket up with Sherlock’s as he went.

“You think we can get out of here?” he asked, looking slightly sheepish now as he surveyed the scene. “Lestrade will probably be ages yet, and- Well, I really just wanna go home.”

Sherlock faltered, his body physically reeling a little from the onslaught of questions that flooded his brain. Home? John wanted to go home? Home to Kent? But there wasn’t anyone around, Sherlock couldn’t let him go there, not when there could still be aftereffects. Home to Langley? Well, he supposed that would be better, but not nearly as comfortable. Or did John mean his aunt’s house? Too much was swirling around Sherlock’s mind for him to expend the energy to form words, so John simply continued speaking after too-long-a-moment’s silence.

“You reckon they woke Mrs. Hudson?” he asked, twisting his head up at Sherlock. “We should probably call her if they did; she’ll be worried. Don’t much fancy explaining this to her when we get back,” he muttered, chuckling with nerves.

Sherlock’s mind quieted as the tight spiral of tension in his body relaxed.

John meant 221B. John wasn’t going anywhere. John didn’t want to leave.

“I’ll ask Lestrade,” Sherlock finally managed to reply. “Tell him we’re leaving and he can drop in when he’s done here. He shouldn’t object, not with you being shot.”

John rolled his eyes, but said nothing, apparently content to play his advantage when it suited. “Think you can wring a ride out of him too? Mrs. Hudson will be angry enough as it is without adding a taxi to the mix; you know how she is about cabbies after 11.”

Sherlock did indeed know, but his smile was more quiet contentment at the fact that that was something John now knew too rather than amusement at the comment. “I’m sure that can be arranged,” he said with a conspiratorial smirk, and John laughed. “After all, you do need two blankets for shock. That certainly sounds like something requiring a police escort to me.”

“Hear, hear!” John affirmed, and Sherlock laughed, turning away to find Lestrade.

When he caught sight of him across a few parked cars, he turned back to check John had noticed, and found the boy bundled up in one of the blankets again, looking every bit the disheveled victim.

John found his eye, flashing a grin and a wink in the swirling police lights, and Sherlock shook his head, grinning back, a small representation of his somersaulting heart.

Lestrade was, of course, extremely accommodating about the whole thing—what with John looking like a Titanic extra in the background—and immediately volunteered Dimmock to give them a ride
home.

The man appeared every kind of relieved to get away from the scene, and dithered a bit at the edge of the path in front of the flat, asking them no less than five times if they were certain they were alright, if they needed anything, if they wanted him to sweep the flat first. Only when Mrs. Hudson came to the door did he leave, giving her a quick wave and a smile that immediately withered as he caught sight of the thunder in the older woman’s gaze, and he nearly peeled out, leaving the lightning portion of her wrath to Sherlock and John.

Her anger over not being notified immediately only lasted seconds, however, and then she was fending off tears, fussing over them as she ushered them upstairs and made them both sit down on the sofa, arranging their blankets around their shoulders before bustling into their kitchen to make tea.

Sherlock chanced a sidelong glance at John, found him already looking, and they quickly darted their gazes away so as not to make Mrs. Hudson irritable again by giggling.

After what felt like an eternity of her fidgeting with their blankets and offering them every possible type of biscuit, John yawned—perhaps not entirely authentically—and Mrs. Hudson excused herself, admonishing Sherlock for some reason for letting her keep John awake all this time. When she had left, John rose from the sofa, blanket attempting to pull him back down as it slid from his back, and Sherlock felt a strange sort of kinship with the horrid orange fabric.

“Well, I’m gonna try and get a kip in before Lestrade shows up,” he sighed with a stretch. “Wake me when he gets here, yeah?” he asked, already leaving the room, and Sherlock made an indistinct grunt of acknowledgement in his throat.

The second he heard John’s door close, he grabbed his mobile, phoning Lestrade to ask him to wait until morning, and the sergeant reluctantly agreed. Sherlock then didn’t know quite what to do with himself. He tried to work on an experiment, but couldn’t focus, the slides and numbers blurring as his mind drifted. He thought about making more tea, but decided against it, knowing he would only be disappointed when it wasn’t as good as John’s or Mrs. Hudson’s. In the end, he settled for playing his violin, gently removing John’s jacket and draping it over the red armchair before plucking up the instrument, standing in the window as he tuned.

The streets were dark, streetlamps and traffic lights reflecting off the black windows of houses long since gone to sleep, and Sherlock just released his fingers to their whims, playing whatever they decided they wanted to. Maybe it was already a piece, maybe he was composing, he couldn’t say; all he knew was that it was much easier not to think when he had his bow in hand, so he simply rode along with the current. He wasn’t sure how long he played, but the next thing he was aware of was a prickling sensation on the back of his neck, and he spun around, bow swinging down to his side as he lowered the violin from his chin.

John stood in the doorway to the stairwell, hip cocked against the doorjamb with his arms folded over his chest. He was wearing low-slung blue trousers with a faint pinstripe and a white shirt, all of which were sleep-rumpled. One of his cheeks was still faintly red with fading pillow creases, and the hair above it was distinctly more disheveled that the opposite side, but all of that faded to inconsequential details compared with the soft smile curling at his lips.

Sherlock’s mouth dried up. “I didn’t hear you come down,” he said, and John dropped his head, swinging one leg out as he pushed off from his support.

“Avoided the squeaky spots,” he replied, smile flashing to a smirk for a moment before settling back to warm. “I didn’t know you played,” he said, bobbing his head at the violin dangling from Sherlock’s fingers as he took a couple steps further into the room. “I mean, I knew you played
something, but I wouldn’t have guessed the violin.”

“What would you have guessed?” Sherlock questioned, watching as John ambled toward the coffee table.

“Oh, drums, definitely,” the blond teased, serious expression breaking to a grin, and Sherlock smiled, twisting the bow self-consciously in his hand. “It was beautiful,” John said suddenly, and Sherlock snapped his eyes back up. The man smiled sheepishly, eyes flitting to the table below before braving Sherlock’s again. “What was it? What you were playing.”

Sherlock shrugged. “I don’t really know,” he admitted, looking down at the violin as if it could remind him. “I was just sort of…playing.”

John snorted. “Just sort of playing,” he echoed bitterly, sinking down onto the worn leather sofa. “Right. Of course.” He held his indignant expression for a moment, and then slowly smiled, and Sherlock ducked his face, shifting his weight.

“Did I wake you?” he asked, suddenly ashamed, but John rattled his head.

“Naw. I wasn’t sleeping all that well anyway. Kept waking up.” He scrubbed a hand down his face, leaning back into the sofa to tilt his head up at the ceiling. Abruptly, he chuckled. “I got shot at tonight.”

“Yes, you did,” Sherlock replied, because what else was there to say.

There was silence for a long moment, John staring at the ceiling while Sherlock stared at him, and then John sighed, rolling his spine forward to a hunch.

“Well, don’t mind me,” he muttered, pulling one of the blankets out from under him. “Just…carry on.” He flicked a hand at Sherlock, tucking his feet up onto the sofa as he lay down, tugging the blanket over himself as he burrowed his head into the armrest.

“You’re going to sleep here?” Sherlock questioned, gesturing vaguely over the scene with his bow.

John nodded as best he was able against the leather. “I’m gonna try, anyway. Need a change of scenery.”

Sherlock’s fingers clenched and loosened over the neck of his violin, eyes darting around uncertainly. “I could go down to my room.”

“No, don’t worry about it,” John assured, shaking his head, voice already a little slurred. “I like listening to you.” John smiled up at him, and Sherlock hoped the dim light and John’s half-closed eyes were enough to prevent the flush flaring up his face from being visible. John sighed, tugging the blanket to his chest as he shifted, bouncing and wriggling further into the furniture, his eyes closing. “Play it, Sam,” he said with about as much grandeur as someone can muster speaking halfway into an armrest.

Sherlock smiled, lifting the instrument to his chin and flicking the bow up to the strings. Immediately, he started in on the melody of “As Time Goes By”, and John huffed a sleep-choked laugh.

“Yes, you did,” Sherlock replied, because what else was there to say.

There was silence for a long moment, John staring at the ceiling while Sherlock stared at him, and then John sighed, rolling his spine forward to a hunch.

“Well, don’t mind me,” he muttered, pulling one of the blankets out from under him. “Just…carry on.” He flicked a hand at Sherlock, tucking his feet up onto the sofa as he lay down, tugging the blanket over himself as he burrowed his head into the armrest.

“You’re going to sleep here?” Sherlock questioned, gesturing vaguely over the scene with his bow.

John nodded as best he was able against the leather. “I’m gonna try, anyway. Need a change of scenery.”

Sherlock’s fingers clenched and loosened over the neck of his violin, eyes darting around uncertainly. “I could go down to my room.”

“No, don’t worry about it,” John assured, shaking his head, voice already a little slurred. “I like listening to you.” John smiled up at him, and Sherlock hoped the dim light and John’s half-closed eyes were enough to prevent the flush flaring up his face from being visible. John sighed, tugging the blanket to his chest as he shifted, bouncing and wriggling further into the furniture, his eyes closing. “Play it, Sam,” he said with about as much grandeur as someone can muster speaking halfway into an armrest.

Sherlock smiled, lifting the instrument to his chin and flicking the bow up to the strings. Immediately, he started in on the melody of “As Time Goes By”, and John huffed a sleep-choked laugh.

“Of course you know Casablanca,” he murmured. “Haven’t seen Doctor Who, but you know Casablanca.”

Sherlock just smiled, watching John’s face slowly slacken with sleep as he played on, indescribably grateful that, of all the dorm rooms in all the towns in all the world, John had walked into his.
Sebastian Moran lay on the plush carpet of the lounge, his blood dripping onto the grey in scarlet splotches.

“I told you Sherlock Holmes was not to be harmed!” the man standing in front of him shouted, and a kick came from his right, hitting him between the ribs.

He crumpled, clutching at his side, and glared up at the man who, up until a moment ago, had just been some moron guarding the door. Moran was going to be putting a bullet between those green eyes as soon as he got out of here, although the smirk on the man’s square face indicated he had no clue to those consequences. “He wasn’t,” he replied, wincing as he righted himself to his knees and then struggled to his feet. “I wasn’t shooting at him; I was shooting at that Watson kid.”

“Yes, but you didn’t know that, did you?” the black-suited figure snarled, voice erratic with rage. “I saw the tapes,” he continued, and Moran’s stomach plummeted through the floor. “That boy was wearing Sherlock’s coat. You had no way of knowing it wasn’t him.”

“I could tell,” Moran attempted, but the man only laughed, high and manic.

“Oh, you’re very brave,” he crooned, smile on his face and ice in his eyes, “trying to lie to me. Tell me something, Seb,” he chirped, clasping his hands behind his back as he strolled idly to the side. “Do you have any idea how expendable you are?”

Moran remained silent, fairly certain he was not meant to answer, and unsure how he would if he tried.

“Because you are, you know,” the man continued, nodding earnestly, as if imparting a great secret. “There are a dozen other mercenaries gagging to work for me, and any one of them would have the good sense NOT TO DISOBEY MY ORDERS!”

Moran flinched, just the slightest twitch of his eyes and dip of his head, but the man noticed, of course, and chuckled softly.

“Don’t worry, I’m not going to kill you today,” he said, smile dripping venom. “But, if you even think about going against me again”—he stepped closer, hands sliding into his trouser pockets—“I will take up smoking just so I can cut off your hands and use them as ashtrays. Clear?”

Moran’s jaw twitched, and he barely managed not to gulp as he nodded.

The man beamed, clapping Moran on the shoulder as he turned away. “Excellent! Now, considering you brought it up, let’s talk about the ‘Watson kid’.”

Moran straightened, prepared, at least in this regard. “John Watson, sir,” he began. “18. Father deceased, died in a car accident last year, served in the military up until the boy was 10. He was wounded in action, honorably discharged, took to drinking after that. Mum’s a similar type, alcoholic, barely scraping by working as a cashier. One sister, younger. They all live in Kent.”

The man nodded thoughtfully, tapping a finger to his lips as he paced. “Was he frightened?”

Moran blinked. “Sir?”

“Was he frightened?” the man repeated, the usual flash in his eyes whenever he had to do so. “John Watson, did he seem afraid?”
Moran slowly shook his head, confused. “No, sir, he didn’t. Not particularly.”

The shorter man’s face twisted, all rage and murder, and then smoothed out again before it curled into a smile that sent chills up even Moran’s hardened spine. “Wants to be difficult, does he?” he muttered, seemingly to himself. “Very well, we’ll change our approach. He’ll break eventually. You ordinary people all do in the end, crippled by your petty feelings.” He snorted, and Moran stayed still and silent, long since passed being offended by such comments. “Victor hasn’t died in some urine-soaked back alley yet, has he?”

Moran shook his head.

“Good,” the man clipped with a nod. “Get him in here. I need him to make a call.”

Moran nodded, turning on his heels and flashing a glare at square-skull as he passed, and the man wisely took a step back. “Oh, sir?” he asked, twisting back, and the suited man halted, turning and tilting his head in eerily polite inquiry. “What should I do with the file?”

The man shrugged. “I don’t care. It’s not about what we took, it’s about why.”

Moran frowned, and the pale figure wrinkled his nose, batting a dismissive wave Moran’s direction.

“Sherlock will figure it out,” he muttered, and Moran felt the familiar twist in his gut at the mention of the name. “Oh, and you can call me Jim,” he continued, his smile warm like blood on a knife’s edge. “All my friends call me Jim.”

Moran watched him, trying to read the hidden novel he was sure the comment contained, but there was no clarity to be found, and Moran nodded, the only thing he felt he could safely do.

Jim Moriarty beamed, bobbing on his heels. “Great! So now…” He jerked his head toward square-head off to the side, leaning forward as he hissed in a conspiratorial stage whisper. “Go ahead.”

Moran didn’t even hesitate long enough to blink, whipping his gun out from the strap on his hip and firing a single shot right between Boxy’s eyes.

Moriarty clapped, soft and polite, as if he were watching a game at Wimbledon instead of a man bleeding out on the floor, slack-jawed and staring unfocused at a spot over Moran’s shoulder. “Always centered,” he noted, stepping forward to lean around the man’s body and get a clear view of the hole in his forehead. “I do so admire symmetry.” He flashed a grin at Moran, who nodded at the compliment.

“I’ll go get Victor for you, Jim,” he added as an afterthought, and, as the man beamed at him, Moran couldn’t help but feel being Jim Moriarty’s friend wasn’t unlike making a deal with the devil.

He always, always collects.
Hello all! So, same reminders as last update: I am going to LFCC this coming weekend (Sherlock panel on Saturday ahhh!) and would love to meet up with some of you there, if you're going (or somewhere else if you're not), and I have a new email address set up for you guys here to contact me about fanfic or beta-ing or reviewing or LFCC or whatever, and it's prettysherlocksoldier@gmail.com. ALSO, is anyone going to that big picnic in Regent's Park on the 19th? But now, on with the show!

“Hey, Sherlock?” he asked as Sherlock closed the door behind them. “Does Mycroft—Does he have…a girlfriend?”

Sherlock’s scoff seemed to be in surround sound, echoing off the walls as if he’d considered the acoustics and pitched it for maximum drama. Which John couldn’t entirely count out. “Girlfriend? No, Mycroft doesn’t have a girlfriend. Mycroft has cake, and the occasional pie if he’s desperate, but no human companionship of any kind.”

John smiled down at his feet as they began climbing the stairs. “Perhaps we should get him a cat for Christmas,” he quipped.

Sherlock stopped dead, spinning a sudden half-circle to face John on the stairs, his eyes wide and mouth stretching with dawning realization.

John’s face fell instantly into a scowl. “We are not getting your brother a cat, Sherlock!”

As it happened, it was Dimmock who came by the next day to get their statements, not Lestrade.

“Busy,” Ryan replied when John asked why. “Paperwork. Wouldn’t ya know, there’s a lot of forms need to be filled out when there’s a shooting at police headquarters.” He shrugged a ‘such is life’, flipping to a blank page in his notepad. “Now, I’m gonna need to talk to you both separately.”

“Why?” Sherlock snapped, uncrossing his suit-trousered legs from where he was poised in his leather chair. “Surely it would be of import to hear our combined accounts, considering we were there together.”

“Well, you weren’t really there for most of it,” John prodded gently, and Sherlock winced.

“Yes, thank you, I am perfectly aware I wasn’t there when you were being shot at by the mercenary employed by a vengeful psychopath,” he answered tartly, and it was John’s turn to cringe.

In the grand total of two hours since they had awoken, John had lived through a veritable epic of angst. It was like an entire season of *EastEnders* combined into one morning, which was a reference Sherlock hadn’t gotten when John mentioned it. Nevertheless, after countless assurances that it wasn’t Sherlock’s fault, that he should stop sulking, that John wasn’t going to suddenly have a breakdown in the loo and could Sherlock please stop hovering outside the door, Sherlock was still in full-on sulk mode.
“Sherlock,” John sighed. Again. “Not now.”

Sherlock glared at him, while Dimmock pretended not to have noticed anything at all, clearing his throat down at his pad.

“I guess we can do ya together,” he said, gesturing between them with the end of his pen. “Just no answering for each other, alright?” He looked pointedly at Sherlock, who managed to look insulted at the insinuation for a few seconds before rolling his eyes and nodding. “Now, John,” he started in, turning to John’s spot on the sofa, “seems best to start with you. Had you ever met Rob Morgan before?”

John shrugged. “I’d seen him around the Yard. Talked to him once. Kinda gave me the creeps, to be honest.”

“How so?” Dimmock asked, scratching away.

“Well…I don’t really know.” John frowned down at the floor between his knees. “It was just a feeling, I guess. He just seemed a bit…eager.”

“Eager?” Dimmock pressed.

Sherlock huffed, rolling his eyes as he flounced back into the chair, and John spared a moment to glare at him.

“Yeah,” John replied, nodding at the young constable. “Said he’d seen me working with Sherlock. Wanted to know what he was like.”

“You think he was fishing for information?”

John hesitantly shook his head. “Don’t know. Something just felt off about it. I said as much to Sherlock right after.” He waved a hand across the room to the detective, who deigned to give a brief nod of affirmation.

“And how ‘bout you?” Dimmock questioned, turning to the brunette now. “Did you ever meet him?”

“Not that I remember,” Sherlock muttered, rattling a shrug that indicated he couldn’t be less interested in the proceedings. “We may have been introduced at some obligatory point or other, but I never had any sort of meaningful interaction with him.”

Dimmock nodded, and John watched him write about two words to all of Sherlock’s.

“Alright now, John, if you could just walk me through what happened.”

John did, Sherlock growing gradually stiller as the story spun on. By the time he got to the part where Sherlock found him, the man’s fingers were parchment-white on the leather arms, and John was feeling supremely guilty. And he was about to make it worse. “Actually, there was something I-I thought of,” he said, and Dimmock’s eyes snapped back up from his pad.

He looked uncertainly between the constable and Sherlock for a moment, reading in Sherlock’s frown that he had no idea what John was about to say, hadn’t pieced this bit together yet, which was going to make this all the more difficult. “Last night,” he began, leaning forward over his knees as he spoke directly to Sherlock, “I was wearing your coat.”

Sherlock blinked back at him a moment, mouth opening in a ready snap, and then he froze, and John
had never known it was possible to physically see the blood drain from someone’s face until now.

“He was back ’round the corner,” John continued, addressing Dimmock. Sherlock’s face too difficult to watch any longer. “Rob- Moran wouldn’t have been able to see him, and it was quite dark.”

“So, what you’re saying is,” Dimmock ventured slowly, pointing the end of his pen at John over the top of his notepad, “Moran thought you were Sherlock?”

John didn’t need to look to know the expression Sherlock had on his face. “I don’t know that,” he replied, trying to soothe as much of the guilt as he could. “All I’m saying is I don’t think he would have been able to tell it wasn’t Sherlock. He probably would have shot at anyone chasing him,” John added, getting out ahead of the inevitable issue.

“But he might have been after Sherlock, you mean?” Dimmock asked, apparently blissfully unaware of the waves of panic John could feel stretching out from Sherlock in ever-widening rings.

“No, there’s no reason to-”

“Of course there is.”

John turned, following the sharp voice to where Sherlock sat, fingers white where they gripped the leather, his eyes unfocused and turned toward the ground.

“There’s no reason to try and kill you, no reason at all. Of course he was after me. It’s the only thing that makes sense. Why didn’t I see it before?”

“Sherlock,” John tried to intervene, but the detective was gone, far from the reach of John’s voice, and a wild panic grew in his eyes, driving his words on with quickening cadence.

“It was dark, too dark to see anything clearly, and perspective would be impossible at that distance in the lighting. My old coat was smaller, so, proportionately, it would look like it fit you, and you were wearing that stupid wig- God, why did I let you-”

“Stop!”

Sherlock startled, bouncing a bit in his chair as he jumped, and John knew he should wait until they were alone to have this little dust-up, but, dammit, he couldn’t just sit here and listen to this!

“You didn’t let me do anything!” he snapped, pinning Sherlock across the room with a glare. “And, besides, like I said, he probably would have shot at anyone who chased him, and I chased him, I chose that,” he urged, pressing a hand to his sternum in emphasis. “It’s got nothing to do with you.”

“Of course it does,” Sherlock bit back with the air of someone who would probably say that about everything. “He wouldn’t have been there at all if it wasn’t for me, would likely have never even taken a job at the Yard, and you wouldn’t have been there if I hadn’t asked you to stay over break, or if I’d never started taking you on cases in the first place, or-”

“And none of us would be here if it wasn’t for God, or the Big Bang, or whatever you wanna blame!” John railed in interjection, hands waving out at his sides in frustration. “It’s pointless, Sherlock, it’s all just pointless! It’s not your fault. I’m the one who went chasing after a murderer!”

“But you would have been safe if you hadn’t-”

“Safe?” John scoffed, wrinkling his nose across at the detective. “Safe? Sherlock, if I wanted safe, I would never have gotten into that very first cab with you.”
Sherlock blinked at him, argument-ready mouth slackening as it slowly closed.

John, however, was on a roll. “I wouldn’t have sat through stakeouts and poured over crime scene photos and gone to a bloody brothel, for chrissakes!”

“You what!”?

“Not now, Ryan! I wouldn’t have done any of those things, Sherlock, any of them!” John was leaning forward off the sofa now, arms waving out over the coffee table as he gestured wildly at the wide-eyed brunette. “If I wanted safe, I would have run for the hills the second you mentioned ‘small fires!’” he snapped, curving his fingers in emphasis around the words. He took a moment to breathe, collecting himself at the ground before lifting his face again. “This was my choice, Sherlock, my decision. And I don’t regret it.” He shook his head, eyes never leaving grey ones, green today in the morning sunlight filtering through the half-closed curtains. “So you don’t get to either.”

Not a single sound broke the quiet of 221B, not even the birds daring to break the awkward silence settling in around the trio in the earth-toned flat, but John honestly couldn’t care about what Dimmock or the neighbors or the bloody pigeons heard, he was looking at Sherlock. And what he thought he saw looking back at him was enough to instantly deflate his lungs.

Sherlock was looking at him with an expression nothing short of awe—almost starstruck, if John would dare associate him with such a word. He was stunned, frozen in loosely gaping shock, and John knew instinctively from the shifting of his eyes between John’s that no one had ever told him that before. No one had ever chosen Sherlock Holmes, and now the detective couldn’t believe it, those all-seeing eyes roving over him, looking for a tell to the lie, and John held very still, working hard to ensure there was nothing that could point to deceit.

Luckily—for Dimmock, at least, whose feet had begun shuffling awkwardly on the carpet—the door downstairs slammed shut, breaking them out of their tableau.

“Oh, excuse me, sorry. Gosh, there’s a lot of you! Excuse me. Oh, shit, sorry! Just have to get through.” A series of thumps, a few muffled shouts by the officers downstairs, and a rustle of clothing later, and the living room door flew open with a bang.

“Molly,” Sherlock greeted, already leaning back in his chair, the picture of poise.

The girl’s eyes widened. “Sherlock!” she practically shrieked, rushing past Dimmock to greet him, and, to everyone’s shock—and maybe a little horror—throwing her arms around the detective. “I came as soon as I heard! My uncle only just told me this morning. Oh my god, are you alright! He said you were shot!”

Sherlock sputtered, the height difference of him sitting causing his face to be burrowed in Molly’s mottled, green scarf. “Molly!” he snapped, arms stretched out to the side to avoid any semblance of a hug. “No one was shot, as you can clearly see. John was merely shot at.”

“Oh, so now it’s shot at,” John muttered, earning himself a glare around Molly’s arms.

The petite brunette eased her limbs off of Sherlock, turning around to face John, who shifted on the sofa, hoping to ward off similar treatment. “You?” she questioned, blinking, clearly a little dazed with relief. “You were shot?”

“At,” John corrected, smiling brightly, the kind of smile that really didn’t require a hug, thank you very much. “And yes.”

Molly blinked some more. “You?” she repeated, pointing now. “You were shot at?”
John raised an eyebrow. “Yes,” he drew out.

“Not Sherlock?” she added, pointing a thumb behind her.

“Yes,” John snapped, bitter now. “Why is that so hard to believe? What, I’m not important enough for psychopaths to wanna do me in?”

It took him all of two seconds with everyone’s eyes on him to realize what he’d said.

“Not good?” he murmured, looking past to Sherlock with a grimace.

Sherlock bobbed his head side-to-side, as if he could go either way on the subject.

“But you’re alright?” Molly asked, stepping to just the opposite side of the coffee table, and John was quite grateful for the barrier.

He was pants at hugs. What does one do with their hands?!

“I’m fine, Molly,” he assured with a nod. “Not a scratch. One of the bullets grazed my coat, but, other than that-”

“What!?”

John bounced back on the sofa, startling away from the sound.

“It grazed!? It got that close!?” Molly started to move around the coffee table.

John moved the other way. “It didn’t hit me,” he entreated.

Molly scoffed. “Yeah, but it did a damn good job of trying, didn’t it?”

“See,” Sherlock muttered, smirking smugly as he nodded at Molly’s back.

John glared back, fists clenching. “I’m fine!” he barked, finally standing and moving next to Dimmock, who didn’t look like he’d quite recovered from Sherlock getting a hug yet. “It barely grazed the coat, let alone me. I’ve looked worse after rugby matches, for chrissakes!” His right hand lifted, moving to cup his left shoulder, which still twinged a bit when he got particularly irritated in his gesticulating, and realized his mistake a second too late.

“Where’s your brace?” Sherlock asked, uncrossing his legs and leaning forward over his knees.

John cringed. “Sherlock,” he sighed, but the detective was already up.

“You’re supposed to be wearing your shoulder brace,” he muttered, curls bouncing almost comically against his frustrated brow. “The doctor said-”

“The doctor said whatever he needed to say to get you off the phone at 3am,” John bit, and Sherlock’s eyes narrowed. “I don’t need a fucking shoulder brace, Sherlock, and I’m not wearing it!”

Sherlock stared at him, eyes moving to slits, and then he blinked, gaze shifting to the sofa.

They lunged at the same time.

“The sofa cushion, John, really,” Sherlock muttered, trying to fight through John’s grappling arms. “Can you think of no more original hiding place?”
“Leave it, Sherlock!” he snarled back, clambering over the leather arm to press his weight down on
the cushion. One of Sherlock’s arms managed to snake under, and John bent his own around,
reaching until he caught hold of the detective’s wrist.

“You’re being childish!” Sherlock spouted, tugging and twisting at John’s arm as he tried to pull
himself loose.

“You’re being childish!” John countered, leaning further off the sofa to get better leverage. “I don’t
need a bloody shoulder brace!”

“Yes you do!” Sherlock threw his weight into a lunge, and John lost a couple inches of ground, mind
working quickly to find an advantage of his own.

He shifted, making sure his face wasn’t visible to Sherlock, who John was practically on top of now,
im him leaning off the sofa as Sherlock knelt beside it. “No I- Ow, ow, ow!” He hissed, gripping his left
shoulder, the one attached to the arm Sherlock seemed not to have noticed he was manhandling.

“John?” the brunette bleated, ripping his arm away as he shifted closer, concerned.

John almost felt guilty. And then it passed. “AHA!” he bellowed, ripping the brace out from beneath
the sofa cushion and rolling onto his back, the blue bundle waving in his hand overhead.

Sherlock gaped with betrayal, and then shifted into a glower, pushing up from a crouch to lunge at
the brace in John’s hand.

With a small shout, John chucked it, bending his arm back and whipping the garment as hard as he
could out the living room door.

Sherlock fell against the back of the sofa on his elbows, knees braced on the edge of the cushion as
he draped perpendicularly over John, hovering only a few inches above. Turning his face from the
door, he glared furiously down, red-faced and tousled from exertion, one half of his crisp shirt
hanging outside of his trousers, and John started laughing, finding he could not stop.

“Hem-hem.”

John choked, and they both turned, John bracing himself up on his elbows to better see over
Sherlock’s back.

Mycroft held the blue brace out in front of him, eyeing it distastefully as he turned it side-to-side by
his fingertips. “Am I interrupting?” he said with that patent smile that meant nothing remotely
pleasant.

John blushed.

Sherlock didn’t. “Aren’t you always?” he snapped, full of false cheer, and John took the
sibling spitting contest as an opportunity to stand himself up, brushing his black-and-white-striped
jumper smooth and trying to wrangle the back of his hair. “Just flew out of your office, racing to get
here, oh”—he checked a watch he wasn’t wearing—“a brief nine hours after the fact. Oh, well done. I bet you even left your midnight cheesecake unfinished.”

Mycroft smiled, and even his teeth somehow seemed to glitter with malice. “Wonderful to see your traumatic ordeal has had no effect on your wit.”

Sherlock sniffed, crossing his arms, but did not reply, likely because he somehow knew Mycroft was just about to turn away to Dimmock and Molly, who had somehow ended up together over by the kitchen door.

“Constable Dimmock,” he said, extending a pale hand, and Ryan took it after a moment’s skeptical gaze. “Wonderful to finally meet you. I’ve heard very good things, very good things. Seems you’re something of a rising star, or so your reports would indicate.”

“Er, thank you…sir,” Dimmock replied, adding the honorific with a climbing eyebrow. “I’m sorry, but…who are you, exactly?”

Mycroft chuckled his politician’s chuckle as he released Dimmock’s hand. “Oh, my apologies, where are my manners? I’m Mr. Mycroft Holmes, Sherlock’s elder brother. I work for the government.”

“The government?” Dimmock repeated, and Mycroft nodded.

“Yes, I’m afraid so.” He chuckled again. “Nothing important, mind you. Just a small position.”

Sherlock snorted.

John elbowed him in the side.

“Well, it’s, er, good to meet you too, sir,” Dimmock said, nodding briskly. “Sherlock never mentioned he had a brother.”

“Well, when you speak of the devil—”

“Sherlock.”

The detective shot him an affronted look, no doubt grieving for the loss of his punchline, but John glared right back, and, eventually, the brunette mutely turned back to the exchange.

“Yes, well, we’ve never been much for family bonding,” Mycroft answered, turning a smile to Sherlock.

Sherlock’s eye twitched. “What are you doing here, Mycroft? I’m sure a dozen CCTV cameras could have easily assured you of our safety.”

“Oh, two dozen, at least,” Mycroft replied, moving away from Dimmock and back toward the door, umbrella swinging along with his stride, “but I thought I would drop this off personally.” He pulled open a side of his suit jacket, a hand disappearing inside before revealing a flash drive. “These are the files Moran stole. I think you’ll find it most…enlightening.” He held the small plastic case out, but Sherlock kept his arms folded, making no move to take it. After a moment of staring, Mycroft smiled, tight with frustration, before shifting his stretched arm toward John.

“Thank you,” John said, because he had manners, and he twisted a pointed glare up at Sherlock as he took the drive. “I’m sure this will be very helpful.”
Mycroft smiled again, more genuine this time—or as genuine as a smile ever looked on his face—and nodded. “I certainly hope so.” He straightened up, both hands braced on his umbrella as he looked imperiously down at Sherlock. “I don’t need to tell you how serious this is, Sherlock, but since you seem determined to get yourself killed before the age of 20, I’ll remind you. You are not, under any circumstances, to conduct any action without consulting me first. Do I make myself clear?”

Sherlock smiled, slow and deadly. “Positively crystalline,” he hissed, beaming innocently as Mycroft glared. A second later, the sarcastic cheer disintegrated, giving way to a cold glower. “Now get out.”

“A gracious host, as always,” Mycroft chided with a bob of his head. “I’ll be out of your unruly hair in a moment, Sherlock. I just wanted to have a quick word with John before I left.”

“What?” John muttered, wrong-footed by the mention of his name. “Why?”

Mycroft tilted his head at him with a curious expression. “Why, about the shooting, of course,” he said. “Ghastly business, isn’t it? Won’t be a moment.” He beckoned John to walk in front of him, smiling serenely, his face turning between John and a rather impressively glaring Sherlock.

“You can talk to him here,” Sherlock snapped, clearly more an order than a suggestion.

Mycroft sighed, rolling his eyes. “Really, Sherlock, I’m not going to kidnap him.” He chuckled. No one else did. “I assure you, I’ll send him right back. Not a hair out of place.” He continued grinning jovially, and Sherlock narrowed his eyes, but it was clear there was nothing for it, so, reluctantly, John followed Mycroft’s direction, heading out of the living room and down the stairs.

The foyer was empty of the officers Dimmock had brought with him—ostensibly for training, but they were clearly going to stick around for protection detail—and voices drifting out from beneath Mrs. Hudson’s door indicated they were being held hostage by tea and biscuits. John turned to Mycroft, ready to demand an explanation, but Mycroft placed a finger to his lips, forestalling the action. With a jerk of his head, he indicated outside, and John followed as the older man stepped out onto the pavement.

“Alright,” John sighed, folding his arms as he turned to face the taller Holmes, “what is it now? Gonna offer me more money?”

“I never gave an amount the first time.”

“And you still don’t have to bother.”

Mycroft smiled, tilting his head in acknowledgement of the point. “Yes, I suppose that was not my best moment, but, in my defense, I didn’t truly expect you to stick around as long as you have. Sherlock usually burns through acquaintances quite quickly.”

John’s posture stiffened. “Well, I’m not an acquaintance.”

“No,” Mycroft chuckled, an eerie sort of knowing in his eyes, “no you’re not, are you?”

John didn’t know quite what to say to that, so he settled for glaring, content that, whatever Mycroft meant, it was something to be glared at.

Mycroft sighed, the same beyond-exasperated one generally reserved for Sherlock.

John felt a little proud.
“I called you out here to talk about Sherlock. Not to ask you to spy on him,” he added hastily as John opened his mouth, “merely to keep an eye on him. I meant what I said, about talking to me first.” Mycroft grew serious, and John imagined he saw a glimmer of real concern cross his face. “Sherlock can’t go running off half-cocked into this one. He needs to let someone else, namely me, take the lead this time. And I need your help ensuring that happens.”

“Me?” John snorted. “Mycroft, perhaps it’s escaped your notice, but Sherlock doesn’t listen to anyone. Least of all me. I’ve been telling him all week to put his cups in the sink, and only this morning did it end up even in the kitchen. On top of the cupboards. Where I couldn’t reach it.”

Mycroft’s lips twitched, and John rolled his eyes, clearly the only one not seeing the humor in his having to drag a chair across the room to pluck a tea-stained mug from practically the ceiling. “Even so,” Mycroft continued, impartial once more, “you have his ear more than I. More than most, I would say. Look, John.”

John blinked, a little startled at the sudden levelling, and Mycroft didn’t even appear to be manipulating him.

“All I ask is that you watch out for him. Make sure he doesn’t run off on some hunch and get himself killed.”

John winced, but, after a moment, nodded. “Alright,” he replied, “I can do that. But I’m not reporting anything back to you,” he added, pointing a finger at the suited man for good measure.

Mycroft chuckled, twirling his umbrella as he stepped away. “Of course not. Good day now, John. Oh, and it might be best if you didn’t go anywhere over the next few days.” He turned back, grinning at John’s perplexed expression just as a long black car pulled up beside the curb. “I have some of my people watching the flat, just in case Moran tries again. It is so much easier to set up a perimeter if you stay inside. Afternoon,” he bade with a nod, dropping down and disappearing into the interior of the car.

John caught a glimpse of long, thin legs and black heels in the backseat, and had to stare at the thin air where the car had been for several moments before he wrapped his head around those possibilities. Must be a coworker. Had to be. Because imagining Mycroft holding hands with some faceless, black-heeled woman across a candlelit table for two was just more than John could bear. He had been shot at, after all; he didn’t need any more traumatic experiences this weekend.

The door behind him flew open, and John whipped around at the sudden sound.

Sherlock was standing in the entrance, leaning out and scanning with narrowed eyes down either side of the street.

John tried not to be too disappointed he had tucked his shirt back in.

“Gone?” the brunette asked, lifting an eyebrow at him.

John nodded. “Gone,” he replied, climbing back up the few steps to the door. “Hey, Sherlock?” he asked as Sherlock closed the door behind them. “Does Mycroft- Does he have…a girlfriend?”

Sherlock’s scoff seemed to be in surround sound, echoing off the walls as if he’d considered the acoustics and pitched it for maximum drama. Which John couldn’t entirely count out. “Girlfriend? No, Mycroft doesn’t have a girlfriend. Mycroft has cake, and the occasional pie if he’s desperate, but no human companionship of any kind.”

John smiled down at his feet as they began climbing the stairs. “Perhaps we should get him a cat for
Christmas,” he quipped.

Sherlock stopped dead, spinning a sudden half-circle to face John on the stairs, his eyes wide and mouth stretching with dawning realization.

John’s face fell instantly into a scowl. “We are not getting your brother a cat, Sherlock!”

“Why not?” Sherlock whined, actually whined!

“Because he’d hate it,” John replied, starting up the steps again, forcing Sherlock to move on ahead of him.

“Exactly!” Sherlock exclaimed gleefully, turning back to John as he reached the top of the flight. “We could name it something abhorrent like Fluffy or Snowball or Oreo.”

“Oi, my sister’s cat was named Oreo,” John barked, but Sherlock only lifted his eyebrows, tilting his head imperiously. “Alright, fine, so it’s a terrible name,” John muttered, moving past the now grinning Sherlock to the living room, “but we’re still not getting him a cat.”

“But, Jooooohn!”

“No!”

Sherlock pouted, nothing short of sulking into the room behind him as John headed toward Dimmock, who was engaged in conversation with Molly by the fireplace. They both looked up at his approach, polite smiles on their faces, and John wondered what it must mean that shouting matches carrying on up the stairs were no cause for alarm in 221B.

“Sorry about that, Ryan,” John sighed, nodding his head toward Dimmock. “Mycroft will not be denied.”

Ryan chuckled, shaking his head. “No trouble. I was practically done anyway. Your statements are more of a formality, really, considering we’ve got the surveillance tape.” He flipped his notepad closed, stowing it in an inside pocket of his suit jacket. “The two downstairs are gonna be staying around, if that’s alright. Not in the building, of course,” he added, lifting his palms out in consolation. “Just outside. Unmarked car. Shifts will be trading off every few hours over the next couple days, just to be safe.”

“You needn’t bother,” Sherlock interjected from where he was hovering by the coffee table. “Mycroft already has his people watching the place.”

Dimmock’s brow furrowed, his mouth opening to speak, and then seemed to give it up as a bad job, closing it with a brief rattle of his head. “Regardless, they’ll be there. So don’t be calling in a panic because there’s a black car outside the place.”

Twin snorts answered.

Dimmock grinned. “Might be best if you didn’t go far either,” he continued, zipping up pockets and going about the other usual business of preparing to depart. “We can have people bring you groceries and the like, if you need. Just give me or Lestrade a call.”

“So, we’re on house arrest?” John summated, and Dimmock smiled but shook his head.

“More like this is now a safe house,” he countered, only smiling broader as John rolled his eyes. “Well, I should be off. Got time for a quick lunch before I go back in, provided it’s nowhere I have
to sit down.” He smiled ruefully, passing John to move toward the door.

“Oh, um, Ryan?” Molly called, taking a few strides forward as she lifted a hand toward him.

Dimmock turned around, eyes bright, and John flicked a raised eyebrow at Sherlock, who was already engrossed in the exchange, looking between their faces with narrowed eyes.

“Um, if it’s not too much trouble, I- Would you mind giving me a ride back to the station? I haven’t got money for the tube back, and my uncle can take me home after his shift.” She was blushing furiously, fiddling with the strap of her purse.

Even John knew what that meant.

“Er, yeah, sure,” Dimmock muttered, not entirely unflushed himself as he scratched at the back of his neck. “You got anything against Italian food?”

Molly giggled, and John and Sherlock’s eyebrows had a race on whose could climb into their hair the fastest. “No, not at all, but I don’t know if I have enough-”

“Don’t worry about it,” Dimmock interjected, waving her comment away. “My treat.”

There was far too much beaming going on, John decided.

Molly ducked her head, hooking her hair behind her ear. “Well, alright, if-if you’re certain.”

“Course I am,” Dimmock replied jovially, turning to the side to wave an arm toward the door. “After you.”

Molly giggled, again, and walked on ahead of him. “Bye, Sherlock. John,” she said, turning to give them each a small wave. “I’ll see you at school. I really am so glad you’re both alright.”

John smiled at her, infectious as Molly’s quiet sincerity was. “Thank you, Molly. It was good of you to come.”

She smiled at him, nodding briefly at the acknowledgement, but John called her back, something suddenly occurring to him.

“Molly?”

She stopped just at the top of the stairs, leaning around Dimmock to find his eyes.

“You- You didn’t tell anyone else about what happened, did you? Like…Mary or-or anyone?”

Molly frowned quizzically at him, and, even though John wasn’t looking directly, he saw Sherlock stiffen in the corner of his eye. “No,” she replied warily. “Why? Do you want me to?”

“No!” John blurted, maybe a bit too quickly if Molly’s widening eyes were any judge. “Er, no,” John continued shyly. “I-I just wanted to make sure she wasn’t worried, is all. No need to bother her with it.” He felt like his face smiled, but, whatever it was, it prompted a smile back from Molly.

“Alright. I’ll see you both later then.” She gave them a final wave before heading down the stairs, Dimmock imitating the gesture and following shortly behind her.

John walked after them, hovering just out of sight at the top of the landing as he waited for the footsteps to cease, the door opening and closing with a creak and a click. “Huh,” he chirped. “Well, how ‘bout that.”
“He’s too old for her,” Sherlock snapped, voice coming from somewhere to John’s right.

“No really,” John replied, shaking his head, eyes still fixed on the closed door. “Only a few years.”

Sherlock huffed, and John turned, finding the detective leaning against the side table, fingers tapping a rhythm out where they gripped the edge.

“Sherlock,” he hesitantly began, gut twisting at the suspicion, “are you- are you jealous?”

“What!” Sherlock spouted with an outrage that could only be sincere.

John’s lungs got the air they were crying for.

“No! Don’t be absurd,” he snapped haughtily, turning away to stare across at the window with a flick of his curls. “I’m not jealous, I was merely expressing a concern.”

“Well, I think it’ll be fine,” John said, unreasonably cheered by Sherlock’s response. “Molly can handle herself. And we know Dimmock; he’s a good guy.”

Sherlock snorted, clearly not convinced, and John smiled at him, warmed by the shift.

“You’re worried,” he teased, hoping his grin didn’t look too soppy.

Sherlock glared at him out of the corner of his eyes, not deigning to turn his head. “No, I’m not.”

“Yes, you are,” John retorted, and Sherlock did look at him then, likely ready to spit out another denial, but stopped short, eyes taking in the absurd grin on John’s face.

His lips twitched in a smile he couldn’t entirely repress, and then he looked away, a swallow moving down his throat. “I’m not worried,” he muttered, pushing off from the table and heading toward the kitchen.

John’s cheeks hurt from smiling as he looked back toward the front door. “Sure you’re not,” he murmured, and he could feel Sherlock glaring at him. Still hovering in the clouds a bit after Sherlock not being jealous and actually caring about another person’s emotional well-being, John opened his mouth, singing the familiar tune just loud enough to carry across to Sherlock.

“Caaaaaan you feeel-” He was cut off by a shoulder brace to the back of the head

-----

John lay draped width-wise across his armchair, legs lolling off the armrest while his head hung backward, giving him an upside-down view of the fireplace. With a clench of his abs, he lifted his neck up, the vertebrae cracking in protest as he looked across the living room.

Sherlock was lying on the sofa, eyes closed, hands folded over his horizontal form as if in prayer. His lips were even moving slightly, but John was fairly certain he wasn’t calling on any heavenly hosts. If he was, it didn’t bode well for his clout with god, considering he’d been doing the same thing for the past three hours.

It was late Saturday evening, not quite two days since Dimmock had visited them Friday morning, but 38 hours could feel like a lifetime when you weren’t allowed to leave. John had even been stopped from going to Speedy’s earlier, Mycroft’s men rushing him at the door, and the poor delivery man who brought their fish and chips was likely going to need therapy after his quite literal dressing-down. Mrs. Hudson had been in to bring them groceries, of course, making sure they were stocked
on milk, eggs, tea, all the usual essentials, but there was no substitute anyone could provide for the outdoors. It felt somewhat like being on a plane, John considered, breathing in the recycled air that just grew drier and drier in your mouth until you were practically breathing chalk by the time you landed. He had run through earlier that morning, ripping open every window he could find in search of relief, but then Sherlock had received a text about keeping the curtains closed, and John had grumbled as he went back through the flat, creating a dozen various shades of ghosts fluttering inward from the captured breeze.

Now the darkness had settled in around them long ago, early as the nights were approaching winter, and Sherlock had retreated into his mind palace, leaving John to quietly amuse himself. Well, he wouldn’t say quietly, exactly, many of his actions purposefully louder in hopes of disturbing the detective and bringing him back to the outside world, but, eventually, John gave up that particular endeavor and just read through the end of Rebecca in silence. Sherlock could read it himself if he wanted to know how it ended, selfish prat.

John sighed, turning his head this way and that, wondering if he should go to sleep in lieu of something worthwhile to do, when a knock came to the door downstairs.

Sherlock’s eyes opened, and he sat up, legs kicking in the air as they dislocated themselves from the sofa, coming to rest on the floor as the detective bounced to his feet.

A sound like a double-time rainstick filled the flat, pattering off the floor in dozens of little clicks and clacks, and Sherlock started, head rattling as he searched for the source.

John merely leaned up, stretching his back so he could clearly watch the progress of his meticulously arranged dominoes falling one by one after their designed kick from Sherlock’s feet, a blur of black and white lines and curves across the carpet.

When the last piece fell, so did silence, and Sherlock looked slowly up to meet his gaze, one eyebrow climbing. “How long did that take you?”

John shrugged. “’Bout an hour.”

Sherlock gave him a fondly confused sort of smirk, and then left the room, his leather shoes quiet on the steps.

Within seconds, two voices could be heard drifting up to the living room, one of them familiar in its gruffness.

“Lestrade!” John cried, flailing himself out of the armchair to greet the sergeant as he walked into the room. “Do you have a case? What is it, a murder? Kidnapping? Bank heist? Double murder?”

Lestrade blinked at him, forehead slowly furrowing. “Blimey!” he spluttered after a moment, turning to Sherlock as he chuckled. “Two days in here and he’s turned into you!”

John folded his arms, glowering up at the amused sergeant, and then realized that likely was only proving the point and quickly untangled his limbs, trying to affect a neutral expression. “I’m bored,” John muttered.

Lestrade snorted, flicking his eyebrows, and then his expression turned puzzled as he stretched his neck to peer around John. “Did those dominos spell out ‘fuck’? In script?”

John turned, although he didn’t need to, and looked back to find both Sherlock and Lestrade eyeing him curiously, although the former looked considerably more amused by the proceedings. “Really bored,” he said in response, and Sherlock just barely contained a laugh, lifting the backs of his
fingers to his lips as he ducked his head.

Lestrade only shook his head, rolling his eyes exasperatedly. “Well, sorry, John,” he stressed with a lift of his eyebrows, “but I didn’t come for a case. I just wanted to let you know surveillance is being called off. The last of the teams are moving out now. So you can go play dominos in the park tomorrow, if you like,” he added with a mocking smirk.

John sneered at him, but said nothing, too grateful to be able to breathe fresh air again to risk pissing him off.

“I’ll leave you to it,” Lestrade said, nodding his head to both of them in turn before twisting on his heels and moving from the room, leaving Sherlock and John alone, both of them still and silent as they listened to his footfalls on the steps. When the door opened and closed, they both moved in wordless agreement to the window, watching Lestrade walk down the pavement and get into a dark car, another unmarked one following him when he left.

It was too late to do much of anything but drink and go clubbing—neither of which he, let alone Sherlock, was inclined to do—but John so wanted to get out of the flat, even just to walk down to the 24-hour Tesco and get junk food they didn’t need. He was opening his mouth to say as much when the doorbell rang throughout the building, and they turned to one another, confused.

“Lestrade must’ve forgot something,” John suggested, but Sherlock shook his head, providing no further information as he turned toward the stairs. John followed him, growing concerned, but Sherlock didn’t seem to have any such reticence, bounding down the steps. He paused at the bottom, waiting for John to come alongside him, and that act alone was enough to send wariness prickling up the back of John’s neck.

With muscles tensed, he waited, watching Sherlock’s hand as it clasped the handle and turned. The first thing John saw was brown paper sacks held up to obscure the head and torso attached to long legs clad in tight black denim.

“Hello, boys,” sang a familiar voice, and the bags parted to reveal the grinning face of Irene Adler. “Let’s have dinner!” She pushed between them, forcing her way into the flat, although Sherlock offered no resistance. He only rolled his eyes, seemingly exasperated but not at all surprised.

John was slightly less considerate. “What are you doing here?” he snapped, folding his arms and glaring at her back as Sherlock quietly closed the door behind him.

And then, she turned. It was only a moment, just a flicker through her eyes and a quirk of her mouth as she faced him before Sherlock had yet turned back from closing the door. It wasn’t quite a smile, wasn’t quite a grimace, but it was definitely an apology, an awkward acknowledgement of shame. John wasn’t quite prepared for just how much it would affect him, watching this woman, The Woman, look bashful about anything, but the display instantly softened him. Maybe it was weak, maybe she was manipulating him, but he could not deny the truce in her eyes, and found his anger evaporating in spite of himself. It was then he noticed her left eye, notably swollen and bruised.

“What happened?” he asked, bobbing his head to indicate the injury, unable to suppress his instinctive concern.

Irene huffed, back to her usual self so quickly, John thought he might have been imagining the momentary shyness. “Moran paid me a visit,” she replied coolly. “Thought it was me who put you
on to him.”

“It…was,” John said slowly, almost a question in it.

Irene rolled her eyes. “Not entirely,” she snipped. “You were already suspicious of ‘Rob Morgan’ before I told you anything about Moran. I doubt I helped much at all.”

“You eliminated everyone without blond hair,” Sherlock interjected, and Irene beamed at him.

“So I did. Aren’t you lucky to have me? Now, is one of you gonna take these bags, or is chivalry truly dead?” She looked between them, blue eyes piercing out of their black lining, and John and Sherlock sighed simultaneously, each grabbing the bag closest to them.

Irene grinned. “Why, thank you, gentlemen! Just up here, right?” She pointed back toward the stairs, and then immediately began ascending them, not even looking back at them for confirmation.

John looked to Sherlock, but the detective looked just as perplexed as he was, watching Irene’s retreating back with a furrowed expression, as if he couldn’t quite believe he was seeing her. “Did you know she was coming?” John asked softly as they began to follow.

“No,” Sherlock muttered. “What, do you think I was saving it for a surprise?”


“Don’t get your hopes up,” Irene said, peeking her head out from the living room doorway as John drew up toward it. “You couldn’t afford me.”

John smiled at her, reaching the landing. “I have savings,” he offered, and she barked a hard laugh, but the dancing amusement in her eyes was genuine. When John Watson buried hatchets, he buried them deep, and, when he turned to look back at Sherlock, a smile still on his face, the detective was looking at him like he’d just sprouted an extra head. “What?” he more mouthed than asked, but Sherlock rattled his head, dismissing the topic.

“There’s plates and cutlery in the bags,” Irene said as she sank into John’s chair, crossing her legs with an exaggerated kick. “When you bump into the samosas, pass ‘em over.” She settled in, picking at her nails, evidently leaving it up to them to organize supper.

John shook his head, unloading the takeaway containers one by one onto the table beside her. He watched as she lifted her fingers to her injured eye, wincing a bit as she pressed gingerly at the cheekbone. “Can I- Do you mind-” He left the sentiment unfinished, but waved a hand toward her face in indication.

She gave him a curious look, a hint of humor in it, and then nodded, leaning back against the red fabric of the chair.

John moved around to her front, bending down to peer at the swollen socket. He slowly lifted a hand to her cheek, touching lightly over the bone. “Can you see out of it alright?” he asked.

Quite suddenly, Irene beamed. “Oh, I can see you just fine, blue eyes.”

“Why are you here?” Sherlock snapped, jaw stiff as he folded his arms.

Irene arched a perfectly groomed eyebrow at him. “To help you, Sherlock,” she said airily, tilting her head at him. “And to bring you the best Indian food in the city. You’re welcome, by the way.”
“We’re not hungry,” Sherlock deadpanned, glaring down at her, and John moved away, walking around Sherlock’s back to escape into the kitchen.

“Well, then I’ll just eat it myself,” Irene jovially replied, and John could hear squeaking containers and crinkling plastic bags as he opened the freezer door.

Scanning the contents, he grabbed a bag of frozen peas and a dishcloth, wrapping the cold package in the towel before handing it down over the back of the chair. “Here,” he said, and Irene lowered the carton of samosas to her lap to take it from him.

She adjusted the bag over her eye, a quick wince shifting to relief, and then tilted her head back, peering up at him upside-down. “So, which one are you?” she asked, single exposed eye glittering as she smirked. “McDreamy or McSteamy?”

“Irene,” Sherlock growled as John laughed, and The Woman rolled her eyes, sighing tiredly as she lolled her head back down toward the detective.

“Lighten up, Sherls; it was only a joke. I’m here to talk business, not pleasure. For tonight, anyway,” she added with a wink back at John, and it was his turn to roll his eyes.

Sherlock made a sound somewhere between a snarl and a scoff, his lip curling. “John prefers blondes,” he answered tartly.

“Er, John is right here,” John interjected, grabbing a carton marked with a scrawled ‘Green Curry’ as he passed behind Sherlock. “And, incidentally,” he added, flopping down in Sherlock’s chair, the flaps of the container coming unhinged beneath his fingers with pops of cardstock, “he prefers brunettes as a rule.”

He couldn’t pick which expression was his favorite, Sherlock’s incredulity or Irene’s begrudging respect. He smirked over his chicken, popping a plastic fork from the cutlery packet with a quick smash against his thigh.

“Er, right. Well, that’s—” Sherlock coughed into a fist, narrowing his eyes at nothing in particular before turning his back to John to address Irene again. “Business, you said?”

Irene looked up at him, shaking her head as if gravely disappointed, and then shifted in the chair, straightening as she placed her remaining samosas on the table. “There are things you don’t know, Sherlock. Things about Moran, about Moriarty. Things you’ll need to know if you want to get through this.”

John leaned forward over his knees, intrigued, but it was impossible to glean Sherlock’s reaction when the man had his back to him.

“And you’re going to help me, are you?” Sherlock asked, and John could picture his mocking smile from the smug lift of his voice. “Why? Why should I trust you? Why should I even believe you?”

Irene’s eyes flashed as they narrowed. “Because that bastard hit me,” she spat. “He came into my club, tried to tell me what to do, and then hit me. Don’t misunderstand me, Sherlock, I’m not on your side,” she said, draping herself back in the chair. “I’m on mine. My best interest is my only interest, and, right now, helping you is the best way to help myself. So”—she quirked an eyebrow at him, foot tapping aimlessly in the air where her legs were crossed—“do you want to know who you’re up against or not?”

In retrospect, perhaps John’s expectations had been a little high. Sherlock didn’t seem to mind, grasping onto each small detail Irene provided and getting that look on his face like he’d just found
the key to deciphering the Rosetta Stone, but John got to the end of the conversation even more perplexed.

“I don’t understand,” he said to Irene after Sherlock had left, pen between his teeth and post-it notes in hand as he disappeared into his room.

Irene gave him a pitying look. “Moran stole the Carl Powers file. The first case Sherlock ever really worked.”

John blinked at her. “I still don’t understand.”

The Woman rolled her eyes, and John felt eight years old again. “Sherlock’s name isn’t in that file, John. There’s no way Jim could’ve known through any official means that he was involved at all.”

“So…what?”

Irene sighed, and it was starting to grate on John a little, everyone knowing everything before he did. “Moriarty didn’t need Moran to steal that file. Everything’s backed up on computers nowadays; he could’ve hacked in if he really needed it, but he didn’t. He stole the physical copy. Even if you hadn’t seen Moran taking it, the theft would’ve been discovered the next day. Moran had to swipe his keycard to get into the evidence room; they would’ve looked at the logs, found that suspicious—especially considering I doubt he was planning on coming into work again—and done an inventory. It wasn’t about taking information, it was about giving it.”

John frowned, eyes dropping to the floor between them. “But-But you said Moriarty was young. Around your age.”

Irene nodded.

“So he couldn’t have been more than…what, 14? 15 maybe when Carl Powers died?”

She nodded again, a small smile slowly growing on her face.

“So what could he possibly have to do with his death?” John continued, chuckling a little at the absurdity. “And what would he care about Sherlock being involved? He was, like, ten!”

Irene was smiling properly now, but it only further unnerved John as opposed to comforting him. “Oh come on, blue eyes, you’re smarter than this,” she drawled, and John crossed his arms, irritated at the condescension. “You heard Sherlock, all that consulting detective vs. consulting criminal lark. So”—she leaned back in the chair, thin hand lolling out over the arm rest—“why Carl Powers?”

John opened his mouth to say he didn’t know, to insist on a straight answer from someone for once, but something dark was unfurling from the back of his mind, a suspicion he hadn’t wanted to accept he was harboring finally being awakened from its forced dormancy. He closed his mouth, and the smile dimmed on Irene’s face, something like pity pushing at the edges of her eyes.

“You do know, don’t you?” she asked softly.

John looked away, focusing down at his scattered dominoes for a moment before he gave a weak nod.

Irene sighed, and, whatever she said about not being on their side, John could feel the shared misery there. “He calls it their first dance,” she said, a note of disgust in her voice. “The Carl Powers case. I think-I think he wants the credit. No, that’s not quite the right word. It’s more like-”
“Respect,” John supplied icily, watching Irene’s pale, fuzzy face turn to him from the corner of his eye. “He wants to impress him.” John looked up, eyes boring into the wall he knew Sherlock’s door lay beyond.

They were quiet for a long time, John trying to get his pounding heart under control as he strained to hear the faint sounds of Sherlock’s muttering and pacing, a small reassurance that he was still there.

“What does he want?” John asked eventually, shifting his eyes for a moment to meet her curious glance. “Moriarty. What does he want? In the end?”

Irene’s expression turned soft and aching, and John had to look away, back to trying to see Sherlock through the plaster. “You mean is he going to kill him.”

John didn’t see the point in replying—it hadn’t been a question anyway—and swallowed hard instead.

“No,” Irene assured, her face in his periphery also turning toward Sherlock’s room. “I don’t know what he wants, not really, but I know he told Moran Sherlock wasn’t to be harmed. That’s why he got so mad at him for shooting, because he knew Moran thought you were Sherlock.”

John nodded, having suspected as much.

“He’s, er—” She hesitated long enough that John looked to her, quirking an eyebrow in prompt. Irene took in a short breath, gathering herself. “He’s not quite as charitable where you’re concerned.”

For some reason, John found himself smiling, a brief chuckle huffing through his nose as he shook his head down at his knees. “That’s alright,” he replied. “I can take care of myself.”

“I don’t doubt it,” Irene said, and John lifted his face to find her smiling, warm and welcoming, and it was an expression he’d never seen on her before. It made her look younger somehow, or at least softer, a glimpse of the girl that still resided inside the tough-as-nails persona of The Woman, and, without any warning from his brain, he found his mouth moving.

“How did you get into this?” he asked.

The reaction was immediate. She blinked, lips stuttering into a surprised parting as they slipped from their smile, and then they pursed as she physically seemed to recoil into herself. “What? Prostitution?”

John had enough experience with Sherlock’s defensive strategies not to be rattled by the display, and simply tried to remain as still and calm as possible, waiting her walls out as she slowly realized he wasn’t judging. Just like Sherlock, she did eventually come down, the hard look in her eyes fading away as her shoulders loosened.

“How did you get into this?” he asked.

The reaction was immediate. She blinked, lips stuttering into a surprised parting as they slipped from their smile, and then they pursed as she physically seemed to recoil into herself. “What? Prostitution?”

John had enough experience with Sherlock’s defensive strategies not to be rattled by the display, and simply tried to remain as still and calm as possible, waiting her walls out as she slowly realized he wasn’t judging. Just like Sherlock, she did eventually come down, the hard look in her eyes fading away as her shoulders loosened.

“What do you want to know?” she murmured, not quite as airy as it seemed she had meant, but the crossing-her-legs routine was perfectly nonchalant. “My origin story? You wanna hear how my dad died? How my mum remarried this lovely lawyer with two sons and a white picket fence who used to sneak into my room every night?”

“Is that the story?” John asked, keeping his voice carefully level and bereft of anything but curiosity, because Irene was good, but she was no Sherlock, and John had an idea of where this was going.

Predictably, Irene smiled, ducking her eyes to the floor. “No,” she murmured, looking at him through her lashes before properly lifting her head again. “Actually, my childhood was fine. Nothing great, but nothing traumatic either. Parents married—still married, I think—and I was an only child. My
mum was one of those fancy dames, you know? With the debutante balls and afternoon tea at the club?” She rolled her eyes, and John smiled, nodding to show he understood. “Well, it’s rather anticlimactic, I’m afraid. One day, I just got tired of it. I didn’t want to wear the fancy dresses and beg for a man to make an honest woman out of me. I knew university wasn’t for me, so I just…left.” She shrugged, as if that was just what people did back in those days. “Tried more ‘honest’ work for a while, waitressing and what have you, but, as it turns out, I’m not all that great at taking orders.”

John gave a brief chuckle down to his knees before returning her smile.

“I’d always known I was attractive,” she continued, leaning further back in the chair, entirely at ease now, “and, with the right words in the right place at the right time, I never had any trouble getting what I wanted. It started out small, just flirting my way into some rich guy’s good graces long enough to store up some cash, but then one of them asked me to be his date to a gala. Arm candy, bought and paid for.” She shrugged a single shoulder, smiling somewhat shyly at him. “I’ll admit, I was a little insulted at first—the stigma, ya know?—but then I realized, I didn’t have to do anything. Still don’t have to, really.”

Some of John’s confusion must have shown on his face, because she smiled sagely, leaning forward again toward him.

“I don’t know how much Sherlock’s told you, but I’ve made something of a name for myself. They don’t call me ‘The Whiphand’ for nothing.” She giggled at what John was sure was a rather mortified expression. “The point is, there’s no actual sex involved,” she finished bluntly. “People pay me to tie them up, to give them pain, to deny them pleasure.” Her face stretched into a Cheshire grin, confidence clearly back to maximum as she eased herself back into the chair. “Not a bad way to earn a living, really. And sometimes I even get a woman.” She winked at him, a downright lecherous grin on her face, and somehow that, out of everything, was the bit that rattled John.

“A woman?” he repeated, feeling his face frowning. “But you- You’re- Are you-”

“Wow,” she chuckled, shaking her head, “and here I thought Sherlock was the poor communicator. Yes, John, I am gay.” She continued smiling at him, and, if he wasn’t so sure of what he’d just heard, her casual expression would make him consider he had conjured it.

“You’re…gay,” he echoed, testing the words, trying to fit them into the rapidly complicating puzzle of Irene Adler. “But you- You and Sherlock…”

Something dark passed over her face, almost like hurt, and John felt a stab of guilt he couldn’t quite fathom the source of. “Well, that’s different, isn’t it?” she replied, smug once more. “He’s different.” She was giving him a strange look, a kind of challenge in it that John wanted to answer, but his tongue was thick and his throat was dry, and all he could do was blink stupidly as her smile slowly grew.

Luckily—or perhaps not, as John’s stomach nearly punched a hole in the ceiling—Sherlock chose that moment to reappear, hair a wreck from no doubt countless strokes through with his fingers, his eyes searching over the ground as if something had fallen. He stopped just outside the kitchen door, lifting his head, and the blue-grey locked onto John, freezing him in place beneath their breathtaking focus, and he couldn’t help the tremor of fear that ran through him at what he considered the very real possibility that Sherlock was reading his mind. He tried to think about other things, rugby and curry and homework, but there was one curl that was flipped the wrong way on Sherlock’s head, demanding to be brushed back to its home side, and John couldn’t help but wonder how soft it would be, if he’d be allowed to linger, fingers tracing the loose brown arcs and swirls.

Sherlock’s eyes turned to Irene, giving John the opportunity to swallow thickly and collect himself.
“You’re still here?” he muttered.

Irene tilted her head at him, smiling wide, as if simultaneously finding him precious and wanting to strangle him. “I was just leaving,” she replied diplomatically, untangling her limbs from John’s chair and rising to her feet. She adjusted her purse on her shoulder, moving past them toward the stairs. Grasping her red-varnished fingernails around the doorjamb, she leaned back through the doorway to smirk at them. “Don’t be a stranger,” she said, flashing a wink, and, though it was impossible to know who the comment was directed at, John could definitely claim the wink.

They didn’t move as she departed, the door closing softly behind her, and the streets outside were so quiet at the late hour, her heels were audible as they clicked down the street away from 221B.

“Well,” John clipped, because surely someone should say something, “that was…”

“Mhmm,” Sherlock hummed, and John could tell he wasn’t listening, probably hardly even knew there was another person in the room.

He narrowed his eyes up at the detective anyway, if only for his own satisfaction. “Right,” he groaned, pushing on the arms of Sherlock’s chair as he leveraged himself up. “I’m going to bed. What time ya wanna head back to Langley tomorrow?”

After a pause, Sherlock turned, blinking as his eyes lazily focused on John’s face. “What?”

John’s teeth clicked as his jaw clamped shut, but he refrained from comment. It wasn’t meant to be cruel, it was just Sherlock; he knew that. He really, really knew that. “Nothing,” he muttered, lifting a hand as he shook his head. “We’ll figure it out tomorrow. Anyway, night.”

“How?” Sherlock murmured, already lost again. “Oh, right, yes, goodnight,” he muttered, frowning down at the ground ahead of his feet as he strode back down the corridor, shutting himself into his room with a do-not-disturb snap.

John sighed, hanging his head as he pinched at the bridge of his nose. With a gathering breath, he straightened, climbing the stairs and closing his own door. He didn’t bother going down to the bathroom to brush his teeth—they’d be up soon enough anyway—and simply changing into pajamas before crawling under the duvet.

The red light of the provided alarm clock shone a scarlet wash over the room, reflecting off the polished and glass surfaces and illuminating a stretched version of John’s profile on the wall to his left. Turning away from the light source, he stared at the wall, watching the rise and fall of his own shadow’s side as he breathed. Gradually, the rhythm slowed, and his breaths evened out to match the time signature of Sherlock’s violin drifting up through the floor.

That night, his dreams were full of gunshots aimed at someone else.
This chapter is 24,064 words. I don’t-I don’t even know. But here it is. Check the notes at the end for lots of random info about the fic you’ll probably want to know.

“I called Lestrade earlier, but all he had to offer were missing pets.” He grimaced at the apparently repulsive suggestion, causing John to chuckle

“I don’t know,” he replied, shrugging. “We took a stray dog in when I was eight, and he disappeared a few months later.” He looked up, smiling at Sherlock’s blinking befuddlement. “I wouldn’t have minded having Sherlock Holmes on the case.”

Sherlock continued blinking at him. “I-I would’ve been seven,” he murmured, forehead creasing.

John beamed, charmed by the man’s confusion. “Still,” he answered, shifting to standing as he moved back to his dresser to continue packing.

Sherlock sighed heavily behind him. “Do you want me to call Lestrade back?” he asked, and John smiled secretly down at his socks.

“You don’t have to,” he shrugged, and Sherlock huffed again, a rustle of clothing reaching John’s ears before the soft beeps of the keypad.

“Fine,” Sherlock was snarling as John turned to him. “Fine, I will call him. But if there’s a cat named Mr. Whiskers or—or Lord Fluffington or anything equally appalling, I will assume it ran away out of spite and look no further.”

The stretch between half-term and Christmas was always the worst as far as John was concerned. No one, not even the professors, felt like doing much of anything after coming back from break, and it didn’t help that Christmas started, as always, the day after Halloween. Or, rather, the day after Guy Fawke’s Day, which happened to fall on a Tuesday this year, something everyone was unreasonably upset about.

“Why did we have to have double bio first thing?” Mike bemoaned at lunch late Tuesday afternoon, one of those slightly-better-but-still-not-entirely-back-into-academia days that followed the worst Monday of your life after break. “I would’ve skipped anything else.”

John smiled across at him around the lip of his coke can. “You won’t be the only one who doesn’t show up,” he replied. “And Mr. Calvin likes you; he’d probably believe it if you said you were ill.”

“He’d like you fine too if you stopped filching test tubes,” Mike murmured around his spaghetti.

John placed a scandalized hand to his sternum. “What!? Mike Stamford, I have never stolen a thing in my life!”

Mike snorted. “Maybe not, but you don’t exactly stop Sherlock, do you?”
John licked his lips, sucking them over his teeth as he dropped his face, and Mike chuckled.

“You’re *complicit*,” he said, pointing his now-bare fork at John.

John shrugged. “He needed them. He’s whipping up some fireworks for tonight.”

Mike blinked, eyes widening. “Fireworks? Why the hell would Sherlock Holmes be making *fireworks*?”

John restrained his grin to a small twitch. “I may have implied that advanced pyrotechnics were beyond him,” he answered loftily.

“So now he has to prove you wrong?” Mike asked, grinning, but it quickly turned into roaring laughter when John shrugged. “Oh my god, you’re *mad*! He’ll burn the place down!”

“No,” John countered, placing his drink on the table as he leaned forward, “I’m a *genius*! You know we’ll have the best damn fireworks display in the country now.”

“If there’s any country left,” Mike muttered, but he was still smiling. “You think he can make those ones that form shapes? Like smiley faces and hearts?”

John barked a laugh. “Somehow I think fireworks of the four-letter variety are more likely than hearts.”

Mike laughed again, and then his eyes focused on something over John’s shoulder, his amusement faltering to startled.

“What?” John asked even as he turned around, and quickly found himself torn between an insane urge to laugh and an equally powerful urge to bluster. He went for a combination. “What the *hell* happened to you?” he chuckled, shifting on the bench to make room for Sherlock.

The man had his sleeves rolled up to his elbows, vest and tie nowhere to be seen, which was probably for the best, as there were several dark patches of powder spread over his arms and shirt and a notable smear over his forehead. There was a clear section around his eyes, forming the definitive shape of a pair of goggles, and John had this mildly hysterical moment of wondering if Sherlock knew his way around a car engine. Or a motorcycle, oh god- No, John, *focus*!

“So,” he coughed, “how flammable are you right now?”

Sherlock shot him a tired sidelong smile. “Just be glad you don’t smoke,” he muttered, and John laughed, the rattle of his body bringing his elbow next to Sherlock’s on the tabletop, a faint pressure shifting at the linen of his shirt as Sherlock’s arms moved slightly with his breathing.

Neither of them moved away.

“So, how’s it coming?” Mike asked, draining the last of his 7-Up with a great slurp. “Still have a dorm room?”

Sherlock smiled, shifting a bit in his seat, and John actually missed the first few of his words due to being momentarily overwhelmed by a more deliberate brush of his elbow. “-shouldn’t be much longer. I’ve got most of them made already.”

“Any hearts?” Mike asked cheekily.

Sherlock frowned, tilting his head.
John batted a hand at him. “He’s joking, don’t worry about it,” he muttered, turning to better face the detective, and if he made up for the severed contact of their arms with a slight brushing of knees, Sherlock didn’t seem to notice. “So, whadya got?”

Sherlock shrugged impassively, but the glint in his eyes waylaid the nonchalance. “Not sure I should spoil the surprise.”

John’s mouth popped open with a small choke. “What?”

The brunette turned away, looking aimless and uninterested as his eyes roved over the cafeteria. “Well, it just seems such a shame to give away all the best bits. Dampen the childlike wonderment and what have you.” He rolled his hand through the air, as if gesturing to hopes and dreams physically hovering there around them.

“But- But-” John floundered, because, if he was not mistaken, Sherlock Holmes was teasing him, well on his way to telling a proper joke, but John was too frustrated to be proud. “But it was my idea!”

“Was it?” Sherlock inquired, face creasing with false thoughtfulness. “And here I thought you were merely expressing a curiosity as to whether the school chemistry lab had the materials needed to craft fireworks, not attempting to manipulate me into taking up a self-serving challenge.”

John’s lips flapped, dead-end consonants popping and clicking out of his mouth as Sherlock rose, eyes twinkling. “Will you at least tell me how many?” he blurted as Sherlock turned to leave, requiring John to twist his back unnaturally to look after him.

Sherlock’s smirk was wicked. “Spoilers,” he crooned, flicking his eyebrows, and then left to a soundtrack of Mike’s raucous guffaws.

John couldn’t move, gaping after him for several seconds before slowly turning back to Mike in a daze.

“Dude, he just River Song’d you!” Mike gasped, one hand clutching the edge of the table while the other pointed at John.

John shot a glare at his friend, flicking a quick glance back to Sherlock again just as he left the room. “He doesn’t know he did,” John sniped. “He’s just saying it because it’s what I always say when he asks questions. We’ve only just gotten to Ten.”

On Sunday, leaving 221B early to head back to Langley, John had declared it finally time to begin the ‘Doctor Who Initiative’, as he had grandly pronounced it, a precarious tower of pizza boxes, Haribo, and soda cans balanced on his palm as he had nothing less than kicked open the door of the laboratory. Sherlock had raised an eyebrow—the first of many over the course of the day—but had obliged, helping John to make makeshift curtains—“You have to put tape across the center too or it’ll just keep falling!” “Maybe your sheets are just too heavy!” “Don’t be petty, John. Just because your sheets are of a negative thread count—” “I’ll tape your mouth shut, Sherlock, I swear I will!”—and even swallowing down some of the Haribo, although that much he did when he thought John wasn’t looking.

It had started out alright, to be honest, sitting propped up against the wall in a mess of pillows and blankets to soften the cold floor as they set up John’s laptop on a low box in front of them, bringing the screen to eyelevel. They started with Nine—“But the internet said people usually skip him.” “I’m going to pretend you didn’t just say that.”—and, for the first few episodes, it went exactly how John had imagined. Sherlock disagreed with the science, huffed at anything remotely sentimental, and
complained about the sauce to cheese ratio on the pizza—“This is both wasteful and unappetizing, and— Why are you laughing? It said ‘extra cheese’! They are taking advantage of the populace with their blatant— Stop laughing!”

But then, whether because of the gradually more traumatic material—Fuck Russell T Davies, seriously. And Moffat, jesus, Moffat!—or the flagging energy that always came after way too many starches, things…changed.

He was full of pizza, theme music was playing, and he was cocooned in a pile of blankets with six feet of consulting detective, whose leg was pressed against John’s from knee to ankle. Sherlock had inched down the wall, his head more at John’s height as he shifted the pillow behind his back, bending it to give his neck more support. The movement had turned his curls toward John’s face, the shifting air pushing a waft of sea and cedar into John’s senses, and his breath had stuttered over the scent. Sherlock had settled back down, wriggling to reset a groove for himself in the fluffed pillow, and John had just looked at the top of his head, at the growing wrinkles of his forehead as Nine searched for Rose, at the fingers he slowly lifted to his lips, nibbling at the corners of the nails, and had quite suddenly found himself in the throes of an impulse to bend his head down and kiss the anxiety from Sherlock’s mouth. He actually bent forward a little—nothing Sherlock noticed, thank god—before the panic set in, his fear focusing more on how natural the gesture had come to him than the actual act itself.

He hadn’t truly watched much of the show after that, answering Sherlock’s few questions from the memory provided by multiple re-watches already, and had instead been focusing on regulating his breathing, on not giving anything away. He had at least vaguely come to terms with the fact that he was attracted to Sherlock, that he could find another man aesthetically pleasing, but feelings? Feelings were another thing entirely, a dangerous, deep, dark thing that beckoned to him in his dreams at night with conjured images of what could have happened if he’d just angled his head a little down, brought Sherlock’s chin a little up. He had wanted so, so badly to turn Sherlock down when the detective, in as brusque a way as possible, had hinted at wanting to continue watching Monday after classes, but he hadn’t the heart. Or, rather, he hadn’t the self-control, as, the moment Sherlock had mentioned it, John had already begun plotting surreptitious ways he could touch him again.

And Sherlock wasn’t helping matters, with his going along with it and eating when John insisted and bringing his fucking violin back from Baker Street and holding his pencil in his teeth when he needed both hands and smiling so much more and laughing so much more and looking at John in that way that made him feel like he might be something special after all, and then there was the touching!

Near-death experiences supposedly changed people, but John hardly thought his quite literal brush with death qualified, so he was at a loss to explain the change in Sherlock. It wasn’t anything untoward or obvious, nothing that didn’t happen naturally with anyone you shared close quarters with. The problem was that—and, up until that point, John had never noticed—Sherlock had never before allowed those small moments to happen. He never brushed up against John in a doorway or grazed an arm over his when he reached across for his notes. Their fingers never fumbled over one another when they handed things this way or that between them. Sure, Sherlock deliberately touched him, stomping on his foot under the table when John teased him, tugging at his arm as he directed him around crime scenes, pushing him toward the locker room so they could get off the field that much faster, but the everyday nudges and bumps weren’t there. Or, rather, they hadn’t been. Now, it seemed John couldn’t so much as walk to his desk without touching Sherlock, a knee or an arm or a hip somehow just close enough to brush, and he was decidedly not getting used to it, the contact singeing through no matter how many layers.

It was driving him mad, but with what, he tried not to dwell on.
The bench bounced, quite literally jarring him out of his thoughts.

“John!” Mary beamed, throwing her arms around him, and John, in what was clearly a moment of senility, threw a frantic glance back to the entrance, a swooping feeling in his chest positive that Sherlock would be standing there and see.

Why he cared so much was another thing he refused to consider.

“Er, hi, Mary,” he replied, trying to push himself into a better mood. “It’s good to see you. How was your break?”

Mary smiled, and then launched into a story about her family visiting the Bahamas, a delayed flight being the reason she hadn’t been at school yesterday. “I messaged you a few times on Facebook,” she said with a small frown, clearly just the barest hint of the displeasure that rippled below the surface.

John smiled, shy and guilty, bowing his head away as he rubbed up the back of his neck. “Yeah, sorry, I-I didn’t have wireless, and my data ran out for the month.”

The wireless part was true. The data plan…

“Oh,” Mary said, obviously still disappointed, but no longer angry, “well, that’s alright. You can read them whenever. Probably better you waited, actually, because now I can show you the pictures.” And she did, reams of photographs sliding over the screen of her mobile as she flicked through them, pausing to talk animatedly about each one.

John tried, god knows he did, to stay interested. He asked all the right questions—“And how was that?” “Did you see any sharks?”—made the appropriate interjections of surprise—“A jellyfish!”—and maintained eye contact, nodding thoughtfully all the while, but his mind was back in the dorm room, or, more specifically, on that smudge of black that had swooped over Sherlock’s pale forehead.

“Well, I’d better go,” she sighed, straddling the bench as she stood, and John blinked aimlessly for a moment before his face hitched into a smile. “Got a lot to make up from yesterday.” She smiled brightly between he and Mike, lifting her hand in a small wave as she retreated. “I’ll see you both later! Oh, actually!” She turned back, taking a step closer as she allowed another student with a tray to pass behind her. “Some of us were going to head into London to watch the fireworks—not a big group, mind, but I know some of your teammates are coming.” Her smile turned hopefully expectant, and John fought to keep his from falling. “Do you want to come? We’re leaving at 5.”

“I can’t,” he replied, half through a sigh to convey his regret, and his gut twisted guiltily at the subterfuge. “We were actually gonna put on a bit of a show here. Down by the lake.” Langley brochures boasted about the pitiful body of water surrounded by ‘an exotic array of flowers and plant life’, but John was pretty sure they were just hedges and lilies. “You could come.” He hoped his smile looked sincere, in spite of the invitation being more polite than genuinely encouraging.

Mary smiled regretfully, shaking her head. “No, I already told them I’d go. What all are you planning to do?”

John beamed now, in a totally manly way, of course. “We bought some basic ones the other day in town, and Sherlock’s whipping up more now.”

“What, he’s making them!” Mary spluttered, eyes wide.

John bristled a little at the tone, but the smile held. He nodded. “Yeah, in the lab.”
“The chemistry lab?” Mary inquired, tilting her head.

John shook his. “Our lab. Across from the dorm.” Mike gave him a curious look he could only pick up in the corner of his eye, his focus still on Mary, who seemed rather alarmed.

“He has his own lab? Right next to your room?”

John nodded warily, less than thrilled with where this was headed.

“And you think that’s safe?” she asked in that way that’s less a question, more of an invitation to wholeheartedly agree with the speaker’s clearly implied opinion.

John’s smile finally gave up. “Yes,” he replied briskly. “Sherlock knows what he’s doing.”

Mary was looking at him like he’d just asserted the sky was pink and purple polka dots instead of blue. “Knows what he’s doing?” she parroted. “John, he started three fires last year. Three!”

“Small fires,” John qualified, a strangled sound of surprise issuing from Mike behind him, “and I’m pretty sure they were on purpose.”

Mary blustered, shaking her head in disbelief. “How is that better!?” she railed.

John’s back cracked as he stiffened. “Well, I think he was trying to drive away his roommates.”

“And that doesn’t worry you?”

“No.”

“Why not!?!”

“Because he’s not trying to drive me away, and it’d take a lot more than a fire if he was.” He hadn’t meant to say it, hadn’t known he even thought it, but it was out there now, hovering thick in the air around them. John coughed. “I should go check on him though,” he muttered, rising from the bench and grabbing his shoulder bag. “Just in case.”

“John-”

John held up a hand, waving Mary’s apologies away as he stepped next to her. “Don’t worry about it. My fault. I didn’t sleep well last night.” He did not add ‘because I couldn’t stop thinking about Sherlock’s fingers when he plays the violin’. He smiled with self-deprecation, and Mary’s mouth lifted to express her sympathy.

“Maybe you should take a kip before your fireworks,” she offered, frost now thawed. “That is, if Sherlock’s test runs don’t keep you up.”

This time, it was only a joke, and John chuckled, face to the floor for a moment. “Probably not. I can fall asleep to pretty much anything. My sister used to have one of those ocean sound CDs.”

Mary grimaced, as if she too had firsthand experience with the horror of 2am seagulls. “Fair enough. So are you coming Thursday?”

“Er.” John blinked, mind searching and scanning for the reference this question was supposed to pull up, but he came up empty. “I-I didn’t know we had anything planned.”

Mary, contrary to John’s expectations, smiled. “We didn’t really,” she said, shaking her head, “but I thought we might make Lindsey’s a regular thing. All the big tests are coming up now that term is
ending, and Molly and I usually meet there to study, so I started a bit of a study group on Facebook. I guess you wouldn’t have seen it though.”

The slimy embodiment of guilt tried to crawl up out of his throat again. “Yeah, I’ll check when I get back to my room. I should be able to come though.”

Mary really did have a beautiful smile. “Great! Well, I’ll see you around,” she said, and turned away with a wave to them both.

John flicked back a wave and then adjusted his bag on his shoulder, momentarily having forgotten that he was the one meant to be leaving. “Well, Mike, I think the show’s gonna start at around-What?”

Mike stood at his side, backpack hanging by a single strap on his right shoulder. He was eyeing John curiously with perhaps a hint of disapproval, and John shifted uneasily on the soles of his shoes.

“What?”

Mike’s eyes narrowed in one last scrutiny before he spoke. “Nothing,” he murmured, shaking his head. It was a terrible lie, but John had a feeling he already knew the truth, and he didn’t want to push Mike to ask a question he had no idea how to begin to answer.

“Okay, um, so I think the show will start at around 10. Maybe a bit before if Sherlock can’t wait.”

Mike smiled, giving his head a small shake. “Alright. I’ll let everyone know. Who is everyone anyway?”

John shrugged. “Pretty much just us and Molly, I think. Whatever rugby guys aren’t going out. A few people Sherlock and I work with were invited, but I doubt they’ll come. Well, maybe Dimmock.”

“Dimmock?”

“Ryan Dimmock,” John confirmed with a nod. “He’s one of the newer PCs. Nice guy. Killer rugby player, if the write-ups in his uni’s paper mean anything.”

Mike nodded thoughtfully, evidently already approving. “Alright, sounds good. Any others?”

“Sergeant Lestrade,” John shrugged, “but he’s on a case right now. Probably won’t have time.” The fact that the case the sergeant was working was the gripping whodunit of taking a shot at John Watson, he omitted. In fact, he hadn’t told a soul about what had happened at the Yard apart from those who had already known, limited to Sherlock, Molly, and the police involved. Lestrade said that was smart, that it would give them an edge when it came to the details later. John hadn’t been being smart though, he was just fed up with telling the story.

“Well, can’t fault him for that,” Mike chuckled, and then hoisted up his backpack. “I’ll see ya then. Lake at 9:30?”

John nodded, smiling. “Lake at 9:30. And bring your own food this time!” he called to Mike’s retreating back, but the boy only laughed, flapping a hand at him without turning around as he disappeared through one of the side exits. Shaking his head, John went the opposite direction back toward Kingsley, whistling absentmindedly as he walked. As he rounded the corner into their corridor, he headed toward the laboratory door, arm outstretched, when a ground-rattling bang shook the handle in front of him. “Sherlock!?” he cried, bursting through the door and into a cloud of smoke. “What the- Sherlock!” he coughed, swatting at the air with one hand while the other tugged
his shirt up over his nose and mouth.

“Two steps to your right, three forward,” came a far-too-calm voice from across the room, and John followed the directionals, feeling rather like a live-action version of monopoly.

“Are you alright?” he asked when he found the detective in the now-clearing smoke, lowering his hands from his shirt and putting them on Sherlock’s arms as he helped pull him to his feet. “What happened?”

“I’m fine,” Sherlock huffed, and John might have followed along with the tone and felt like a fussy mother hen if not for the dust still clotting his eyes. “Slight miscalculation in powder density,” he explained as if that explained anything at all, swatting at his once-white shirt and only succeeding in further spreading the dark smudges.

“Jesus,” John breathed, looking around at the lab. Nothing was disturbed, the explosion seeming to be more projectile particles than any actual force, but everything was now covered in a thin layer of grey dust, and John suddenly felt very much the hero of a post-nuclear-apocalypse film. “Cleaning staff aren’t gonna be happy,” he muttered.

Sherlock chuckled. “They never are. Remember that cheese sandwich last week? Well, a month ago, but they only found it last week.”

“If you would just eat the things I brought you instead of squirreling them away, things like that wouldn’t happen.”

Sherlock rolled his eyes, the haughtiness of the gesture greatly diminished by the amount of soot in his hair, and John’s lips began to quiver as he removed his goggles, revealing their outline against his powder-blackened skin. “If you would stop bringing me food I didn’t ask- What?”

John couldn’t help it. He cracked spectacularly, bending double and clutching at his sides as he laughed.

“What!?” Sherlock snapped, a slight flush creeping up his cheekbones as he glared.

John waved a hand upward toward the detective’s face, but could not speak through the gasps of laughter.

Sherlock tilted his head, lifting a seemingly unconscious hand to his cheek, and then darted off to the adjacent bathroom, leaving John to stumble over to one of the side tables and cling to the edge for balance. “Oh, for heaven’s sake,” he muttered, and John’s gasping broke out anew as water began running. “It’s not that funny!”

John disagreed, but couldn’t voice it, and he was just barely managing to breathe again when Sherlock emerged, face not quite clean, but at least a little less black. It was only his thunderous glare that kept John’s amusement from bubbling forth again, and he managed to restrain it to a small quiver in his lips as he coughed. “So,” he said, still trying not to smile too broadly, “do we have any fireworks left?”

Sherlock sneered at him, unamused, and John sucked his lips around a smug grin. “Yes,” the brunette snapped. “Plenty. Only one malfunctioned.”

“That was only one firework!?” John bleated, looking around the powdered room, aghast. “Jesus, how big are these things?”

Sherlock’s grin sent shivers up John’s spine, a blend of terror, foreboding, and a few other things he
wasn’t willing to name right now. “You’ll see,” he said ominously, and John felt his eyes widen. “Come on,” Sherlock continued, turning suddenly back to the table. “You can help me set them up.”

“I think my life just flashed before my eyes,” John mused, but he was moving forward all the same as Sherlock laughed.

“You know, I once had a case where a woman murdered her husband with fireworks,” Sherlock said, head bent low over a box he was loading several small canisters into. “She slipped a rigged one into the pile before sending him off to light them.”

John stopped, hovering a few feet back as he raised an eyebrow.

Sherlock looked up after a moment when he didn’t arrive, and, catching sight of the look on John’s face, exasperatedly rolled his eyes. “Please, John, if I were going to kill you, there are infinitely easier ways.”

John blinked. “Comforting.”

“So I’ve been told,” Sherlock replied, flashing a smirk as he hoisted the box off the floor, cradling it between his arms. “Get the door,” he commanded, and began walking, forcing John to scamper back to snatch the handle before he reached it in his longer strides.

“Shouldn’t we shower first? Or change or something?” he added, blushing furiously at the accidental implications of his initial question.

“Why?” Sherlock snipped, clearly not noticing.

“Because we’re covered in black powder and we’re about to start lighting things on fire.”

Sherlock stopped just short of the corner of their corridor. “Oh.”

“Yes, oh,” John repeated, rolling his eyes. “You use the one in the lab; I’ll go down the hall to the communals,” he said, turning back toward the dorm for fresh clothes.

“Would the appropriate gesture be for me to insist you use the private shower?” Sherlock asked, his voice at John’s back as the lab door opened once again.

John chuckled as he pushed into the dorm, delicately plucking through his dresser to keep the powder from spreading as much as possible. “Probably,” he answered as he slipped out a fresh pair of jeans and a grey jumper.

“Pity,” Sherlock deadpanned, the lab door closing with a snap between them, and John was still giggling about it as he lathered shampoo into his hair ten minutes later.

At 8:30, they were down by the lake, Sherlock insisting on giving advice even though he knew nothing about carpentry, making him little more than a nuisance as John constructed a wooden frame for the fireworks.

“You’re going to put your eye out!” John griped for the hundredth time, attempting to snatch the hammer away from Sherlock.

“And I’d still be better at this than you half blind!” Sherlock retorted, childishly holding the tool aloft.

John sighed, finally resigned. “Fine,” he said, lifting his hands. “You can hammer in the nails for this row. But I am not patching you up if you hit your fingers!”
“Some doctor,” Sherlock muttered, but he was smiling as he bent down, tongue between his teeth as he lined up the nail. He struck unerringly—of course—and looked up at John with a bright grin that was not nearly as smug as the blond had been anticipating.

“Yeah, yeah,” John murmured, and Sherlock chuckled before returning to his task, unexpectedly gleeful about the whole thing. John felt a little like Tom Sawyer handing over his paintbrush, but the guilt quickly passed as Sherlock continued to smile with each successful strike, and, quite quickly, the row was done.

The detective rose from the ground, proud smirk on his face and a goading glint in his eyes as he handed back the hammer with a flourish.

John levelled a glare at him, snatched the hammer back, and then turned away to the box, prompting a chuckle from Sherlock behind his back.

It took the better part of the next hour to set up the fireworks, stringing the wires and timing devices Sherlock had whipped up at some point he probably should’ve been sleeping, and, by the time they were done, the viewing party had started to trickle in.

John waved to Dimmock where he and Molly were making their way down the hill, dropping to the grass at a spot to their right. Mike and Devon followed shortly behind, waving animatedly as they found a spot further downhill from the couple, giving them their space. More of the rugby team followed shortly thereafter, Tom Kenley’s bright red hair making him the only one John could clearly distinguish, but Sherlock answered his questioning gaze with the rest of the names. All totaled, including a few people neither John nor Sherlock could place names for, there were about 15 people awaiting the show, which Sherlock was making some final adjustments to.

“Do we have to stay here to light them?” John asked as Sherlock twisted at one of his numerous wires.

“No,” the detective-turned-pyrotechnics-expert replied. “I just have to hit the switch. It will run by itself after that.”

“So we can run for cover?”

Sherlock chuckled, flashing a sidelong smile. “So we can run for cover,” he affirmed, and then went back to the mess of buttons and switches in front of him. “Alright,” he sighed a few seconds later, “it’s ready.”

John nodded, looking around. “Where do you wanna watch from?” he asked, and Sherlock shrugged.

“I should probably stay nearby in case something goes awry, but you can go wherever you like,” he answered, not quite meeting John’s eyes.

John smiled, the gesture likely hidden in the growing dark. “I’ll stay too then,” he said, and Sherlock snapped his face toward him. “Who else is gonna help you when you set yourself on fire?”

Sherlock scoffed, but the smile held something much gentler than mocking. “I do remember primary school, John. Stop, drop, and roll.”

“I’m not sure that still applies when you’re surrounded by fireworks,” John said, laughing when Sherlock conceded the point with a tilt of his head. “Ready?” he asked, and Sherlock nodded as he turned back to the tangled electronics in his hands, tapping and flicking at a few things before sitting it down on the grass in front of him.
“Alright, let’s go,” he said, walking past John, the opposite direction of the rest of their friends, but John still followed.

“That’s it?” John asked, nearly tripping over a divot in the grass, his hands popping out of the pockets of his rugby jacket in preparation to break his fall before he regained his balance. “But nothing hap-” He spun around as a sudden hiss issued from behind him, his legs staggering backward as he followed the small flame of the first rocket as it shot into the sky. Seconds later, it exploded into the largest firework John had ever seen, a flaming gold and blue circle that stretched so wide, it seemed intent on reaching the edges of the sky.

“Copper,” said a voice at his shoulder, and John turned to see Sherlock’s pale neck stretched backward as he tilted his chin up at the stars. He dropped his face as the firework began to diminish, smiling softly. “That’s what makes them blue.”

John smiled back, and then whipped around again as several other pops and snarls came from the fireworks setup. Mouth open in awe, he watched as the explosions rattled the sky, vibrant hues of yellow and blue lighting the wispy clouds that had attempted to gather in the distance.

Sherlock nudged him gently, just the smallest pressure at his elbow, and John half-turned back the direction they had been walking, trusting Sherlock would warn him before they stopped so he could keep one eye on the sky. “Is here alright?” he asked, and John tore his eyes away from a rather impressive purple and silver flare that crackled away into the dark.

“Yeah, yeah, fine,” he murmured as he lowered himself to the ground, and he thought he may have heard Sherlock’s low chuckle amidst the final snaps of silver. Another rocket burst into the sky, prompting John to lie back as he followed its progress, head pillowed on his forearm as he bent the limb behind him. “Wow,” he breathed as a large purple plume stretched out above them, tinting the landscape, a shower of red and gold sparks emanating from the center a second later. “How do you get the purple?” he asked, flicking his eyes briefly to where Sherlock was still sitting above him, legs outstretched, arms locked to hold him up as he leaned back.

“Potassium sulfate,” Sherlock answered, face stretched up to his handiwork.

“And the red?”

“Strontium nitrate,” he replied, and so it went, Sherlock answering his questions, pointing up at certain ones as he provided a description, his eyes never leaving the sky, which was just as well, as John was having a hard time not watching him. The alabaster skin and satiny curls provided the perfect canvas, reflecting the shifting hues overhead, and John watched the colors sparking in his eyes, burning vivid before fading out. It was only because he was watching so closely that he noticed the tremble.

“Cold?” John asked, propping himself up onto his elbows.

“No,” Sherlock snipped, but the hunch in his shoulders betrayed him.

John chuckled into a sigh as he sat up. “I told you to bring your coat,” he chided as he began shrugging away his jacket.

“I wasn’t cold then,” Sherlock snapped, every bit the petulant 8-year-old John always knew he was.

“Because you were setting things on fire, Sherlock,” he explained again tiredly, peeling away the second sleeve and flipping the jacket around the correct direction. “Here,” he said, half placing, half tossing the jacket over Sherlock’s shoulders.
Sherlock started, but held the fabric in place at his shoulder instinctively regardless. He twisted back to look at John, who was already resituating himself on his back. “Won’t you be cold now?” he asked, expression a little lost, his fingers tightening at the collar of the jacket.

John shook his head, replacing his arm behind his head. “Nah, I have my jumper. You’re the one who thought it would be a brilliant idea to go sit outside in November wearing Lanvin.”

“Have you been reading the labels on my shirts again?” Sherlock mocked, but John only smiled, the expression growing as the detective slipped his arms into the sleeves.

John settled back down to watch the show, but, inevitably, his eyes kept flicking to Sherlock’s silhouetted back, his own surname spread across the back, and it felt right to see it there somehow, a warmth growing so thick in his chest, he thought a fragment of firework may have lodged itself in his heart. He couldn’t say how long he lay there, transfixed by the image, but then, too quickly for John to turn away, Sherlock’s face looked down to where John lay, his mouth stopping halfway through a sentence John hadn’t really been listening to. He tilted his head curiously, searching over John’s face just as a massive shower of silver sparks exploded overhead, giving John no hope of hiding his expression in the dim. Sherlock blinked, puzzled, and then blinked again, this time in apparent surprise.

John’s lungs burned, but still he dared not breathe, afraid even the slightest drag of oxygen would unfreeze the moment. He wanted to move, to reach, to pull, to tangle, but he couldn’t do anything, couldn’t decide on anything, couldn’t be sure whether any of it was the best or worst idea he’d ever had.

Sherlock opened his mouth, the beginning breath of a consonant breaking from his throat, but John never got the chance to hear the rest of it as an absolutely thunderous bang issued overhead, the ground shaking under them with the force of it, and both their faces turned up again.

The grand finale, John assumed, as thousands of individual flecks of color twisted and arched across the sky, an avalanche of falling stars. He watched openmouthed as firework after firework burst and ebbed, until finally, as the previous round was fading into a fog, a massive yellow smiley face opened up overhead, fizzing with sparks of gold. John turned to Sherlock, lifting an eyebrow. “A smiley face?”

Sherlock shrugged, watching the yellow disintegrate into smoke, the applause from the hill in front of them audible in the falling silence. “I figured out what Mike had meant by the hearts, and thought I’d try my hand at forming specific shapes.”

“But not hearts?” John asked, smile growing.

Sherlock snorted. “Of course not,” he snapped.

“Because that wouldn’t be classy enough,” John prodded, grinning now.

“Certainly not,” Sherlock huffed haughtily, lifting his chin.

“Wouldn’t measure up to your rigorous firework standards,” John continued, and Sherlock seemed to only just now realize John was taking the piss and turned to him with a narrowing glare.

John laughed as Sherlock opened his mouth to likely snap, but they were overrun by beaming friends and vague acquaintances, and both rose to their feet to greet the congratulations. John, of course, did most of the talking, redirecting the praise to Sherlock whenever possible, but the detective would only smile and nod, perhaps throwing out the odd ‘Thank you’ in a stilted, perfunctory tone.
Before long, they were gone, trailing back up the hill toward campus, their hands miming explosions as their enthused voices drifted back.

John smiled as he watched them, folding his arms and nudging Sherlock’s arm with an elbow as he swayed closer. “It really was amazing, you know.”

Sherlock gave him a small sidelong smile. “Maybe that will teach you to doubt my skillset in the future.”

John chuckled, shuffling his feet on the ground. “I didn’t really doubt you,” he admitted with a small shrug. “I just- Well, I’d never seen one before. A fireworks show, I mean.” He kept his eyes fixed on the sky as he watched Sherlock turn to him in his peripheral vision. “From a distance, sure, and the odd one that the neighbors set off, but never…never properly.”

“Well, I- I’m glad- I-” His mouth flapped a few more times, his grey eyes blinking beneath furrowed brows as his gaze skittered every which way. “It was incredible. No one- No one’s ever done anything like that for me before.” He withdrew his hand, tucking them into the pockets of his jeans when he realized Sherlock still had his jacket.

There were a tense few beats of silence in which they avoided eye contact, and then Sherlock cleared his throat.

“Please. That man can barely find potassium on a periodic table, let alone find an appropriate use for it.”

“Like fireworks?” John suggested with a smirk as they began gathering up the remnants of their spectacle.

Sherlock grinned briefly at him across the wooden frame. “Like fireworks.”

Three hours later, John was just drifting off, his eyes closing longer and longer with every blink, when the dormitory door opened, a familiar tousled shadow stretching across the floor. “Sherlock?” he murmured, pushing himself up to sitting against the wall.

“What else?” the silhouette asked, stepping forward to sit opposite on the edge of his own bed.

John blinked, wondering if it truly didn’t make sense, or if he was just half asleep. “What?”
Sherlock sighed irritably, and John smiled into the darkness he was slowly adjusting to. “You said you’d never been to a fireworks show before. That you’d wanted to, but never had,” Sherlock explained, and John nodded even though he wasn’t sure Sherlock could see it. “What else have you always wanted to do?”

John couldn’t show all his surprise on his face just in case Sherlock had superhuman eyesight on top of everything else, but his brain thoroughly short-circuited for a moment, and he blinked dumbly into the faint light from the lab across the hall. “I, um- Why?” he muttered, clearing the remaining grogginess from his throat with a cough.

“I-I don’t know,” Sherlock murmured, and the shape John could now fuzzily make out shrugged. “I was just…curious.”

“Oh,” John replied, rubbing at the back of his neck. “Well, I don’t know, really. Lots of things, I suppose.”

“Like what?” Sherlock’s long legs folded under him, elbows perching on the interior of his knees as he cupped his chin in his hands and looked across at John. The light reflected off his eyes, giving them an even sharper, almost animalistic appearance, but, somehow, John wasn’t unnerved by the focus.

He did become hyperaware of his bedhead, however, and tried to subtly flatten the side he’d been almost-sleeping on. “Er, well…I’ve never been to Hamley’s. You know, the toy store?”

Sherlock nodded once.

John pulled his own legs up in front of him, fingers tangling loosely across his shins. “I remember, in primary school, everyone would come back after Christmas with stories about the windows at Hamley’s; how they’d built this or that out of legos, or made up some moving carousel or something.” He shrugged, smiling meekly. “It’s silly, looking back, but it’s important when you’re a kid, ya know?”

Sherlock probably didn’t know, but he made a vaguely affirmative gesture with his head, and John could now see him quite clearly, his expression still and waiting.

“And, um…the Eye,” he murmured, tugging and twisting at the duvet over his ankles as he looked down at his knees. “I know it’s tacky and touristy,” he continued hastily, “but I’ve never done it, and I always sort of thought it’d be really great around the holidays, seeing all the lights from up there. Guess I just have a thing for Christmas,” he chuckled awkwardly, looking up, but Sherlock only continued quietly regarding him, and he felt compelled to go on. “We never did much at home,” he said softly, watching his thumbs as he twirled them around one another. “We couldn’t afford much in the way of presents, and we never had a tree. Not beyond one of those little plastic tabletop ones, anyway,” he added with a shrug. “You see it in films, London all done up for Christmas.” He looked up, smiling in spite of the melancholy settling in his chest. “It just seemed like that was the proper way to do things, the normal way, and…well, I wanted to be a bit normal. At least once.”

Sherlock said nothing, didn’t so much as move, a statue half-lit from the corridor, the shadows adding unprecedented depth to the angles of his face.

John sighed, looking out ahead to the shuttered window on the opposite wall. “It’s stupid, really.”

“No,” Sherlock answered, voice just above a whisper, and John turned back to find he had somehow soundlessly shifted, his legs now hanging off the edge of the mattress as he leaned forward, braced on his knees. “It’s not stupid at all.”
John simply watched him, forehead creasing, and Sherlock bit at his lip, leaning back on his palms as he planted them on the bed.

“We did all those things, my family and I,” he began, and John fought to keep his eyes from widening too drastically, but he could do nothing about his heart, which had stuttered to a stop at the realization that Sherlock was actually talking about himself, about his past, and that it was offered freely, without John so much as asking a question. “My mother was always very big on Christmas,” he explained with a secret smile, glancing in John’s direction for a flash. “Every obscure relative we barely knew would show up for Christmas Eve dinner and be back again at New Year’s. Provided we could get rid of them in the interim,” he added with an aside nod.

John smiled, breathing a small chuckle as he dropped his head to his lap.

“They stopped coming when father got sick,” Sherlock said, rather abruptly, as if he didn’t trust himself to get it out if he waited, and John froze, watching him as he stared out the window. “And then, after he died,” he continued, sounding rather removed, “mother didn’t see the point anymore, I suppose. She died three years later. Pneumonia, officially.”

A heavy hum of silence followed, unbroken until John shifted on his bed.

“Officially?” he asked, feeling like he ought to, feeling like Sherlock’s silence invited the question.

“She just…gave up,” Sherlock answered, something sharp snapping around the edges of his tone. “She wouldn’t eat, hardly slept. Never went outside. It was only a matter of time before she got sick, and then, when it happened, she let it take her.”

There was really nothing for him to say to that, so he sat in silence, watching as Sherlock’s eyes burned toward the window for a moment before settling back to frost.

“Mycroft was out of uni by then, so we stayed in the house. Mrs. Hudson came on shortly thereafter, and she always made sure we had Christmas, but no one came over anymore. Not that we invited them.” He shrugged, as if unbothered by that particular side effect. “But, I suppose…” He paused, looking back toward the window again. “I suppose it isn’t the worst thing. Being normal,” he mused, and then turned a slow grin to John. “Or so I’ve been told.”

John laughed lightly, shaking his head, and then they were caught just smiling at one another long after it ought to have gotten uncomfortable.

The moment was broken when Sherlock blinked, but it wasn’t a bad broken, wasn’t an end so much as a pause.

“I’ll leave you be,” Sherlock said, rising to his feet and moving toward the door. “Shouldn’t leave my mold cultures too long.”

“I thought you finished with those, like, two weeks ago,” John replied, twisting his neck around to follow the brunette’s progress.

“Yes, but this is different strain,” Sherlock urged, and John lifted his eyebrows.

“Ah, of course,” he sighed, nodding sagely. “A different strain. My mistake.”

Sherlock rolled his eyes, shaking his head with a soft smile. “Goodnight, John,” he said, closing the door on John’s answering grin.

*****
It happened, as most life-altering things do, on an entirely unremarkable day.

It was a cold, wet night near the end of November, and the last rugby game of the term had come to a close. They had won, well on track to getting into the finals come April, and the field was still a mess of happily shouting players, all running around tackling one another for no good reason other than adrenaline they hadn’t yet shaken. The spectators had all gone, even the most committed of girlfriends giving their goodbye pecks—followed by a cacophony of whistling and cat-calling from the poor victim’s teammates, of course—and John had been roped into conversation with Kevin Clark, something about his vision for the defensive line next term, but John was hardly paying attention.

As Kevin rambled, turning to point out some spot on the field, John chanced a glance toward the bench where Sherlock was talking to a rather animated Devon. The detective didn’t seem in any particular distress, however, his hands tucked into the pockets of his Consulting Coach jacket, shoulders soft and at ease as he nodded thoughtfully at whatever Devon was saying. As if sensing the glance, his eyes flicked over, catching John’s, and he blinked, a telepathic question in the tilt of his head.

John nudged a nod toward Kevin, and then performed the most dramatic eye roll he had ever felt his face contort.

Sherlock responded to John’s suffering with a brilliant grin across the meters between them, and, as the corners of his own mouth lifted in response, John felt it.

It wasn’t an unfamiliar feeling, this specific kind of nausea, the type of thrilling twist that spasms through you for a second at the top of that first rise of a rollercoaster. It was the same way he had felt about Mary when he had said goodbye to her outside her maths class that first day, or Sarah before that, when she had kissed him outside her house after their first date—John had sprung for popcorn, a big deal when you’re 14. Sure, there had been other girls in-between—not too many, much to John’s alternating pride and chagrin, depending on the company—but none of them had inspired that sort of feeling, none of them had even come close. And now... Well, now it was happening all over again, but—god help him—it wasn’t directed at Mary anymore.

Sherlock Holmes stood in the misty rays of the floodlights, his curls slightly wilted from the damp, the pale angles of his face shifting responsively as Devon continued to speak to him, his frail fingers lifting up to brush a raindrop from his forehead, and John Watson fell in love with him.

He fucking fell in love with him.

Well, okay, maybe the actual falling didn’t happen then, but the realizing it did, which is really less the falling part of falling and more the sudden stop at the end.

“Hey, John! Kevin!”

John jumped, eyes startling wide as Mike waved at them from nearer the sidelines.

“We’re all heading out to celebrate. You in?”

“Well—” John started, feeling like the last thing the violent spasms in his stomach needed was alcohol, but it might help with the rivers of cold that kept shuddering over his shoulders and down his arms.
“Oh, come on,” Devon urged, suddenly half on top of him as he slung an arm over his shoulder. “A captain goes down with his team!”

John chuckled under the chorus of cheers and slaps to his shoulders. “I’m pretty sure it’s a ship.”

“Eh,” Devon shrugged, giving John a quick rattle under his arm before darting off with a grin. As he raced after the group heading up the hill, Sherlock appeared at John’s side, and the hair on the back of John’s neck stood up, now hyperaware of the detective’s presence.

“You should go,” he said, nodding after the scattering team. “They’ll want to toast to your success.”

“Our success,” John stressed, watching his blue-clad friends becoming smaller as they climbed. “Are you coming?” he asked, heart pattering shamelessly, and he swallowed hard to keep his voice steady.

Sherlock snorted, and John supposed he had been expecting that. “No, I have those mold cultures to finish.”

“Well why don’t you come out after?” John tried, his mind at odds with itself between wanting Sherlock to stay far away from any possible signs John couldn’t suppress, and wanting him around all the time so John didn’t have to think about him all night. “We can toast to your success too.”

Sherlock chuckled, shaking his head. “I don’t think anyone wants to hear about the varying rates of multiplication in different strains of household mold, John.”

“I do,” John said, because he was apparently the biggest moron in the whole world. He might as well light up neon over his head, a giant ‘Arse over tits in love with you!’, but he did honestly think he would queue up to listen to Sherlock read nutrition labels so long as he got to hear his voice.

“Yes, well,” Sherlock continued, either not noticing or politely ignoring the flush on John’s face, “you have always been the exception.”

John twisted up to him, startled, a million possible meanings running through his head, but Sherlock was giving nothing away, looking back at him with a smile touched with nerves around the edges.

“Best not keep them waiting,” he said abruptly, turning back to nod at the nearly vanished group as he began leaving the opposite direction. “I’ll see you when you get back.”

“Okay…” John murmured, but he doubted Sherlock heard, his strides even faster than normal it seemed as he beat a retreat back toward Langley. John stood there for a long time, watching Sherlock’s shoulders lift against the cold, his curls tugged by a passing gust, his legs shifting in his dark jeans, long lines of muscles tautening and loosening beneath the cotton, and he suddenly very much wanted to scream, wanted to demand answers from the sky for what he had ever done to deserve the infuriating privilege that was Sherlock Holmes.

With a frustrated huff, he shoved his hands into his pockets, forcing his feet to follow the path of his team, no longer the slightest bit uncertain that alcohol was just the thing he needed.

*****

Sherlock had no idea how long he had been tapping his mechanical pencil against the surface of his desk, but he had at some point broken the lead, tiny fragmented cylinders bouncing around with the vibrations of every strike. His mold cultures had been done yesterday, contrary to what he’d told John, but he couldn’t stomach going out there with the rest of the team, couldn’t bear to watch all the hanging on and shoulder-slapping that was bound to get exponentially worse with rising blood alcohol contents.
His temper flared again, and he snarled, spinning up out of his chair, the pencil tossed aside to ping against a beaker with an eerily resonating hum. He checked the time on his phone—his phone that hadn’t gone off once in the past three hours—and tried to extrapolate what John would be doing right now. He closed his eyes, stalling his pacing and regulating his breathing. Hour one would have been spent mostly talking, nursing beers, and giving grand speeches and proclamations for their future successes. At hour two, they would have hit that ‘I can’t believe I’m not drunk!’ stage of drunkenness, and shots would quick have been relegated. Hour three, the here and now, would likely find a few valiantly drinking on, voices growing louder and billiards ability growing worse, while most would be dwindling, falling into that stage of slurred exhaustion that dictated arms slung around one another while they staggered and giggled home. And none of those arms would be Sherlock’s because he was an idiot and hadn’t thought this through.

He sighed, furious with himself, and resumed his pacing, trying and failing not to think about it.

Sherlock didn’t even like Doctor Who. He supposed he could appreciate it from a purely scientific standpoint, but he didn’t much follow the plot or the characters, didn’t much care for remembering the details of every alien race that flitted across the screen. What he did like, however, much to even his surprise, was watching it with John. He liked sitting near him, liked the small incidental touches that happened at such close proximity, like reaching for the Haribo and brushing the back of his hand against John’s outer thigh. Okay, so maybe the touches were quite incidental, but he could hardly be blamed for orchestrating it now and again, not when John didn’t seem to mind. Trouble was, now that he’d started, he couldn’t stop.

Sherlock wasn’t ignorant when it came to himself. He knew his flaws, his weaknesses. He knew he had what one might call an ‘addictive personality’, but he had never dreamt it would manifest itself like this. It was one thing to crave the drugs, that was a biological reaction, a process they were created to engineer. But how could he explain John? How could he explain the jolt that flooded his system with every brush, the quickening of his heart, the rushing in his ears, the lightning that forked patterns down his spine? And, just as with the cocaine, a fix was all he thought about now, chasing higher highs in dreams that led to more than one awakening in the middle of the night.

He sat down on the floor, leaning against the nearest support—the leg of a table that ground against the floor a bit as he crashed his weight into it—and pressed the heels of his hands to his eyes.

He didn’t know how to do this! He didn’t know how to handle being around John all the time, having him there but not quite there enough. He didn’t even understand it, couldn’t fathom the logic behind the dreams that shifted John’s sleeping breaths to quicker ones, to gasps, to stuttered words that always blended to his name, and then he would wake up, palm pressed to his groin as he darted frantically across the corridor to his lab, burying himself in an experiment until his weakness subsided.

He leaned his head back, hitting against the metal table leg with a heavy thunk, and the mournful vibrato shook down to his core. He was doomed, he knew that much. Doomed to light touches and brief brushes and haunted daydreams of more. Doomed to watch and see and want, but never have, never even try to have, because how was he supposed to do that anyway? Just walk up and say ‘Hey, John? I hope this isn’t terribly inconvenient, but I seem to have developed a rather distracting attraction to you. Would you by any chance feel the same way, because sometimes you look at me and I feel like maybe you want this just as much as I do?’ Or maybe he ought to take the more dramatic approach of all those ridiculous romantic movies Molly was always going on about and pin him to the wall with his tongue. God he so wanted to pin him to the wall with his tongue.

“Dammit!” he cried at himself, lifting his head only to pound it back into the table. He sighed wearily, lifting a hand over his eyes.
Even if he did manage to say anything to John—which would take an act of probably several gods to orchestrate—he had no clue how to follow it up. Sure, he had a million wild impulses roaring inside of him—belated from those supposedly hormone-crazed years he was supposed to have already had, he suspected—but he had no practical experience. Not like this, anyway, not when it mattered, and, in spite of having a handle on some of the more delicate acts, he had no clue when it came to simple things. Like kissing.

He groaned, ashamed at himself that even thinking about it should give him such—dare he say it—butterflies. A small, disgusted sound spat from his throat. He was Sherlock Holmes, for chrissake! Consulting detective for Scotland Yard, fluent in four languages—not including computer coding—proficient violinist, and professional chemist only lacking a degree—for now. Surely he could handle hormones! And none of it even mattered because John was with Mary, John chose Mary, and Sherlock didn’t want any romantic entanglements anyway.

People leaving never hurt if you didn’t care.

A muffled scratching sound came from outside the door, and he rolled his head back to forward, tilting it before rising and crossing the tile. He opened the lab door to find ‘Watson’ staring back at him in white letters over blue, the wearer of the jacket hunched over the dormitory doorknob.

“John?” Sherlock asked, moving to the blond’s side in front of the door.

John was attempting to get his key into the lock, holding onto the metal handle for balance as he lunged, missing and clinking against the surface. He turned his palm up, staring down at the key as if it had personally offended him. “Sh’lock?” he slurred, and Sherlock blinked against the potent wave of liquor. John looked up at him dolefully, eyes heavy-lidded and blinking slowly. “The door’s broken,” he said piteously, lifting the key up toward Sherlock’s chest. “Make it not,” he added, swaying dangerously, and Sherlock caught him by the shoulder, pressing him back into the doorjamb with one hand while the other took the offered key.

“Alright, alright, you just- just lean there for a second, okay?” Sherlock muttered, and John nodded, but Sherlock had to keep a hand pressed into his chest to steady him against the wall regardless.

“There,” Sherlock said, pushing open the door in front of them, “now why don’t you-” But John was already gone, rolling around the edge of the doorway to stumble into the dorm.

He staggered, supporting himself on the edge of his dresser for a moment, and then stumbled forward in two heavy strides before toppling onto Sherlock’s bed with a rattling thump, the springs squeaking as his body rode out the waves.

“Or not,” Sherlock muttered, closing the door behind him before crossing to flick on the small desk lamp, but John moaned against even that small assault of light.

“S’ not time,” he mumbled into the mattress, lips scraping against Sherlock’s sheets as he attempted to squint up at him in the light.

“Okay, John,” Sherlock placated, no idea what it wasn’t time for. “Now go to sleep.”

John didn’t seem to hear him, and instead had lifted his neck to stare cross-eyed down at the bed beneath his face. “This isn’t my bed,” he murmured, craning his neck farther back to get a better look. “S’ your bed.” He pointed down at the mattress, head drooping comically before he stiffened his neck again.

Sherlock smiled down at his bemused expression, folding his arms and leaning back against the edge of John’s desk. “I know,” he replied with a slow nod. “It’s fine.”
John blinked at him a moment longer, blue eyes hazy and glittering in the lamplight, and then nodded, the understanding sinking in that little bit delayed. “Okay,” he sighed, cheek falling to the sheet again as his eyes fluttered closed.

Sherlock watched him, shaking his head as a smirk grew on his face, and then he startled as John took a sudden suck of air in through his nose.

“Smells nice,” he mumbled, his eyes opening lazily again. “You always smell nice.”

Sherlock had no idea what his face was doing, but he was glad John was too far gone to interpret it. “Thank…you…?” he replied, and John nodded like that was just the right thing to say, cheek scraping against the sheet in soft rustles.

“Softer,” he remarked, presumably about the sheet, as one hand gripped the fabric and gave it a weak tug before his arm went limp again. He was still for several moments, breaths beginning to even out, and then he smacked his lips together, rousing again as he swallowed and twisted himself onto his back. From there he rolled onto his side, propping himself up on a wobbly elbow as he bent his body around in an attempt to reach his shoes.

“Don’t,” Sherlock snapped as the blond nearly toppled off the mattress. “Let me do it. Before you fall and crack your skull.”

John folded back out onto the mattress, giggling and clicking his trainers together, completely counterproductive to Sherlock’s attempt to unlace them. “Crack my skull,” he parroted through a sigh, and Sherlock shook his head as he tugged off his shoes. “Wait, wait,” John whined as Sherlock went to walk away, bending to place John’s trainers underneath his bed. He sat up, more or less, wavering a bit before finding his balance. “I-I don’t want-” He tugged at the front of his jacket, flapping his arm backward in a disjointed attempt to remove the sleeve.

“You want the jacket off?” Sherlock asked, and John nodded like a plaintive child dragged to church. Sherlock’s lips quivered, and he pursed them over his teeth to keep from laughing. “Alright. No, don’t lie back down. No- John!”

John started giggling, unhelpfully gripping onto Sherlock’s forearms as he tried to help him out of the jacket.

“God, you’re useless when you’re drunk,” Sherlock snarled, and John just laughed harder. “So drunk. Sherlock, I’m sooooo drunk!” he crooned, shaking his head. “Never been this drunk. Never ever ever!”

“Yes, alright,” he snapped, finally freeing the elasticized cuff from John’s wrist, prying the tan hands away from the purple fabric of his shirt so he could stand up and toss the jacket atop John’s bed. “Now just-” He stopped, turning back to find John lying on his back, staring silently up at him with glazed eyes. “What?” he muttered.

John simply blinked at him, head tilting slightly on the pillow.

“John?” Sherlock took a step closer, and John blinked twice in quick succession, as if coming back to himself.

“You,” he said, suddenly forceful, his arm swooping a bit as he tried to point up at Sherlock’s face. “You…you…” he repeated, voice trailing as his hand drooped, finally hitting back to the bed with a weak puff of displaced cotton, but his eyes seemed to grow even more focused, dancing over Sherlock’s face. “You’re not fair,” he breathed, and Sherlock knew then, could hear it in the plea of
his tone and see it in the desperation of his eyes, that John would answer if he asked.

He could know, right now. He could gather his data and put together the puzzle and not spend another minute wondering, worrying, reading into every unnecessary touch and too-long stare, and John wouldn’t even remember telling him in the morning. But, strangely, confronted with the opportunity, Sherlock found he couldn’t do it.

John wasn’t offering, not really, not willingly, and Sherlock couldn’t rob him off his secrets. Not these secrets, not like this. It wouldn’t be right, and, for once, that actually mattered to him, because this was John, and John deserved more.

And, also, he was absolutely terrified he wouldn’t hear what he wanted.

“Go to sleep, John,” he whispered, moving toward the door, and, as if he’d been waiting for permission, John’s eyelids fluttered closed.

*****

John’s mouth tasted like he had just licked his way across the locker room, and he smacked his lips, hoping to find relief. He met only chapped lips and a thick tongue, however, and resigned himself to the fact that he would have to open his eyes, if only to search out water. Turning onto his side to provide at least small shelter against the light, he creaked open his eyelids, blinking stickily into the white linen. He could still smell alcohol, stale and coupled with the faint odor of cigarettes that always lingered after a trip to the pub, but there was something else too, a blend of salt air and-

His eyes shot wide, an instinctive act of alarm he immediately regretted as the sunlight rushed at his pupils, and his head spun dizzily as he jerked up, trying to blink the bed beneath him into focus. With focused effort, he lifted his neck, orienting himself in the room, and realized with a gut-churning flare of humiliation and terror that he was, in fact, in Sherlock’s bed. In Sherlock’s bed with absolutely no memory of getting there. And he was missing his shoes.

His elbows gave out in a rush of weakness, and he toppled sideways with a small yelp, scrabbling at the blankets and only succeeding in pulling them down onto the floor with him as he landed in a heap. He groaned, head throbbing even though he hadn’t hit it, and there was the sound of footsteps and a small click behind him before he heard a familiar low chuckle.

“Morning, sunshine,” Sherlock said, and John opened narrowed eyes to find the inverted face of the detective smirking down at him from the doorway.

John could only groan, swatting one hand back toward the man’s legs while the other pulled the duvet completely off the bed to cover his face. “S’ too early,” he whimpered. “Come back later.”

He could hear the smug smile in Sherlock’s voice as he spoke, nearer now, as if he had knelt. “It’s 1:30,” he said, and John flicked the blanket back down in a flash.

Craning his neck backward, he bent his face upside-down to meet Sherlock’s eyes where the detective was crouched just behind his head. “No it isn’t,” he wheezed, voice raspy from sleep and dehydration.

Sherlock only held out his wrist in response, and John grabbed it, twisting and moving it backward and forward until he could force his eyes to interpret the time.

“Fuck,” he groaned, releasing Sherlock’s arm and slinging one of his own over his face. “How late was I out?”
“About two,” Sherlock replied, voice drifting away, footfalls suggesting he’d crossed the room. “But I’m not sure you ever entirely came back.”

John puffed, unamused, and then slowly peeled the limb from his eyes, a twist of nausea building in his stomach. “What, er- What happened?” he asked, and the general wrecked state of his voice probably helped mask the high-pitched panic.

“You don’t remember?” Sherlock asked, casually enough, but his hands stopped moving inside his wardrobe, and that didn’t bode well as far as John was concerned.

“No,” he nearly squeaked, mind concocting a list of every horrible possibility, bile rising all the while.

“Oh,” Sherlock said, and he sounded almost…disappointed? “Well,” he clipped, closing the door and smiling once more, “it would seem you have a penchant for the ‘80s when intoxicated.”

John blinked, furrowing his brow, and then his lips snapped shut, eyes bulging. “I didn’t.”

Sherlock nodded. “Wham!, I believe. Something called ‘I’m Your Man’?”

John stared at him, eyes slowly narrowing as Sherlock stared impassively. “You’re making that up,” he accused, and Sherlock smirked, tilting his head down at him.

“You’ll never know,” he said lightly, twisting on his heels and walking back to his lab.

“Sherlock?” John called after him, flailing around to his stomach, because being upside-down while arguing over singing Wham! would have been embarrassing. “Sherlock!!”

“Water and paracetamol are on your desk,” the detective carried calmly on, turning in the opposite doorway, grinning like a devil. “And do try to eat something. You get awfully cantankerous when you’re hungry.”

“SHERLOCK!” John shouted, reaching up to grab a pillow, but, by the time he’d thrown it, it flopped limply against the lab door. He grumbled to standing, glaring at the barrier. “I don’t even like Wham!,” he muttered, and then blushed furiously as laughter drifted out from under the door.

*****

It was too good to last.

Sherlock had known this all along, of course, but disillusionment is one of those things that, no matter how much you tell yourself it’s coming, it still arrives like a punch to the stomach.

He was going to have Mycroft arrange an audit for Mr. Tyson, he’d decided.

“Sherlock?” Molly asked for his attention, and he cast a glance over to her as he blinked. She smiled shyly. “Sherlock, do you want to stop? We don’t have to run lines today.”

Sherlock looked out the window, watching from the comfort of faux-leather chairs in the Kingsley common area as students battled the December winds outside. “There’s nothing else to do,” he muttered, tugging his ankles tighter back to himself where he’d pulled his legs up on the edge of the seat.

“I can find Mary,” Molly offered, valiantly smiling on. “We can work on our bit at the end of Scene I.”
Sherlock shook his head, carefully avoiding shifting his gaze from the window. “They’re working on their bit,” he said, and Molly dropped her head to her notebook, no other explanation being needed.

Where Sherlock had been hoping Mr. Tyson may have conveniently forgotten about the group project for *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, he had been sorely disappointed. It had come as no surprise that he, John, Molly, and Mary had been thrown into a group together—considering the necessary boy/girl ratio given the characters, as well as people who could tolerate his extended company—but the exact scenes they were given had been something of a blow.

The random fairies and whatever else—Sherlock hadn’t much been following the reading—that showed up had made putting together suitable portions for everyone rather awkward, and, as such, they had a bit of a medley. The sections assigned to their group consisted of the end of Scene I, going from Lysander and Hermia’s private declarations through to the end (including a sickeningly whiny conversation between Hermia and Helena) and then the Demetrius and Helena altercation near the beginning of Act II.

Of course, John and Mary were cast as Lysander and Hermia—Sherlock rolled his eyes even now just thinking about it—and he and Molly had been given Demetrius and Helena. The fact that he spent the beginnings of the play also chasing after Hermia was something he was violently ignoring, to the point of not even wanting to rehearse the lines from his scene with Molly that referenced it.

They were rehearsing the ‘couple portions’—as Mary had taken to calling them with a blush and a smile—separately, John and Mary off nonexistent-god-knows-where making dewy faces at one another, and he and Molly here in the common room decidedly not doing any such thing.

It wasn’t so awful being paired with Molly, he admitted only inside his own head. At least there wasn’t any pressure, any expectation. Sure, it was a bit awkward when Demetrius scorned Helena’s affections in a way that seemed to hit a bit too close to home at first, but Molly had battled through, texting Dimmock once or twice until a glowing smile appeared on her face and she was ready to continue, and Sherlock only begrudged her a little.

It was, after all, exceptionally difficult to suffer the happiness of others without your own to stand up against it. And his own was probably laughing in some private corner right now, twining fingers with pale green-varnished ones and brushing blonde curls out of not-as-blue eyes.

“Sherlock?”

“Hmm?” he hummed, blinking back toward his forgotten companion. “Sorry, what were you saying?” he asked, and he genuinely did feel a little contrite about it. Molly was doing her best, after all, and he knew he was likely trying her patience.

She didn’t let on, however, and he saw nothing but sympathy in her gaze as she tilted her head at him, smiling fondly. A moment later, she blinked, head levelling out again as she leaned forward over her knees, a glint in her eyes as her smile grew mischievous. “Wanna go crash their practice?” she whispered conspiratorially, throwing in a wink that looked downright absurd on her features, but it did manage to make him smile.

“No,” he chuckled, shaking his head, “just keep going. I know where we are now.” He had never lost track of it, of course, just lost interest, and, though Molly must have known that, she only smiled and nodded, bowing her head back to the paperback in her hands as she began to read her lines.

“The wildest hath not such a heart as you. Run when you will, the story shall be changed: Apollo flies, and Daphne holds the chase; the dove pursues the griffin; the mild hind makes speed to catch the tiger; bootless speed, when cowardice pursues and valour flies.”
“O spite! too old to be engaged to young,” Mary said, holding her paperback out in front of her where she sat cross-legged on a chair in the corner of Lindsey’s.

“Or else it stood upon the choice of friends--” John read back, shifting uncomfortably in his own seat across from her.

“O hell! to choose love by another's eyes,” she continued, smiling at him over the folded-back cover of her book.

John returned it, nervously clearing his throat before the larger chunk of text. “Or, if there were a sympathy in choice, war, death, or sickness did lay siege to it, making it momentany as a sound, swift as a shadow, short as any dream; brief as the lightning in the collid’ night, that, in a spleen, unfolds both heaven and earth, and ere a man hath power to say 'Behold!' the jaws of darkness do devour it up: So quick bright things come to confusion.”

Mary lowered the play to her lap, smiling eagerly. “That was really good,” she chirped, and John huffed a sharp laugh.

“I’m only reading it,” he muttered, bobbing the book in his hand for emphasis, “and I’ve no idea what any of it means.”

Mary laughed, and John was pulled along, chuckling as he picked up his tea from the low table in front of them.

“Wow, this place really cleared out,” he noted, looking around the near-deserted café, completely deserted if you didn’t count the barista wiping down tables on the opposite side.

“Yeah, there’s a bit of a lull between supper and the late night crowd,” she said, plucking her coffee off the table and tucking her feet up onto the chair.

They were in the far corner, hidden by the backs of their armchairs that they had dragged to form an upholstered barrier against the rest of the café, and their armrests were now nearly pressed together, Mary’s elbow bumping his slightly as she bent it out to lift the cup to her lips.

“Sorry,” she murmured through a mouth of coffee, rather like talking around a toothbrush, and John laughed, Mary choking over a swallow before she joined in. “So,” she said, clearing her throat as she moved her cup back to the table, “what are your plans over Christmas?”

John swallowed a gulp of tea before resettling his own cup. “Not much, really. Just going home.”

“Still though, that’s nice,” Mary reassured, nodding. “You get all your shopping done?”

“Not even close,” he scoffed, and she giggled, “but there’s still another week and a half left.”

“Counting half weeks,” she chided, shaking her head. “That’s when you know you’re desperate.”

John sneered at her, provoking a grin. “No, I know, it’s a mess,” he admitted, leaning back into the cushioned seat with a sigh. “I’ve nearly got everyone taken care of, but I can’t for the life of me think of something for my mum.”

“Candles are always a safe bet,” Mary suggested, shrugging as she scooped up her mug again.

“My mum’s not all that big on candles,” he replied, because he couldn’t say he didn’t trust her not to
drift into a wine coma and burn the house down.

“Oh,” Mary mused, unphased, her pale brow furrowing thoughtfully. “Body lotions? They have all the Christmas ones out now. Or you could always go for soap if lotion’s a bit too girly,” she added, lifting her eyebrows at him over the lip of her mug.

“Ha ha,” John mocked tonelessly, and she smiled into her coffee. “I don’t know, I’ll think of something. I’m pretty sure she said something about needing a new scarf, but she might have gotten one since now that the weather’s getting cold.”

“Well when do you remember her talking about it?”

John stared up at the ceiling as he thought. “I dunno. Before school started,” he offered, not mentioning that he had not spoken to her since, not beyond the occasional brief-as-possible exchange of ’still alive!’ texts, at least. Christmas was going to be well beyond awkward.

“Hmm, well maybe not then,” Mary continued, not noticing his discomfort, but he appreciated her trying to help all the same. She shifted sideways to face him, crossing her legs under her on the cushion. “Well, it can’t be that hard,” she said brightly. “Come on, what does she like?”

“I don’t really know,” he shrugged, looking down at his fingers twisting together in his lap. “She doesn’t really talk about that sort of thing much, ya know? She’s always out working.” It was the lie he had been telling since his sister was old enough to notice Mum was gone more often than not, and, though she had long since stopped believing it, it was still always the first thing to slip out.

“Oh, okay, that’s a start,” Mary urged, leaning forward over their combined armrests. “So, she works a lot. Good. Maybe…maybe you could get her one of those foot massage things! Or a gift certificate for a spa! That’s even girlier than the lotion though, isn’t it?” she muttered, grimacing sheepishly, but John just laughed.

“No, it’s a good idea, actually,” he acknowledged, nodding. “She could use a break,” he added, smiling at Mary, who beamed proudly at the praise. She wasn’t to know John meant rehab as opposed to aromatherapy. Not that they were mutually exclusive, he supposed.

“Hey, er, John?” Mary murmured, fingernails tracing figure eights in the upholstery as she bit her lip, watching the progress of the pattern.

“Hmm?” he hummed, turning his head toward her as he grabbed for his mug.

She continued, but did not look up. “About-About Christmas. Are we- Should I- That is… Are you getting me something?” She glanced up at him then, just barely out of the tops of her eyelids, and John was fairly certain what she saw was him blanching with panic.

“I- I don’t-”

She silenced him with a small smile, shaking her head as she pulled away. “It’s fine. I haven’t gotten you anything either, I was just curious.” She shrugged, fingers spinning around the rim of her cup.


“Did you get Sherlock something?”
John blinked, face slowly folding into a frown at the sharpness of the question. “Well, yeah. Sort of,” he mumbled. “I mean, I didn’t buy it or anything.”

“But you got him something,” she pressed, something sharp and pained in her gaze that John couldn’t pin down.

“Well, I- Why does it matter?” he muttered, instinctively defensive.

Mary stared at him a moment, and then sighed in a great gust of exhaustion, leaning down to put her cup on the table with a heavy clunk. “John, look,” she began, hands gesticulating placatingly between them, “I’m trying here, alright? I really am, but you have got to be honest with me.”

John’s frown deepened, and he leaned back, shaking his head blearily. “Mary, I don’t-”

She cut him off with a sharp jerk of her head. “No, John, you do know. And I think you’ve known for a while.” Her blue eyes bored into him, unmoving in their knowing, and John swallowed down the knot of panic rising in his throat.

“Mary, I have no idea what you’re-”

“Do you want to be with me?”

John’s sentence actually death-rattled in his throat. “What?” he wheezed, heart seeming to pound in his stomach.

Mary softened, sighing faintly as she shifted further up in the chair, leaning closer across the small gap. “Do you want to be with me? Do you want a relationship? With me?”

John blinked, dumbstruck, and yet, somewhere in the back of his mind, he supposed he had known this was coming. There was a reason he hadn’t thought to get her a present. “Mary, I- I do like you-” he began, but she shook her head again.

“No, don’t do that,” she interjected somewhat fiercely. “Don’t leave doors open you never intend to walk through. It’s a simple question: Do you want to be with me or not?”

John garbled out of flapping lips. “I- I-”

Mary huffed, rolling her eyes, and then, suddenly, she was blurring, coffee-warmed fingers brushing his jaw as he was guided forward to her lips.

It was…nice. Perfectly nice. The kiss was chaste, her lips soft, carrying the taste of vanilla and coffee—had she gotten vanilla in her coffee?—and it immediately occurred to him that trying to remember the coffee someone had ordered was not the type of thing that should be going through your mind when they kissed you.

She pulled away, and John felt something settle between them, a heavy shared acknowledgement that came down like a wall. Her fingers drifted away as she leaned back, resigned smile sitting sadly on her face, and John could barely look up at her from the tops of his bowed eyes. “It’s okay,” she said with a soft nod, and it was so obviously sincere, John wanted to throw up from guilt. “It’s not exactly a shock,” she chuckled, shrugging a shoulder.

John sighed, wiping a hand across his shamed face. “Mary, I’m sorry, I-”

“It’s really okay, John,” she repeated, reaching forward to cover his hand with her own over the armrest, and he hated himself for the nothing that flooded through him at the touch. Sweet, kind,
caring, perfect Mary smiled up at him, patting his hand in soft reassurance, and he couldn’t make himself want her.

So quick bright things come to confusion…

You know you’re in trouble when Shakespeare starts making sense.

“You’re a great guy, John,” she stressed in a whisper, and he was obliged to smile up at her even as he kept his eyes from focusing. “I hope we can still be friends.”

“Of course,” he blurted, startled into looking at her properly. “Of course, I-I would never- You’re a fantastic friend,” he urged, and she chuckled airily, settling her hand heavier over his, and he gripped it back.

“So are you,” she replied, and there was no edge to her smile now, and John felt the knots in his stomach loosen as the barometric pressure seemed to drop around them. “Even if you’re terrible at Shakespeare,” she added with a cheeky tilt of her head.

John dropped his mouth, and she laughed, their hands disentangling as she went back to her coffee. “You said it was good!”

“I say a lot of things,” she sang, looking sidelong at John as she drank, but her composure cracked into a giggle as he glared. “Alright, it’s not terrible,” she allowed, rolling her eyes as she settled the cup in her lap, “but we still need the practice. From the top?” she asked, and John nodded, balancing his tea on his knee as he hoisted up his paperback.

Perhaps it was just the nature of how odd the past month had been, but the evening’s events didn’t really hit John until he was walking down the corridor toward the dorm. He slowed in the hall, taking the last few strides with deliberate slowness as his mind sorted through it all.

He had parted amicably with Mary outside of her building, insisting on escorting her now that it was dark, and she had thanked him with a quick hug and a threat that she would know if he hadn’t been practicing come their next meeting tomorrow after her last class. And it had all been perfectly normal, not the slightest bit awkward, and John would quite possibly have entertained the thought that he had drifted off into a masochistic daydream for a minute at Lindsey’s if not for the taste of vanilla he couldn’t quite shake.

When he pushed open the door, Sherlock was lounging on his bed, feet lolling off the edge, and John knew he was caught the second those grey eyes looked up, not having bothered composing himself as he had expected Sherlock to be in the lab. Sure enough, Sherlock lowered his book to his lap, tilting his head with furrowing brows.

John softly closed the door behind him, looking somewhere aside toward the floor. “Mary kissed me,” he said, unplanned, and then snapped his head up at a strangled choke of breath.

Sherlock didn’t appear to have made the sound when John’s eyes found him, however, his face a brick wall.

John kept his eyes fixed on the grey ones, not wanting to miss anything else. “And then broke up with me.”

Sherlock’s mouth twitched as he blinked a few, quick times, and then an imperious eyebrow slowly rose. “Are those two things related, or…?”

“What? No,” John snapped, rattling his head as he stepped into the room, perching on the edge of his
bed, elbows digging into his thighs as his fingers pushed up into his hair. “I didn’t even know we were dating!” he bleated, hands pulling free to gesture helplessly out at his sides.

Sherlock snorted, and John looked up to find the haughty head tilt had joined the imperious eyebrow. “Really?” he condescended, drawing out the mocking syllables. “You didn’t know you were dating?”

“No!” John spluttered, shaking his head as he bolted up to sitting straight. “What, you knew?” he pressed, waving a hand out in a vague point.

“Of course I knew.” Sherlock snapped, a hint of a chuckle in it, but he seemed anything but amused. “Everyone knew.”

John let his hand fall to his thigh with a slap, shaking his head in befuddlement. “Why didn’t you tell me?” he spouted.

“Everyone knew.” Sherlock blinked, mouth closing as he simply regarded John for a moment. “Are you genuinely asking me why I didn’t inform you of your own romantic relationships?” he asked, skeptical.

“Yes!” John exclaimed, voice high with exasperation.

Sherlock only continued blinking at him. “I rather thought you were already aware,” he murmured, slow with confused hesitation.

“How did you not know I wasn’t aware?” John snapped, and there was a small tremor in his misplaced anger as Sherlock’s eyes flashed, the first warning sign he may have gone too far.

“I didn’t examine the matter that closely; it seemed too obvious to bother with,” Sherlock spat, eyebrows lowering with growing irritation.

“You examine everything closely!” John exclaimed, standing up before his leg started bouncing with delayed adrenaline. “Why should this be any different?”

Sherlock didn’t reply, only narrowed his eyes, staring John down in that way he had that ripped right through every defense mechanism you thought you’d properly deployed.

With a sigh, John wilted back to the bed, hanging his head and knitting his fingers over the back of his skull. “I’m sorry,” he said, straightening up again as he shook his head. “I just- It all caught me a bit off-guard.”

Sherlock nodded as if this were perfectly understandable, although John doubted he had any idea what it was really like being caught unawares.

“It’s fine though,” he continued, even though Sherlock showed no signs of caring, but his mouth seemed to want to say it. “We’re still friends and everything.”

Sherlock hummed, nodding again, and then stilled, looking down to where his hand shifted against his duvet. “You sure it wasn’t the kiss?” he asked in a rapid mutter, expression sarcastically concerned.

John’s eyes snapped to slits. “Sherlock.”

“Because,” the detective continued, shuffling forward to the edge of the mattress, “it seems like an awfully big coincidence that she terminated your relationship right after-”
“It wasn’t the kiss, Sherlock,” John interjected, consonants sharp on his tongue.

“How do you know? Did you ask?” the detective inquired, dipping his head.

John’s mouth popped open as he shook his head incredulously. “I just got dumped!” he spluttered.

“You’d think you could show a little sympathy.”

If you were weeping, I would weep,” Sherlock muttered, waving a hand in dismissal, “but, as it is…” He finished with a shrug.

John tilted his head, considering. “Would you really weep?”

Sherlock let out a loud scoff. “No,” he spat. “I would get out my violin and play a sad song just for you,” he goaded with a faux-innocent grin.

John sneered at him, and then smiled, somehow feeling better under the barrage of insults. “Well, not tonight, okay?” he replied, rising to his feet again as he headed to his dresser for pajamas. “I’d rather save that for the more dire cases.”

“Series finales of Doctor Who, got it,” Sherlock said, snapping his fingers into a point at John before turning back to his book.

“I was not crying!” John bellowed, whipping around to face the old argument. “I told you, I got popcorn powder in my eye!”

“Ehh,” Sherlock mused, wobbling his head side-to-side with indecision, and John made the very adult choice to chuck a pair of socks at him.

Of course, Sherlock blocked them with his book and threw them back, and things devolved drastically from there, culminating in a tense meeting in the middle to exchange hostages: Sherlock’s skull for John’s favorite jumper.

****

John paced back and forth down the aisle between their beds, arms folded across his chest, one hand lifted up so he could nibble at his thumbnail as he watched Sherlock’s eyes roll back and forth across the screen. “Well?” he pressed, and Sherlock shushed him with yet another hiss. John resumed his strides, steps growing quicker and quicker until he simply couldn’t contain it any longer. “Oh, come on! You’ve read it three times by now!”

Sherlock looked up at him, raising an eyebrow. “Twice,” he informed, spinning the laptop on his thighs and holding it back up to John, all without breaking eye contact, “and corrected a split infinitive somewhere around the middle.”

“Great,” John muttered, rolling his eyes as he turned to sit on the edge of his mattress, resting the laptop beside him, “but what did you think.”

“It was…” The detective paused, eyes shifting away as his head wobbled in consideration. “Good,” he finally concluded. “No one is going to believe it, mind you.”

“Why not?” John asked, plucking the computer back up and placing it on his lap, staring down at the offending paragraphs.

“John, please,” Sherlock muttered, rolling his eyes as he wriggled forward on the duvet, crossing his legs. “If you hadn’t been there, would you really believe a man trained a snake to kill his
“But,” John murmured, looking forlornly down at his dramatic retelling of Sherlock smacking the cobra away with a lamp, “that’s what happened.”

“Yes,” Sherlock conceded, swatting a hand, “but it sounds ridiculous. Like something out of those Illinois Jones movies.”

“Indiana,” John amended, and, though he didn’t immediately look up, he could feel Sherlock glaring at him as the detective sniffed sharply. “But Lestrade was there,” John offered, “he could back up the story.”

Sherlock shook his head. “It wasn’t officially a case, remember? They couldn’t ‘allocate the departmental resources’ to look into it,” he reminded, fingers hooking around the quote. “That’s why he sent Ms. Stoner to us in the first place, because he couldn’t do anything about it. He wouldn’t be able to comment.”

“But he was there,” John urged, but Sherlock only shook his head again.

“Only after the fact, and not for her. He was there for the murder. Suicide? Negligent suicide?” Sherlock mumbled, brow furrowing as he shifted to talking to himself. “Regardless,” he muttered, rattling his head, “he won’t be able to help you. You and The Speckled Band are on your own,” he concluded with obvious disdain for the title, but he had wanted to include the Latin name of the snake, so clearly his suggestions were useless.

“Fine,” John sniffed, chin lifting as he moved the cursor toward ‘Post’. “And who cares if they believe it anyway? We know it happened.”

“That’s what you said about the last one,” Sherlock replied, smirking as he leaned back against the wall, “and then pouted for three days when they didn’t believe you.”

“I didn’t pout,” John muttered, and Sherlock grinned, “and it’s not my fault Jabez actually bought that whole ‘Red-Headed League’ lark.”

“You could’ve left it out,” Sherlock suggested with a shrug.

“But that’s how it happened!” John snapped, arms rising and falling to bring his hands back down onto the bed with a thump. “It’s the truth!”

Sherlock chuckled. “People don’t want the truth, John. It’s far too honest a thing.”

John opened his mouth to argue that was the point, but then closed it, understanding the difference. “So,” he said instead, closing his laptop before any infuriating comments came up, “any new cases?”

For the past several weeks since their encounter with Moran, Sherlock had been grabbing every case he caught so much as a whiff of. Moriarty seemed to have disappeared off the face of the earth, if he’d ever existed on it in the first place, and there was nothing left for them to do but wait until he surfaced. Of course, Sherlock was horrible at waiting, and John suspected half of his clothing had ended up at Baker Street over the past two months, a side effect of the innumerable nights spent there when the chase went too late. It was all well and good for Sherlock, who seemed to have evolved past the need for sleep, but John was still only human, and he couldn’t remember a time his eyelids weren’t heavy. He yawned just thinking about it.

“No,” Sherlock replied sourly, but John had to suppress a sigh of relief. “I called Lestrade earlier, but all he had to offer were missing pets.” He grimaced at the apparently repulsive suggestion, causing
“I don’t know,” he replied, shrugging. “We took a stray dog in when I was eight, and he disappeared a few months later.” He looked up, smiling at Sherlock’s blinking befuddlement. “I wouldn’t have minded having Sherlock Holmes on the case.”

Sherlock continued blinking at him. “I-I would’ve been seven,” he murmured, forehead creasing.

John beamed, charmed by the man’s confusion. “Still,” he answered, shifting to standing as he moved back to his dresser to continue packing.

Sherlock sighed heavily behind him. “Do you want me to call Lestrade back?” he asked, and John smiled secretly down at his socks.

“You don’t have to,” he shrugged, and Sherlock huffed again, a rustle of clothing reaching John’s ears before the soft beeps of the keypad.

“Fine,” Sherlock was snarling as John turned to him. “Fine, I will call him. But if there’s a cat named Mr. Whiskers or-or Lord Fluffington or anything equally appalling, I will assume it ran away out of spite and look no further.”

John chuckled, grinning as the glowering detective lifted the phone to his ear. “Fair enough,” he allowed, and Sherlock gave him a parting huff before John turned back to his clothes, his smile refusing to be wiped.

“Lestrade?” Sherlock questioned, and John snuck a glance over his shoulder to see the boy bowing his head, pinching at the bridge of his nose. “About those missing pets…” he ground out, teeth clenching, and the whole thing was just far too adorable if you asked John.

Of course, if anyone had, he would have lied, because he didn’t imagine Sherlock Holmes would take too kindly to being described the same way people referred to cooing babies and yapping puppies.

There was a knock at the door, a less shocking occurrence than normal being that it was the last day of term, the entire rugby team seeming to want to stop by before they left, and John moved toward it, throwing it open unthinkingly before he froze. “Harry?” he breathed.

His sister grinned at him, dirty-blonde hair falling over her sparkling blue-green eyes as she bounced a bit in place. “John!” she cried, and then he was wrapped in crushing hug of mint and laundry detergent.

“Harry?” he repeated, hands a bit delayed as they came to rest on her back. “What are you- What are you doing here? Hey, Harry?” he added, concerned as she continued to squeeze him, clinging tight for several beats too long. “Harry, what’s wrong?” He touched his hands to her shoulders in suggestion, and she complied, unwrapping her grip and stepping back to reveal a new shimmer to her eyes. “Harry?” he asked again softly, bowing his head toward hers.

She swallowed hard, dropping her gaze. “I-I moved out,” she said, and John’s hands slipped from her shoulders in surprise. “I’m staying with Clara till the end of the year.”

“You- What-” John murmured, blinking down at her, though she was nearly his height now. “Harry, why-”

There was a rustle from behind him, a clicking of glass on wood, and John remembered with a start that Sherlock was still in there, clearly trying to alert someone to his presence before the conversation.
Harry jumped slightly, trying to look around his shoulder. “Oh, I-I’m sorry, I didn’t realize- Do you have”—she leaned in, lowering her voice to mostly mouthing—“someone in there?”

John bit down a hysterical giggle. “No,” he scraped out, shaking his head, “it’s my roommate. Sherlock?” he called, opening the door wider, the detective’s head popping up around it as though he had just been alerted by the sound of his name, an act John wasn’t buying for a second. “Sherlock, this is my sister, Harry. Well, Harriet, but-”

“I hate it,” Harry interjected, stepping in front of John and flicking a small wave at shoulder-height. “Hi. Sherlock, was it? John’s mentioned you a few times, I think.”

Sherlock nodded, quirking his lips politely, and John could tell he was evaluating Harry, trying to figure out which personality he ought to portray for this encounter.

John interrupted before it could get too far, hoping Sherlock would take the hint and stay himself. The whole fake smiling bit rather disquieted him. “Do you wanna come in?” he asked, gesturing between Harry and the interior. “Or we could go somewhere. Into town? There’s a few cafés that should be open,” he rambled, lifting his wrist to check his watch.

Harry placed a hand on his arm, pressing lightly for him to lower it. “No, here’s fine. I can’t stay long anyway. Clara’s waiting in the car.”

“She can drive?” John asked, frowning at the age difference as he pressed himself flat against the door to let Harry past.

She laughed lightly. “No, her and her family. I’m staying with them for Christmas. And, well, who knows how long after that.”

John hesitated in the doorway, looking between his sister and Sherlock. “I- Er-”

“I should go,” Sherlock said, abrupt and awkward, snapping up a seemingly random book from his bed and turning toward the door.

“No, it’s fine, don’t bother,” Harry bade, waving a hand, and Sherlock stopped just in front of John, both of them turning with surprise toward their guest. “You’re the detective, right? The one from John’s blog?”

They exchanged a quick glance, Sherlock’s accusatory while John’s was apologetic.

“Yes,” Sherlock said warily. “In a sense. He is rather fond of hyperbole.”

“What, when?” John blurted, and Sherlock gave him a withering look.

Harry chuckled. “Well, that bit about you figuring people out, about seeing everything that makes them tick, is that true?”

For a tense moment, Sherlock simply watched her, Harry staring right back, and John looked between them, wondering what silent exchange he was missing.

“Yes,” Sherlock answered, no uncertainty in his tone now, and Harry smiled with a clipped nod.

“Okay. Then there’s no point in you not being here because you’ll figure it all out from the way John folds his shirts later anyway.”
Sherlock’s lips twitched as he dropped his head in acknowledgement of the point, and Harry grinned.

John, wondering when he had gotten left out, cleared his throat, closing the door with a quick flick of his wrist and moving into the room toward Harry. “So, tell me then,” he said, waving for her to sit down on his bed. “What happened?”

Harry sighed, hanging her head in her hands over her knees, and John lowered down beside her, Sherlock silently creeping past to sit in his desk chair a respectable distance away.

“I came out to Mum,” she said to the floor, and John’s wide eyes flicked up, catching Sherlock’s head also snapping to Harry in his peripheral vision. She lifted her face, sliding her hands up her knees to rest on her thighs. “She actually handled it pretty well,” she continued, pitch rising. “It was Will who was the problem.”

“Will?” John parroted, hoping for a surname and perhaps an address so he could murder him and have Sherlock make it look like an accident.

Harry only nodded. “Mum’s new boyfriend. He lives with us. Well, her now, I suppose. She said she was gonna tell you.”

John shook his head at her confusion. “She didn’t. We don’t really talk much though.” At all, he knew his eyes were conveying, and Harry nodded ruefully.

“Probably thought you wouldn’t come home if you knew. Manipulative bi-”

“Harry,” John interrupted, but without any real heat. It wasn’t as if he could defend the accusation, but Harry calmed regardless, sucking in a slow breath.

“She’s a nightmare, John,” she said on the exhale, shaking her head. “Just as bad as she is. I don’t think there’s been a night since they got together that she hasn’t gone out.”

John’s jaw clenched, and his eyes skittered to the floor, guilt settling thick in his throat.

“No, don’t do that!” Harry urged, shoving at his arm, and he looked up in surprise to her fierce expression. “Don’t go blaming yourself! It wouldn’t have mattered if you were there or not.”

“But you-” John argued, but Harry shook her head.

“I’m fine,” she insisted, tone unyielding. “Clara’s parents know, and they’re letting me stay with them. We’ll sort something out until uni. None of this is your responsibility. And it never should have been,” she added quietly, and John blinked across at her, lips parting.

“Harry-”

She held up a hand. “I know you didn’t mind. I know that,” she headed off, and he closed his mouth. “But it shouldn’t have been your job, John.” Her eyes drifted away for a moment as she swallowed hard. “I’m good now,” she assured, grabbing onto one of his hands with both of hers, her smile watery. “Really, really good. And Mum-” She paused, expression faltering as she looked down at their combined grip. “Well, Will’s not mean,” she continued, shrugging. “He’s an asshole, sure. Kept asking me if I was gonna bring my girlfriend around for a show”—she lifted a hand to halt John’s appalled protest—“but he’s not mean. To be honest,” she murmured, pulling her hands back to herself, brow furrowing with hesitation, “I think they might deserve each other.”

“Harry,” John said, twisting to better face her on the bed, “you don’t mean that. I’m sure Mum-”
“Don’t,” she interrupted coldly, eyes flaring. “Don’t make excuses for her. I’m not a child anymore, John. I know what my mother is.”

He looked away, unable to meet the ice in her young eyes, and equally unable to entirely dispel the shame in his gut.

Harry sighed, folding her face into her palm. “I didn’t come here to fight,” she said tiredly, rising to her feet as John awkwardly followed. “I just- I just wanted you to know. I wanted you to know I’m alright.” She smiled, weak but genuine, and John returned it, nodding.

“Thanks, Harry,” he said, and her smile grew as she moved toward him, wrapping her frail arms around his back again. He turned his face away, cheek pressed into her hair as he gripped her tightly back, and he realized just how much she had grown, just how much she had been through and come out the other side. He couldn’t ignore the nagging gnawing in his gut that it was all his fault, that he had brought this on her by leaving, by not getting Mum to quit drinking, by calling the police on Dad, by a million tiny failures scattered across the limited years of his life, but he fought it down with a swallow as they pulled apart. “Be careful,” he said, and she rolled her eyes, moving away toward the door. “And don’t forget to study, even though it’s break,” he continued, following after her. “This year is very important for your grades.”

“Yeah, yeah, thanks, Dad,” Harry muttered, turning back with one hand on the handle.

John chuckled even as his gut twisted.

Harry then hesitated, mouth opening and closing a few times as her face grew taut with thought. “John?” she finally said, looking up at him through the tops of her eyes. “I know it won’t make any difference, I know you’ll do it anyway, but I just wanna say…” She lifted her face, eyes sad and focused. “Don’t go back,” she pleaded, shaking her head softly. “You’re better here, I can tell,” she continued, and he dropped his eyes from her desperate ones. “Don’t let her pull you back in.”

He took a breath, looking back up, emotions firmly suppressed. “Happy Christmas, Harry.”

She searched his face, mouth opening, the tiny beginning sputter of an argument breaking from her throat, and then she stopped, blinking as her posture shifted back in acceptance. She gave a quick nod to the floor, a breath passing through her nose. “Happy Christmas, John,” she replied, a trace of sorrow in her smile, and then she was gone, pulling the door closed behind her.

John stared at the spot her face had occupied, several wars raging inside his head, and he only came back to himself when there was a small squeak of a chair leg against the tile behind him. “I-I need-” he rambled, moving simultaneously too slow and too fast. “I need some air,” he spluttered, grappling at his jacket where it was draped across his dresser.

Sherlock didn’t reply, or, if he did, John didn’t hear him, didn’t even look at him as he darted out the door, racing down the corridor and bursting into the frigid December air.

It took him all of twenty minutes to realize where he really wanted to be wasn’t alone.

Sherlock seemed startled when he came back, fumbling over the handle of the suitcase he was wheeling out of their room, and John remembered then the time that one of Mycroft’s henchmen was picking him up, hours earlier than John’s train.

“Headed out?” he asked, frozen fingers cradled in his pockets.

Sherlock nodded, fingers thunking against the plastic as he tapped at the handle. “Yes. Mycroft just called.”
John nodded, forcing a smile even though he knew the effort was wasted on Sherlock. “Well, have fun,” he bade, and Sherlock gave a soft scoff. “Season of love and goodwill and all that.”

“I’ll try to keep that in mind,” the brunette replied, smiling, and then they lapsed into silence, avoiding one another’s eyes.

John pushed all the words he wanted to say aside and forced his tongue to form only, “Stay in touch, okay?”

Sherlock tilted his head, suddenly sharply curious. “Stay in touch?” he murmured.

John nodded. “Yeah, you know. Don’t be a stranger. Text me and all that,” he muttered, shrugging as he removed a hand to rub at the back of his neck, a shiver running through him at the miscalculation of how much his pockets had warmed his fingers.


John chuckled, but nodded. “I will,” he said, a little softer than he’d meant to, a little heavier, a little too much like a vow, and he swallowed hard at his self-imposed awkwardness, eyes flitting away.

Sherlock cleared his throat, shuffling minute inches closer, but the effect was staggering, the moment spiraling to intimate as his voice lowered. “John?”

John looked up, and then immediately regretted it as he met Sherlock’s torn expression, too much emotion in those silver eyes for him to have any hope of keeping himself impassive.

“If you- If anything…happens,” he stressed, stammering uncharacteristically, “you can- I hope you know you can- You can tell me. Call me.”

This was the moment John ought to look away, ought to smile, maybe chuckle softly, and assure Sherlock he would be fine before bidding him goodbye with a quick joke and a final laugh. As it was, he only stared blankly back at him.

“I mean to say,” he rambled on, leaning back to brush a hand through his curls, “you could always stay with us. At the Manor. I mean, I know I wasn’t exactly complimentary towards it”—John did genuinely chuckle a little at that—“but it’s really not entirely unbearable. Just me, Mrs. Hudson, Mycroft and the staff. Half of them are trained killers, of course, but I think that rather adds something to the festivities.”

John laughed, the knots he had tangled himself up in loosening a little. “Do you mean the staff or Mrs. Hudson and Mycroft?” he joked.

“Well,” Sherlock muttered, shifting his head side-to-side on his neck, and then laughing along when John picked up again.

“Thanks, Sherlock,” he said, properly grinning now. “I’ll- I’ll keep it in mind.”

Sherlock smiled, gripping back onto the handle of his suitcase as he nodded. “Well, I suppose I should-“ he murmured, pointing vaguely down the corridor.

“Right,” John clipped, stepping to the side to let him past. “I’ll, um…I’ll talk to you later?” he really tried to say but ending up asking.

Sherlock slowed, turning his head over his shoulder. “Later,” he assured with a nod, and, if John had
accidentally made a vow, Sherlock seemed to have stumbled into a promise.

He grinned back at him, lifting his hand in parting as Sherlock rounded the corner, and he waited until he could no longer hear the wheels rolling along the tile before turning around to the door.

Sherlock hadn’t taken much with him, the room looking nearly identical to the way it had for months, but it felt hollow to John, dim and grey, and even the air breathed stale, like a world shuttered away for far too long. He wrinkled his nose against it, tossing his jacket onto his bed, and then toed off his shoes, kicking them under the bed so as not to impede his path as he packed. As he carried a handful of boxers across from his dresser, he noticed a cup sitting on his desk, and he deposited the bundle of cotton onto the bed temporarily as he investigated.

It was coffee, the expensive stuff Sherlock bought and never let him use, but it was in John’s mug—a ridiculous novelty thing he’d picked up in London at some point that looked like a plain Pac-Man screen until the heat made the dots and ghosts and such appear—and on John’s desk, so, logically…

He tentatively picked it up, sniffing the liquid for some reason, as if that would help him decipher the intended recipient, and then took a small slurp. It was still hot, and way better than the common room coffee, and John hummed contentedly as he wrapped his hands fully around the sides. As he swallowed his third swig, he realized Sherlock must have left it here, must have gone across to his lab, boiled water in likely a questionable manner, and made John coffee in the twenty minutes he had been gone. A whole different kind of warmth spilled over in his chest, and he placed the cup back down to his desk, fishing his mobile out of his pocket.

*I don’t take sugar*

He waited, halfway through another drink when the phone beeped moments later.

*I’ve only been gone four minutes and you’re already being ungrateful*

John chuckled, savoring the warm drag of caffeine down his throat as he swiped out a reply.

*Thank you Sherlock*

The reply was instantaneous.

*You’re welcome, John*

*****

“It’s definitely the angels.”

“Shh, don’t spoil it!”

“For myself?”

“Sherlock.”

Sherlock smiled, grabbing another handful of popcorn as he directed his crunching mouth away from the phone that was broadcasting John’s voice on speaker. “But it’s so obvious!” he argued, lifting a hand to the television even though there was no one else in the room. “They are literally the only other things in the room. ‘Oh no, where ever has my friend gone?’” he mocked, scoffing at the frightened blonde protagonist. “And now she’s going to explore. Of course she is. Really, you would think that people would have more common sense than- AH!” Popcorn toppled to the duvet as he jumped, his hands losing their grip, and John’s laughter filled the room, loud where the phone rested.
on the pillow beside him.

“Oh my god, you fucking screamed!” he cackled, and Sherlock glared down at the technological messenger of his mocking.

“I did not,” he snapped. “I merely spilled my Coke. It was rather cold, and I was unprepared.”

“Did you jump?” John continued, completely ignoring him. “I bet you did. You’re hanging from the ceiling right now, aren’t you? Clinging onto some diamond chandelier?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” he spat, popping a Malteser into his mouth. “We don’t have diamond chandeliers.”

John laughed, and Sherlock couldn’t help but grin, closing his eyes as the sound washed over him.

It had been barely two days since he had seen John, Friday afternoon leading into Sunday’s waning daylight, but it felt like another lifetime entirely, shut away as he was in the isolated manor, so dark and dull compared to the dorms at Langley. Although whether that had more to do with the buildings or the company would require further study.

“Just wait till you get to the police box bit,” John said excitedly, and Sherlock could hear his voice get clearer as he likely picked the mobile up. “It’s great. The Doctor really—”

Muffled voices came through on the line, the words unintelligible, but he could hear John talking with someone—a man, older. Their tones were tense, bordering on argumentative.

Sherlock pressed the speaker to his ear, pausing the episode with a quick jab of the remote.

A woman joined, soft, placating, but John’s voice only sharpened, scraps of syllables reaching across the 47 minute drive at just-shy-of-getting-pulled-over speeds.

He may have looked up the details.

A rising shout, a bitter snarl, and then the rustling was back, John’s cold voice breaking through.

“Sherlock?”

“Still here,” Sherlock replied, prompting a frustrated sigh.

“I have to go,” John muttered. “Apparently, Will doesn’t think I did a proper job of mopping the kitchen. Never mind that he was the one who spilled his beer in the first place.”

Sherlock was probably supposed to chuckle, but instead frowned. “John, are you sure—”

“It’s fine, Sherlock,” John interrupted, but he didn’t sound entirely confident either. “I can handle it,” he amended, and that much, at least, Sherlock believed.

“Allright,” he allowed, leaning back into his pillow.

“Allright,” John repeated, and Sherlock’s lips twitched at the smile in his voice. “I’ll text you when I’m done, yeah?”

It was true John had not been home long, but, in that time, it had become abundantly clear that, whatever Harry had said, Will was most definitely mean. He barked orders, usually while slurring, and drank everything John’s mother bought, no money of his own going into the arrangement. He was arrogant, coupled, as usual, with ignorance, and Sherlock could tell John was stuck, wanting to get as far away from the man as possible, but not wanting to leave his mother. The fights had yet to
get physical, but Sherlock didn’t hold out that hope for too much longer, and had taken to pacing through the periods John went silent, cycling through gradually more horrific scenarios until his mobile beeped again.

Sherlock had never told John any of this, of course, but the man seemed to have pieced it together, and was quick to text or call the second he was free of them.

“Sure,” Sherlock replied, affecting nonchalance. “I’ll be trying not to fall asleep. This episode is terribly boring; I don’t know how you can find it so terrifying.”

John chuckled. “Whatever you say, Sherlock. Whatever you say,” he drawled, and then the call ended, a sharp series of beeps signaling his return to solitude.

He tried to continue the episode, but his fingers twitched, his feet tapping together, and he quickly gave it up as a bad job, returning to his usual habit of wearing down patterns in his thin, green rug.

He hated his room at Holmes Manor, all dark wood and rich colors that made him feel like he ought to be talking in a Transylvanian accent. At least he had convinced them to get rid of the velvet, and he now had a simple white duvet and sheet set, rather at odds with the forest green and chocolate brown tones of the rest of the room. Of course, the decorative pillows it seemed he could do nothing about, even going so far as to throw them over the balcony that afternoon, but the staff had retrieved them, unharmed and taunting him from the head of the bed when he’d returned from lunch.

He’d forgotten to tell John that story, and made a mental note to tell him when he called back. Except he didn’t call back.

20 minutes went by, the till-then-longest time the altercations had taken. Then 30. Then 40. Sherlock was counting each minute interval individually by the time it reached 50 minutes, counting the seconds by 55, and, at one hour, two minutes and thirteen seconds, he was pounding down the stairs, mobile in his hand and only one arm in a sleeve of his coat.

“Sherlock?” Mycroft started as Sherlock burst into his office. “What are you doing in—”

“I have to get to Kent,” he blurted, planting his palms on the desk and attempting to look intimidating with anxiety-tugged hair and half a trench coat dragging on the ground beside him.

Mycroft raised an eyebrow. “Kent?” he asked, tapping his handful of papers on the cherry wood to straighten their edges. “What could you possibly have to do in Kent?”

“I have to get there,” Sherlock snapped, fingers curling over the edges of the wood as his grip tightened. “Right now. So call a car or a chopper or a jet pack or whatever you have to do, but I have to get to KENT!”

Mycroft stared at him, unmoved apart from his eyebrow lifting higher. “And what, pray tell, is so urgent that it cannot wait until morning?”

“Dammit, Mycroft!” Sherlock bellowed, swatting the papers out of his brother’s hands, sending them and the desk set clattering to the floor.

Mycroft wheeled back a few inches in his chair, eyes wide with alarm.

“You know what’s in Kent!” Sherlock shouted, pointing accusatorily, his arms then jerking wildly as he continued to rail. “John’s there, and I’m fairly sure he’s in trouble, and I have never asked you for anything in my entire life, so will you get off your custard-tart ass and CALL A DAMN CAR!” He panted, his lungs unaccustomed to the vigor of shouting, and glared down at Mycroft, who was
staring at him open-mouthed.

He collected himself quickly, however, and closed his lips, but he still looked decidedly unsettled. “John?” he asked.

Sherlock sighed, spinning on the Persian rug and tugging his fingers through his curls as he paced back a few steps. “I don’t know!” he snarled, but his voice creaked a little. “I don’t know, but I think- I think-” His arms fell limply to his sides, his lips trembling over a shaky rattle of breath. Slowly, he turned, swallowing hard, eyes blinking at the front of the desk before lifting to Mycroft’s pale face. His shoulders rolled in a helpless shrugged as he sucked in air and courage. “Mycroft,” he breathed brokenly, “I need your help.”

Mycroft’s entire body rippled with shock, and then he blinked, mouth closing and eyes hardening. Gaze never leaving Sherlock’s, he nodded. “I’ll drive,” he said, standing up and charging toward the door, Sherlock falling into quick strides behind him.

“Thank you,” he said softly, so softly, he thought for a moment his brother hadn’t heard him, but then Mycroft paused in putting on his overcoat, looking down the few inches to Sherlock’s face with an expression he didn’t think he’d seen in years.

Gently, and so quickly he’d have missed it if he’d blinked, Mycroft laid a hand on his shoulder, squeezing just enough to be felt before he was fastening buttons and grabbing his umbrella. “Come on,” he said, dropping Sherlock’s scarf into his hand, and Sherlock looped it around his neck at a jog as they raced toward the garage.

30 minutes later, his phone rang.

“John!?” he cried, and Mycroft shot him an urgent sidelong glance from the driver’s seat.

“Sherlock,” John answered in a rush of air. “I’m sorry, I-I know it’s late.” He paused, and then sighed heavily down the line, Sherlock remaining motionless as he listened, feeling Mycroft’s eyes burning into the side of his head. “Will left,” John continued coldly. “He’d been stealing from Mum. No idea how long, but I caught him taking money out of her purse, told him I’d tell the police if he didn’t stop. He ran off after that, threw some clothes in a bag and left. Took the money, of course.”

“Did he-”

“No,” John interrupted, and Sherlock imagined him shaking his head, imagined the creases of his forehead, the stiffness of his mouth. “He didn’t try anything. But Mum-” He faded off, and Sherlock pressed the phone hard to his ear, as if he could interpret something from the silence if he just got closer. John’s shaky exhale was like a gunshot when it came. “She’s so angry,” he said weakly. “So angry.”

Sherlock listened to him breathe for a few moments, wincing when the rhythm stuttered.

“What you said…about-about me staying with you-”

“We’re nearly there,” Sherlock interrupted, glancing up at Mycroft, who nodded, and the engine roared a little louder.

“Wait, you’re- But how did-”

“You didn’t call back,” Sherlock answered the trailed away question, grip tight on the mobile.

John sighed, and Sherlock could picture the frail smile in it now. “No,” he breathed. “No, I didn’t.”
They were quiet another long moment, the wheels hissing along the road the only sound in Sherlock’s ears.

“I’ll meet you outside,” John said, sounding a bit more determined, more controlled.

“Ten minutes,” Sherlock replied, looking to Mycroft again, who quirked his head slightly to the left. “Maybe less,” he added.

A slight shuffling sound indicated John was nodding. “I’ll be there.” He stopped, and there didn’t seem to be any more to say, yet he did not hang up. “Sherlock—” he began, and then faltered.

“We’ll see you in ten minutes,” Sherlock concluded, and John sighed softly in relief.

“Alright,” he whispered. “Alright.”

The phone beeped at him, and he lowered it to his lap, tapping back to the home screen before simply staring at the rectangle of light. He could feel Mycroft watching him, but was grateful for the silence, and, by the time they pulled into John’s driveway—or Sherlock assumed it was, at least, trusting Mycroft knew those sorts of details better than himself—he had recovered a reasonable level of his composure, no longer fighting the urges to cry, scream, or break things.

The front door opened, and Sherlock’s heart stuttered at the familiar silhouette, a large bag hanging off one of the shadowed shoulders.

John stepped under the porch light, not quite smiling, but his face visibly relaxed a little as his eyes found Sherlock’s in the passenger seat, and Sherlock was unbuckled and out of the door before the idea had even been fully processed through his mind. John opened his mouth to say something, though there were still several meters between them, but then there was a shrill shout from behind him, and he blanched, turning around.

Sherlock froze, still standing behind the car door, fingers gripping white against the top edge of the metal as Mrs. Watson appeared, visibly intoxicated even from this distance. Her shoulder-length hair was greasy and splayed everywhere, darker than John and Harry’s, but still more blonde than brown. Her makeup was smeared across her face, mascara running and lipstick smudged down her chin, but it was the feral look in her sunken, pale-green eyes that ran Sherlock’s blood cold. Mrs. Watson, whoever she might be, was not the woman standing in front of them, and Sherlock suddenly understood why people called addictions ‘demons’.

“You think you can just run away!?” she was shouting, and the side of John’s face Sherlock could still see clenched. “Just disappear like nothing happened? Like you didn’t fuck everything up?”

“He was stealing from you, Mum,” John said, a gentle reminder forced through gritted teeth.

“LIAR!” she shrieked, so loud, Sherlock recoiled, but John didn’t so much as flinch.

“Your father!” she shrieked, so loud, Sherlock recoiled, but John didn’t so much as flinch.

Sherlock hated to think what that implied.

“You’re a liar!” she continued, pointing at him as she staggered forward on the porch. “You drove him away! You told him lies and you drove him away! Just like you did with your father!”

John winced, head turning aside as his grip tightened on the strap of his gym bag.

On the opposite side of the car, Mycroft quietly rose out, exchanging a quick, wary glance with Sherlock.
“I didn’t lie, Mum,” John answered, quiet and quivering, his eyes cast down.

“Yes you did!” she bellowed. “You called that-that woman, that social worker, and you lied! You’re the reason he left! You’re the reason he’s DEAD!”

“That wasn’t my fault!” John cried back, but his voice held none of the rage of his mother’s.

“Yes it was!” she screamed, and John coiled back a half step. “If you had kept your mouth shut-”

“HE BEAT ME!” John shouted, and it was his mother’s turn to startle away. “I was a kid,” he urged, hands clenched at his sides. “I was just a kid, and he beat me. And you did nothing!” he spat, and even Sherlock flinched.

“He was your father!” Mrs. Watson countered fiercely.

John shook his head, mouth twisting into a disdainful sneer as he scoffed. “No, he wasn’t,” he snarled, and the hairs on the back of Sherlock’s neck stood up at the icy venom contained in those three words.

“SHUT UP!” Mrs. Watson railed again, eyes bulging, spots of spit bursting from her mouth as she bore down on John, who didn’t move apart from to draw himself up to his full height. “You shut up! He was your father! He loved you!”

“He never loved me!” John spouted back, defiantly holding his mother’s gaze. “Not ever! He never loved me, and he never loved you, and he deserved everything he got!”

The crack cut through the night like lightning, the whole world momentarily narrowing down to the spot on John’s left cheek where his mother’s hand came down with a fury only matched by the fire in her eyes.

Sherlock felt time halt, became acutely aware of every molecule in his body vibrating in the absolute stillness that froze in around them, and the small, shocked exhale of his breath seemed to drag on for hours as he watched John stagger backward, his right hand lifting across his body to the red-marred skin.

Mrs. Watson blinked, arm still outstretched in the final position of her swing, and then she too stilled, eyes widening in dawning horror.

And then everyone watched John, watched as he lowered his hand from his cheek, staring down at it in disbelief, or maybe looking for blood. His lips trembled as his fingers closed, arm slowly lowering back to his side, but it was a long moment before he lifted his head. When he did—in a slow, staggered motion—Sherlock couldn’t clearly see the look in his eyes, but he could read in the line of his jaw, the wrinkle at his temple, the muscles of his neck that it was an empty look, a cold look, and Mrs. Watson wilted appropriately beneath it.

“I-” she gasped, looking down at her own hand as if just realizing she was attached to it, and there, in the moment of sobriety, was a glimpse of the woman she must someday have been. “John, I- John, I’m sorry.”

John held out a hand as she outstretched hers, halting her approach. “Don’t,” he grit out, wrecked, and Sherlock wondered how it was possible to ache so much for another person, to feel their pain so deeply in your own soul that you thought you might crumple with the agony of it.

Mrs. Watson floundered, arms shifting up and down with indecision. “John, I- I didn’t- I didn’t mean-”
John dropped his hand, looking away, the shifting angle of his body creating a definitive wall between them.

“I’m so sorry, John,” Mrs. Watson rasped, the beginnings of a sob rising as her eyes filled. “I’m sorry, I- I need help, John,” she wept, face twisting with sorrow as she hung her head. “I need help.”

John nodded down at the grass, his shoulders rising and falling with a steady breath. “Yeah,” he choked out, lifting his face to her once again, “you do.” He swallowed, a strangled breath following, the type that staves off tears, if only for a moment. “But not from me,” he breathed, shaking his head, and Mrs. Watson quivered with a quiet sob. “I can’t help you anymore, Mum,” John continued, strength growing. “I haven’t been helping you for a long time.”

Mrs. Watson whimpered, lifting the backs of her fingers to her lips as she shook, eyes pressed tightly shut.

John swept in a breath, shaky on the inhale, firm as it passed his lips again. “The brochure for the treatment center is still on the fridge,” he said, and she looked up at him then, hopeful, if a little surprised. John shifted his bag more securely onto his shoulder. “Call them before you call me,” he added, an unmistakable end. He turned, and Mrs. Watson made no move to stop him as he walked toward Mycroft’s car, eyes glinting like polished stone in the headlamps, but he didn’t look directly at either of them. Without a word, he crossed to Mycroft’s side, passing him and opening the back door, tossing his bag in before dropping inside.

Sherlock followed his path with his eyes, and, when he looked back to the house, Mrs. Watson was gone, the door closed as a shadow moved across the front windows. Closing the passenger seat door, he backed up a few steps, opening the back one on the same side, and climbed in next to John, or as next to him as he could get with John’s bag firmly—and probably strategically—placed on the seat between them.

Mycroft lowered in a second later, his door closing in time with Sherlock’s, and then they all simply sat there, Mycroft looking at Sherlock in the rearview mirror, Sherlock looking at John, and John looking out the window, the light from a nearby streetlamp yellowing his flat features. Mycroft then turned the key, the engine revving to life, and he turned his head as little as possible to back out of the Watson’s driveway.

John didn’t move for 12 minutes and 27 seconds—Sherlock knowing this because he watched him for every single heartbeat of the clock—and, even then, all he did was close his eyes, a slightly louder breath passing his parting lips. A few seconds later, however, his eyes pinched, his mouth twitching, and Sherlock watched as the hand that rested on his gym bag clenched tighter into the fabric.

He had no idea what to do, what words were appropriate to say, what gestures of comfort or support were expected. All he knew was that he ached somewhere he couldn’t reach, some piece of himself he suspected now resided within John, and so he did the only thing that made sense in this strange, terrifying, post-gunshot world he was navigating bereft of a map. Gently, he lowered a hand over the taut one of John’s, startling a small gasp out of the boy as his eyes flew open, revealing the dampness pooling at the lower rim. They stared at each other, John shocked where Sherlock was terrified, but he slid his hand more firmly around John’s all the same, prying the stiff fingers away from the bag one by one as he captured them within his own.

Slowly, like he might scare the moment away if he moved too fast, John lowered his eyes to the touch, the muscles of his hand leaping briefly as if testing the feeling. He then turned a dazed look back up to Sherlock, and though Sherlock had no idea how many questions were contained in that small tilt of his head, he suspected the answer to every one of them was ‘yes’.
He nodded.

It wouldn’t be right to call it a smile, but John’s lips did close, a swallow moving down his throat as the corners curled briefly. He then closed his eyes again, leaning his head back against the headrest with a slow, heavy breath, chin tilted up to the ceiling, but he made no move to pull his hand away, so Sherlock didn’t either.

When they got back, Mycroft got on the phone while Sherlock led John upstairs. He made no attempt to hide the fact that he was arranging for the rest of John’s things to be removed from his house, as well as organizing a spot at a nearby rehabilitation facility for his mother, but John made no argument, only glancing toward the cracked study door in brief surprise when Mycroft adamantly insisted money would be no object.

Sherlock nudged him gently on the arm, nodding up the stairs, and John mutely followed, a 3-dimension shadow in his wake. When he pushed open the door of the room down the hall from his—the one he had already christened John’s in his head, but which the interior decorator had referred to as ‘The Blue Room’—the boy merely walked in after him, depositing his bag gently to the floor before wilting to the edge of the mattress, staring vaguely into space.

Suddenly, he sighed, head falling forward as he caught it in his hands. There was a long stretch of time he just breathed noisily into the navy and oak surroundings, and then he shook his head, whispering down at the grey rug, the first words he had spoken to Sherlock since their phone call. “What am I gonna do?”

Sherlock didn’t reply, frozen as he was just inside the closed doorway, but then John looked up at him, desperate and afraid and not like himself at all.

“Sherlock, what am I gonna do?” he croaked.

Without even considering it, Sherlock strode forward, reaching John’s side and sitting down on the bed next to him. “It’ll be alright,” he urged, and John blinked at him, smiling ruefully as he dropped his head again. “No, I mean it,” Sherlock said, moving his head to catch John’s eyes before they escaped. “I know that’s a hollow platitude that people throw around when they have nothing else to say, like ‘You’ll get through this’ or ‘Give it time’, but you know me; you know I wouldn’t do that. I don’t bother with people’s feelings enough to spare them.”

John chuckled, just one short, strangled laugh, but it sent Sherlock’s heart spiraling in his chest. “I’m telling you it will be alright because it will be, because I know,” he continued, trying to impart all his fervent belief into that single word. “You’ll stay here, we’ll go back to school, your mother will get through rehab.” He stopped, shifting closer, letting their legs just barely touch. “It will be alright.”

John looked at him like he didn’t dare believe it, couldn’t risk the disappointment. “How?” he muttered, shrugging helplessly. “How can you know any of that? How can you know she’ll even go at all?”

Sherlock opened his mouth, and then closed it, dropping his eyes to where his fingers twisted in his lap, but he had to say it, had to be brave enough for John. “Because she has you,” he said, looking up, “and you make people want to be better.”

John blinked at him, mouth parting, and this his face softened and he smiled, just a small one, but it was there. He looked back to the floor, nodding to himself before meeting Sherlock’s eyes again. “Thank you, Sherlock,” he said, and the voice was his again. “For everything,” he added, smile
brightening, and Sherlock returned it, something warm and liquid filling up his chest.

Not trusting himself to speak right away, he only nodded, rising to his feet and backing a few steps away, the added distance giving his brain the space to function properly. “If you need anything, my room’s just down hall to the right. First door you come to. Bathroom’s through there”—he waved to a door against the wall beside him—“and the closet’s there”—he waved to another door near the corner—“and the windows open out onto a balcony. Ya know, if you feel like catching frostbite.”

John chuckled again as he stood, and Sherlock tried not to beam too inappropriately as the thrill of the sound rushed through him again. “Maybe tomorrow,” he said, bending his elbows back as he stretched. “Right now, I think I just need to sleep.”

Sherlock nodded. “Right, well I’ll… leave you to it then,” he muttered, standing there an awkward moment longer before twisting away and making a quick retreat toward the door. He nearly had it closed behind him, and then stopped, popping his head and shoulders back in. “Er, goodnight,” he murmured, eyes shifting between John the corner of the rug he was standing on.

John’s face split into a brilliant grin, and Sherlock marveled at how anyone had ever composed poetry or music or any sort of beautiful thing without first witnessing this. “Goodnight, Sherlock,” he answered.

Sherlock was not quite sure how he made it back to bed, but he came out of his daze staring up at his ceiling, limbs spread out around him atop the duvet. He sighed, watching the shadows of the branches outside pluck at the plaster as they shifted in the breeze, and wondered if John was doing the same thing in his own bed mere meters away, and just the fact that that was something to wonder at, that it was possible, that John was here and safe and here sent Sherlock to sleep with a smile on his face, thinking that once, just this once, he might have done something right.

**Chapter End Notes**

FIRST OF ALL, I apologize. That was difficult to write, I’m sure it was difficult to read, but I hope everyone is okay because it all turned out kind of alright in the end. And next chapter you finally get an end to the UST, so there’s that to look forward to! And Christmas!

Anyway, some other notes: There is a link on my profile page to my tumblr, but people keep asking me if I have one, so, for the record, here it is. There is a post up there right now with the song and lyrics to "I'm Your Man", which is referenced in this chapter, and later today or tomorrow I will be putting up a Teenlock playlist inspired by this fic, so be on the lookout for that. I'll link it into the next chapter though, if you just wanna wait.

Completely random thing I'm asking your advice on: I saw this post on tumblr today and now have a mighty need, so do you guys think that should go into this fic, or is it more one shot material? Is that something you guys would even want or...? Yeah, just thoughts, give me your thoughts.

Also, a massive thank you to everyone who I have met up with so far in London. You have helped make this the best summer of my life, and I am loathed to leave you all at the end of the month.
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

FINALLY! Here we are! This chapter is just under 25k, can you believe it!? The fic isn't anywhere near over, but this is still a bit of a milestone. This chapter is the one that started it all! There is a scene in here that was the first thing that popped into my head, the reason I not only started this fic, but got into Teenlock in the first place (I'll tell you what it is at the bottom to avoid spoilers).

So, yeah, I'm not going to take up too much of your time, but there are a few people I need to thank for encouraging me, inspiring me, and generally talking me down from a nervous breakdown or two. Some of these are real names, some of them are usernames, and, if you want me to link your tumblr, take down your real name and switch it to your tumblr, or anything else like that, just let me know! ANYWAY, a massive thank you to Marisa, Amy, Eryn, Rosie, Hana, Olivia, Juliette, Saskia, Hannah, communionnimrod, AudreyWrites, morviarty, investigayting, and, last but not least, the loves of my life Erin and Alyssa. Truly, without all of you (and numerous others I probably forgot to mention or have yet to become best friends with) I would still be so alone, and I owe you so, so much.

As promised, here is the playlist for the overall fic that I mentioned last update, and here is a special Christmas one I made just for this chapter, and for all your Teenlock Christmas needs, I suppose.

Um, what else... my tumblr, if any of you want to find me there, or there's always my email address: prettysherlocksoldier@gmail.com, and do not ever, EVER hesitate to talk to me about the fic or send me your own stuff to look at/beta/whatever. Just talk if you wanna talk, basically!

And now, on to the excerpt!

“Sherlock,” he said sternly, “we are taking a selfie with Darth Vader, and there’s nothing you can do about it.”

Sherlock blinked at him. “Was any of that even English?”

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

John was pulled into the world of the conscious by a strange humming. It wasn’t strange in and of itself—“Hark the Herald Angels Sing” was a reasonable choice for the 23rd of December, after all—but it was strange that there should be anyone to hum in his room at all. Of course, it was also strange that his room should have a bed big enough for him to be splayed out as he was now, or a pillow as soft as the one he was currently lying on.

He blinked his eyes against the white linen, his vision obscured by a dark blue bedspread he had evidently pulled up to his face while he slept. Not wanting to shift too much and alert the musical intruder, he instead opened his eyes as wide as he could, peering up over his forehead and the impeding blanket to take in what bit of the room he could see.
A bit of the headboard came into view, a warm shade of light wood that shone in the flickering stripe of sunlight he suspected was being let in by the edge of the curtains. The walls were grey, though how dark was difficult to tell in the dim room, and just a corner of a tall, wooden door was visible on the wall directly in front of him. He shifted slightly, trying to get a better look.

“John?”

He barely restrained a yelp, his body jolting at the familiar voice he hadn’t expected to hear. He turned, sitting up slowly as he did, rubbing at his eyes to dispel any humiliating debris. “Mrs. Hudson?” he rasped, swallowing. “What are you-” He stopped, memory sparking as he looked at the woman at the foot of his bed, and he collapsed back into the headboard with a lame thump. He sighed heavily, looking up at the ceiling, his eyes naturally drawn to the light fixture positioned in the center—a modern silver chandelier. He let out a small sniff of amusement in spite of himself. No diamonds my ass.

Mrs. Hudson smiled gently at him, dropping her face as she slowly made her way round to his side. “How are you feeling?” she asked, the safer question.

John shrugged against what he now thought was probably the oak headboard. “Fine,” he lied, because that’s what you were supposed to do in these situations.

Mrs. Hudson sighed, moving to perch on the edge of the mattress beside his knees. “John,” she said, a gently prodding, and he swallowed, looking away. There was another small puff of her breath, and then her hand pressed gently down on the duvet over his forearm. “You did the right thing,” she said softly, and John turned to her, surprised. She twitched a smile. “Mycroft told me what happened,” she explained, tightening her grip over his blanket-rolled arm. “I- It’s a terrible thing, what happened to you. All of it,” she added gently, and the rate of John’s blinking increased as he dropped his eyes to his lap. “But you did do the right thing.”

He nodded, an obligatory jerk of his head.

“No, no, none of that,” she chided, and suddenly there were tender fingers in his hair, lightly brushing in a single stroke back from his temple.

He met her eyes, dazed, and she returned the stare with a dewy smile.

“You did do the right thing, John,” she said, thumb gently shifting back and forth in his hair, the barest hint of a touch. “You have to believe that. You did everything you could.” She smiled, tilting her head, her hand settling more firmly around the curve of his skull. “You can’t save people who don’t wanna be saved.”

His throat was tight, and he swallowed hard, blinking down at his blurring lap. Squinting his eyes together, he nodded, fighting the need for air he knew would reveal how ragged his breathing was.

“Oh, John,” Mrs. Hudson whispered, hand shifting firmer into his hair, “it’s alright.”

He felt a shift in weight on the bed, his head pulled forward, and then he was burrowed in the front of Mrs. Hudson’s horrible Christmas sweater, a snowman staring up at him with black button eyes as the woman’s arms wrapped around him.

“It’s alright,” she repeated, the words warm as they swept over his hair. “We’ll take care of it. All of us.”

His face pinched as he took in a shuddering breath, his hands lifting to rest limply on her arms, a weak return of the support.
“You’re not alone,” she whispered, hand trailing through his hair in soothing strokes, the way he always imagined mothers that weren’t his would do. “You’re not alone.”

He sucked in a massive gust of air, quivering it out, and then bit hard at his lip, eyes blinking down to disperse the moisture as he nodded against her collarbone.

They sat there a few moments longer, Mrs. Hudson seemingly content to let him wait until he was composed, and then he lifted his head from her, her hands shifting down his arms to his elbows as the gap between them widened.

“Thank you, Mrs. Hudson,” he said, and he was proud he still sounded in control of his vocal cords.

Mrs. Hudson did one last tuck of his hair behind his ears before she withdrew, hands cradled in her lap as she smiled warmly across at him. “Of course, dear,” she said, giving his leg a final tap before she stood. “Now,” she said primly, “I suppose I should leave you to get ready. I was only popping in to drop off some towels.”

“Oh,” John said, flicking a glance toward the now-open bathroom door. “Right. I-I didn’t bring-”

“Everything’s been taken care of,” the woman assured, nodding down to him. “Soap, shampoo, shaving cream. Sherlock even told me what toothpaste you prefer.” Her smile brightened, but John’s face turned thoughtful.

“He- He told you what…toothpaste I like?” he said slowly, the words feeling awkward on his tongue, like they ought not to be appearing together in that order.

Mrs. Hudson nodded. “He was very specific. Wrote it down and everything. He also told me what shampoo and body wash to get, but I wasn’t supposed to mention that.” She winked, sending molten embarrassment rushing down to his toes and back.

“I, er- Well-” He coughed into a fist as he dropped his face a moment. “Thank you for…for getting all that,” he finished lamely, but the woman beamed.

“Oh, it was no trouble, dear,” she assured, batting a hand. “I was out the shops anyway. Last day for it, after all. I’ll probably be out again after lunch as well. Never seem to get enough cranberry the first time round.”

“Do you want any help?” John asked, both because he did feel like a bit of a freeloader crashing the Holmes and Hudson Christmas, and also because he didn’t think he could stand just sitting around the manor all day.

Mrs. Hudson lit up like a- Well… “That would be lovely, dear, thank you!” she chirped. “We’ll leave right after lunch!”

“Mrs. Hudson!”

They both turned at the sharp hiss, a scowling face beneath a mop of untidy curls popping in around the door. “I told you to leave it outside! You’ll wake- Oh.” Sherlock stepped properly into the room, argumentative shoulders sagging as his grey eyes fell on John’s upright form. “You’re awake.”

John nodded, swallowing to clear his throat after it had constricted at the sight of Sherlock in dark jeans and an emerald dress shirt. “Only just,” he said, tilting his head as he smiled.

Sherlock closed the door, eyes narrowing toward Mrs. Hudson as he approached. “Did she wake you?” he asked.
Mrs. Hudson clicked her tongue, rolling her eyes.

John chuckled. “No,” he answered.

“You’re a terrible liar,” Sherlock snipped, shaking his head disparagingly.

“It’s Christmas,” John chirped back, grinning brightly. “You can’t lie at Christmas.”

Sherlock scoffed. “No, well, clearly you can’t.”

John sneered at him, and the detective smirked in response.

“We’re going out shopping after lunch, Sherlock,” Mrs. Hudson interjected from where she was needlessly tidying the few things John had dropped on top of the dresser the night before. “If you’d like to come.”

“We?” Sherlock muttered, eyes narrowing in calculation. “We who? Who’s we?”

“Well, John and I, of course,” she chuckled, flashing a smile over her shoulder at John, who returned it only to have it falter as he met Sherlock’s quizzical stare.

He frowned, tilting in his head in a gestured ‘What?’.

Sherlock held his eyes a few moments longer before he blinked, turning away, and John was left feeling as though they’d just had an entire conversation he couldn’t remember any of. “What are you shopping for?” the detective asked.

“Oh, nothing much,” Mrs. Hudson said, shrugging. “Just a few last minute groceries. Maybe a present or two. Nothing too strenuous.”

Sherlock cast down a strangely earnest look, and John matched it, confused before it occurred to him that shopping being too strenuous for him might be precisely what Sherlock was worried about.

He smiled softly, giving a small nod, and Sherlock relaxed, his shoulders lowering.

“We won’t be gone too long,” Mrs. Hudson continued, oblivious to the silent discussion. “Just a couple hours. Although I have to pick up something over by Piccadilly, so that could take a while. It’ll be a mess down there. You really don’t have to go if you don’t want, John,” she assured, turning back to him after folding his rugby jacket and replacing it back on top of his dresser.

John shook his head. “No, it’s fine. I don’t really wanna stay in all day anyway.”

There was a brief moment of tense silence, Mrs. Hudson smiling in uncomfortable understanding before Sherlock cleared his throat.

“I suppose I’ll go with you as well,” he said, directing it to Mrs. Hudson, his hands clenching together behind his back. “Otherwise, it’ll be just me and Mycroft,” he grimaced, not possibly able to inject more contempt into the name.

John smiled down into the blankets while Mrs. Hudson tutted.

“Oh, come now, Sherlock. It’s Christmas!” she cajoled, moving toward him as she headed to the door. “How ‘bout we bury the hatchet for a few days, hmm?”

“Bury it where?” Sherlock mumbled, and John laughed, Mrs. Hudson giving the detective a small slap on the arm as she passed.
“Oh, you,” she scolded, shaking her head. “I’m going to go get lunch started. Should be ready in about an hour. You can be ready by then, can’t you, dear?” she asked, turning back to John from halfway out the door.

John smiled, nodding. “Yeah, I’ll be ready.”

Mrs. Hudson smiled, nodding back, and then left with a click of the latch, leaving him alone with Sherlock, who was turned away to look back at the door.

“Um,” John began masterfully, fiddling with the duvet in his hands.

Sherlock turned to him, eyebrows lifting in inquiry.

“I-” He swallowed, taking a breath. “Sherlock, a-about last night-”

Sherlock cut him off with a shake of his head. “John, you don’t have to-”

“Will you just- Will you just let me? Please?” he muttered, lifting a hand.

Sherlock looked at him, lips parting slightly as they twitched to speak, but then he blinked, closing his mouth and nodding.

John sucked in a deep breath, releasing it slow as he rallied his determination. “Look, I-I know-” He swallowed, a thousand possible sentences tingling at the tip of his tongue. “What you did…you didn’t have to do that.”

“You would’ve done it for me.”

John looked up, blinking in surprise, but Sherlock looked steadily back at him, a small smile twitching at the corner of his mouth as John continued to stare stupidly. He chuckled in a rush of air, dropping his face back to the bed. Slowly, he nodded. “Yeah,” he said, looking back, smiling softly at the detective. “Yeah, I guess I would’ve. But, still, Sherlock, you- What you and Mycroft did for- for my mum…” He faded away, shaking his head down at his knees as he sighed.

“John.”

He looked up to find Sherlock a lot closer, standing just beside the bed, and John suddenly felt extremely self-conscious about the holes in his t-shirt.

Sherlock didn’t seem to notice—or, more likely, ignored it—and smiled down at him, bringing a flush to John’s cheeks. “You would have done it for me,” he said again, more purposeful this time, eyes burning earnest, and John had to manually remind himself to breathe.

“Well, yeah, but the money-”

“Well, yeah, but the money-”

“John,” Sherlock interrupted again, laughing a little over it, and John was offended for a moment before he looked up, finding Sherlock looking down at him with a gaze so open, so fond, he wasn’t certain he would ever be able to be angry again. “Don’t worry about the money.”

“But-“ John attempted to interrupt, but Sherlock shook his head in a quick dismissive rattle.

“But-“ John attempted to interrupt, but Sherlock shook his head in a quick dismissive rattle.

“John,” he practically whined, as if they had somehow switched places: John being unbearably frustrating where Sherlock was being the reasonable one.

“I’ll pay you back,” John blurted, figuring the only way to slip this conversation in around Sherlock’s interruptions was to have it all at once. “I’ll-I’ll get a job through uni and I- I’ll pay you
Sherlock rolled his eyes, shifting his weight between his feet. “You really don’t—”

“Sherlock,” he said, slipping into the authoritarian tone usually reserved for the rugby pitch and when Sherlock wanted to put body parts in the microwave.

Sherlock sucked his lips over his teeth, looking away for a moment as he rocked on his heels. “Fine,” he muttered, shrugging as if John were the most tiresome creature he had ever come across. “If you must. Now, get up,” he snapped, moving to leave. “Mrs. Hudson’s sandwiches wait for no man.”

John chuckled, amused by the abrupt dismissal, but not particularly surprised. Sherlock confronted with emotions was always rather brash. “Alright, I’ll be out in a bit,” he replied, and Sherlock nodded, disappearing through the door, closing it in a sweep behind him.

With a sigh, John slid out of bed, padding across the room to where his bag was sitting in a chair by the window. Removing some clothes for the day—jeans and a dark red jumper—he then headed into the bathroom, sitting the garments on the corner of the countertop as he perused the toiletry supplies. Perhaps it ought to have been embarrassing that Sherlock knew exactly what brand and scent of shower gel he used, but John only smiled as he twisted on the water, turning the plastic bottle over in his hands.

About 20 minutes later, he emerged, tossing his towel over the rack—heated, of course—and going over the roughly two dozen mental notes he’d made to ask Sherlock about the various buttons and levers on what he thought ought to be fairly simple bathroom appliances. Honestly, what did a toilet need to do other than flush?

He stepped out into the corridor, tugging absentmindedly at the still-damp tufts of his hair as he looked side-to-side. He hadn’t been paying much attention the night before, in a trance such as he was, so he didn’t know quite where to start looking. He remembered Sherlock’s room was down to the right, so he checked there first, knocking awkwardly at the door, but, as he’d half expected, there was no answer. He managed to find the stairs, carefully avoiding making eye contact with the creepy bust on a shelf in the corner, and wound down to the first floor. The manor was so quiet, he winced at every creak of the wood beneath his grey-cottoned feet, scanning his eyes across the hall that slowly came into view. When he did hear a sound, a soft mumbling coming through a crack in a door to his left, he nearly leapt out of his skin, quickly rattling his head and ordering himself to get a grip as he went to investigate. It was only Holmes Manor, after all, not an episode of Scooby Doo, but he was keeping a rather close eye out for suits of armor with wandering heads all the same.

He knocked softly on the door as he pushed it the rest of the way open, and found a large room completely paneled in wood, a fire roaring at the back wall and a rather stiff-looking set of dark leather chairs set in front of a wide window fogged with condensation against the December cold. Sherlock, however, was not there, and it was Mycroft who looked up at John from the chair closest to the fire, pulling a mobile from his ear and tapping at the screen to end a call. “Oh, sorry,” John mumbled, shifting a half step back out into the corridor. “I-I thought—”

“No, please,” Mycroft interjected, straightening his jacket with a flick as he stood. “Come in, Mr. Watson.”

John hesitated in the doorway for a moment, but he supposed there was nothing for it now. He stepped inside, not entirely closing the door behind him.

“I’ve arranged for the rest of your things to be collected within the next few days,” Mycroft began, stiff and direct, but John found he rather appreciated it at the moment. “And your mother has agreed
to enter a rehabilitation facility just after the first of the year.” He looked at John expectantly, and John blinked, unfreezing himself.

“Okay,” he breathed, uncertain what else there was to say, but it seemed to be a satisfactory response, as Mycroft nodded and turned away toward the window. “Um... Mycroft?” he murmured, twisting his fingers in front of him as he moved a little further into the room.

Mycroft turned, raising an eyebrow.

“I- Thank you,” he said, prolonged eye contact proving impossible. “I’ll pay you back. When-When I can.”

Mycroft smiled briefly as he looked down at the floor, his hands pushing back the panels of his suit jacket as he slipped them into his pockets. “That won’t be necessary, Mr. Watson,” he assured, eyes kind but firm. “Consider it my merely... returning the favor.”

John frowned, tilting his head as he inhaled to question, but then the door opened behind him, drawing his attention away.

“There you are,” Sherlock sighed, incredibly frustrated for someone who had only just entered the room. “Come on, we have to go over lines.”


“No,” Sherlock snipped bitterly. “Molly’s impossible to practice with. Always giggling, going on about how romantic it is.” He rolled his eyes, and John chuckled.

“Well, how do you know I won’t do that?” he teased, and Sherlock shot him a withering look.

“Well, how do you know I won’t do that?” he teased, and Sherlock shot him a withering look. “Alright, I’m coming,” he said, and Sherlock nodded, giving Mycroft a parting glare before disappearing back out the door, but he left it open. John turned, smiling through a long-suffering shrug as he looked back to Mycroft, but something in the man’s gaze made him pause, face falling to curious.

Mycroft fixed him with a steady look, and, slowly, he nodded.

John blinked, still confused.

“JOHN!?”

He looked back to the door, mouth opening to bark a reply, and then stopped, understanding. He turned to Mycroft, who smiled softly, nodding at the doorway. John smiled in reply, something warming over his heart as he nodded back, and then he followed after the beckoning shout, wondering if he’d just received the Mycroft version of a blessing, or at least a stay-of-execution.

“What did Mycroft want?” Sherlock asked, materializing at John’s side, the silent appearances no longer even making him so much as widen his eyes.

He shrugged, hooking his thumbs into the belt loops of his jeans. “Nothing. Just telling me about my mum. She’s gonna go into a rehab come January.”

Sherlock hummed, certainly already having known that, but John appreciated the restraint in not showing off, and shot a small smile up at him. “What?” Sherlock snapped, eyebrows creasing.

John chuckled, shaking his head. “Nothing,” he replied, and then reached between them, pulling the
book from Sherlock’s hand. “So what part do you need help with?”

“I don’t need help,” the detective spat, and John smiled down at the printed pages, following mutely as they entered what appeared to be a library. “It starts at the highlighted portion,” Sherlock said, waving a hand at an armchair beside yet another fire, himself apparently intending to pace across the rug in front of John. “The ‘I love thee not, therefore pursue me not’ bit.”

“Alright,” John said, settling into the chair and positioning the book on his lap. “Ready?”

Sherlock nodded, moving side-to-side across the rug as he steepled his fingers beneath his chin and began. “I love thee not, therefore pursue me not. Where is Lysander and fair Hermia? The one I’ll slay, the other slayeth me.”

“Wait,” John interrupted, frowning up at the detective. “You wanna kill me?”

Sherlock blinked at him. “Have you not read this before?”

“No,” John replied, and Sherlock rolled his eyes. “What? I’m not in this scene,” he defended, lifting the book up to face the detective for emphasis.

“No, but it’s still part of our group’s assignment,” Sherlock replied.

“Well, yeah, I-I suppose,” John mumbled, feeling strangely guilty. “So…why do you wanna kill me?”

Sherlock lifted a tired glance to the ceiling. “Because I’m in love with Hermia too.”

“What?” John blurted, looking down at the offensive black ink. “Why?”

“How should I know?” Sherlock snapped. “I didn’t write the damn thing. Now will you just check my lines?”

John frowned, but obliged, falling silent as he scanned the page along with Sherlock’s recitation.

“Thou told’st me they were stolen unto this wood; and here am I, and wode within this wood, because I cannot meet my Hermia.”

John’s grip tightened on the edges of the paperback, irrational jealousy prickling at the edges of his gut.

“Hence, get thee gone, and follow me no more.”

John waited, blinking unseeing down at the pages, and then lifted his eyes, realizing Sherlock had fallen silent. “What?” he asked, finding Sherlock looking down at him with raised brows.

“It’s your line,” he said, searching over John’s face, and John quickly ducked his head before anything incriminating could be seen.

“Oh, right,” he muttered, clearing his throat and trying to breathe away a blush. “You draw me, you hard-hearted adamant; but yet you draw not iron, for my heart is true as steel: leave you your power to draw, and I shall have no power to follow you.”

“Do I entice you? Do I speak you fair?” Sherlock continued, tone raised and rankled as he began to act out the part. “Or, rather, do I not in plainest truth tell you, I do not, nor I cannot love you?”

John swallowed, throat tight and bitter as his eyes blurred. “And- And even for that do I love you the
Sherlock shifted his hands in his lap, looking down at the black leather between his denim-clad knees. Twitching his head just slightly, he looked up out of the corners of his eyes to where John was leaning against the window on the opposite side of the car. Sensing the gaze, as he often—and rather disconcertingly—did, his blue eyes flicked to Sherlock’s, and he smiled softly, a weak reflexive gesture, before returning to watching the bundled crowds shuffling along the paths outside.

John had been rather quiet ever since they had practiced their lines, and Sherlock may have thought it was some lingering dissatisfaction with the turkey paninis Mrs. Hudson had put together for lunch, but John had barely touched his, more pushing it around on his plate and tugging at the strings of cheese than actually eating.

Sherlock hadn’t thought John was still upset about what had happened with his mother—not in a debilitating way, at least—but something certainly seemed to be wrong, wrong enough that the crease between his brows had become something of a permanent fixture on his face and his eyes didn’t seem able to focus on Sherlock’s for more than a blink or two at a time.

“Sorry about this,” he muttered, leaning across the middle seat, and John blinked his gaze toward him, frowning in confusion. “I probably should have warned you. Mrs. Hudson can make a small pilgrimage out of picking up tea.”

John chuckled, but his eyes remained far away. “Well, tea is very serious business,” he joked, smiling distractedly again, and then turning his head away toward the window, leaving Sherlock blinking confusedly at the side of his face.

He narrowed his eyes, trying to glean clarity from the tangles in John’s hair and small twitches of his brow, but the source of his discomfort remained out of Sherlock’s reach, and he blinked away, frowning out his own window as Mrs. Hudson made a sharp, gleeful sound.

“Your mother will start to worry. Oh, really, Sherlock, we used to listen to this all the time! Mark? I don’t know the guy part.”

Mark shook his head, either actually ignorant or just smart enough not to get involved.
Mrs. Hudson huffed, frowning for a moment down at the radio. “I never did understand that line,” she said, pointing down at the speakers as if they would promptly explain themselves.

“Put some records on while I pour,” John supplied, apparently absentmindedly.

Sherlock winced, shaking his head in sympathy for his fallen comrade.

Sure enough, Mrs. Hudson whirled completely around in her seat, peering back at John with a gleeful grin. “You know the song?”

John blinked, evidently just now realizing the gravity of his mistake. His mouth floundered for a moment, eyes looking to Sherlock, who could do nothing but shrug, John too far gone to still save. “Well, not-not really.”

“Oh, give it a try!” she cajoled, waving a hand, and John looked pleadingly to Sherlock again, but only received a sympathetic grimace in return. “I wish I knew hooooow”—she turned back to John, who looked to be contemplating if the car was moving too fast to bail out—“to breeeeeak the spell.”

John turned his hands up in the air in a helpless gesture, and then mumbled in a vaguely rhythmic sort of way. “I’ll take your hat, your hair looks swell.”

Mrs. Hudson beamed at him, and Sherlock watched John’s discomfort crumbling away, a small smile gracing his lips. “I ought to say no, no, no, sir,” she continued, looking back to the front.

“Mind if I move in closer?” John sang overtop, shaking his head down at his knees as he smiled, and Sherlock found his own lips being tugged up in response.

“At least I’m gonna say that I tried.”

“What’s the sense in hurting my pride?” John shrugged dramatically, half laughing as he looked across to Sherlock, who suddenly realized he was grinning.

“I really can’t staaaaaaaay-“

“Baby don’t hold out-“

“Ahh, but it’s coooooooldd ouuuuuuutsiiiiiiiiiide!” They sang in tandem, the harmonies a bit of a disaster, but it hardly mattered, as, a second later, the entire car burst into laughter.

Sherlock caught John’s eyes, clear and shining with mirth, whatever had been plaguing him evaporating with the lilting notes of Ella Fitzgerald, and, as Mrs. Hudson turned around to smile softly at them, Sherlock wondered if that hadn’t been her plan all along.

Predictably, Mrs. Hudson had several places she needed to visit, Mark escaping to “park the car” for probably the entirety of their visit, and Sherlock and John plodding along behind her. As they were approaching Gap, Mrs. Hudson prattling on about some niece or other, Sherlock caught John’s eyes behind her back, flicking his eyebrows as he bobbed his head backward. John immediately nodded, eyes widening in relief.

“Oh, John?” Sherlock said suddenly, pausing on the path and ducking out of the way of the other pedestrians who didn’t.

“Hmm?” John hummed, not quite as talented at nonchalance as Sherlock, but good enough to fool Mrs. Hudson, who had stopped as well and was now approaching with a puzzled expression.
“Didn’t you have to buy something for your aunt?”

John blinked, tilting his head perhaps a little more exaggeratedly than he had to. His face then burst into almost comic surprise, but it wasn’t a horrible attempt. Honestly, if Sherlock hadn’t already known that they were entirely making this up, he might have believed it for a moment himself. “Oh my gosh!” he blurted, and Sherlock barely managed not to snort. “You’re right! I almost forgot!” He then turned to Mrs. Hudson, apologetic. “I’m sorry, Mrs. Hudson, but would you mind if we went to do that instead? I wanted to pick her up some candles or something and just completely forgot.”

“Oh, of course, dear,” Mrs. Hudson said, patting a hand to John’s arm. “I think there’s a Body Shop down that way,” she added, waving a hand down Regent Street, and both Sherlock and John turned politely to follow the gesture. “They have candles. And there’s a lovely handmade greeting card place as well.”

John smiled, looking surprisingly quite grateful for something he didn’t need. “Thanks, we’ll check it out,” he assured, nodding, pulling Sherlock into this with a glance.

Mrs. Hudson beamed, looking between them as she tapped John’s arm again for good measure. “You have your mobiles on you?”

They both nodded.

“Are they charged?”

They nodded again, John ducking his head as he smiled.

“Well, alright then, don’t let me hold you up,” she said, flapping them away. “I’ll call you when I’m done here. Well, I’ll call you,” she added pointedly at John. “You never answer,” she snipped at Sherlock with a teasing glare.

“I prefer to text,” he muttered, and she took her leave with a roll of her eyes.

John chuckled, shaking his head as he looked after her.

Sherlock glared at him. “Shut up, ‘Oh my gosh’,” he snapped, spinning and charging down the street as he thrust his hands into his pockets.

“I panicked!” John bleated, catching up to him.

“Golly, did you ever!”

John glared at him.

“Oh shucks, did I make you mad?” Sherlock pouted dramatically, dropping his head.

John’s eyes were barely slits. “Christmas or not, Sherlock, I will hit you.”

Sherlock gasped, placing a hand over his sternum. “Jinkies, that’s violent!”

John laughed, frustrated front breaking. “You know, that one actually makes sense,” he remarked, looking up at Sherlock with a small smile. “All that looking for clues and whatnot.”

Sherlock snorted. “No,” he muttered, rattling his head as he scanned the approaching shops. “Orange isn’t my color.”

Several fellow shoppers whirled around at the racket of John’s laughter, but Sherlock grinned down
at him, watching the puffs of his warm breath swirling through the biting air. “No, I suppose it isn’t,” he chuckled, shaking his head, and then turned thoughtful, brow furrowing at the pavement beneath their feet. “Who would I be?”

Sherlock tilted his head down at him.

“You know, from Scooby-Doo,” he clarified, as if it were a very serious matter of consideration and not the most ridiculous sentence Sherlock had ever heard him say. “If you’re Velma, who am I?”

“I’m not Velma,” he snapped, but John only smiled.

“Okay, but if you were,” he shrugged, “who would I be?”

Sherlock blinked straight ahead, forehead gradually creasing.

“If you say Scooby, I swear-”

“I wasn’t going to say Scooby!”

“Oh my god, you were totally gonna say Scooby!”

“Well, he’s the title character!” Sherlock sputtered down at where John was shaking his head, sorely disappointed with a smile playing at his lips. “You should be honored!”

John only continued shaking his head. “Scooby,” he murmured. “Unbelievable.”

“If you say Fred or-or that girl with all the purple?"?

“Daphne,” John supplied, and somehow he was now the one smiling while Sherlock glared. “And I dunno,” he muttered lightly, shrugging. “I look alright in purple.” He grinned up at Sherlock, laughing when the detective rolled his eyes.

Sherlock saw the moment the question occurred to John, and quickened his pace, trying to get that little bit further before he had to answer.

“Where are we going anyway?” John asked, jogging a little to keep up with Sherlock now.

He delayed replying, rushing quickly past the last few shops.

“Sherlock?”

He stopped, John nearly bumping into him with a small shout.

“What are you-”

It wasn’t often Sherlock got even so much as nervous, but he was having something of a panic attack now, heart pounding as waves of heat rippled through his otherwise frozen limbs. His fingers twitched within his pockets as he watched John blink slowly at the glass in front of them, lips slightly parted, a shaky breath frosting out of him.

The blond looked up at him, a soft sound that maybe one day hoped it would grow up to be a word drifting out of his throat before he looked away again, eyes moving further down the storefront.

Sherlock couldn’t stand it. “I just figured,” he muttered, shrugging into his turned-up collar, “since we were here...” He swallowed, eyes frozen on his own reflection as he saw John turning his face up once more.
“Sherlock,” he whispered, and that was all he said, but *my god theway he said it!*

However long Sherlock lived—and he was under no disillusions about how not-long that was likely to be—he knew just as sure as he knew Mrs. Hudson would make him try on that sweater later to see if it would fit her nephew that no one, *no one* would ever say his name like that again, like it was precious, like it had to be transferred with care from the back of the throat to the taps against teeth.

He couldn’t look John in the eye. “What?” he murmured, ducking his chin into the front of his coat.

There was a puff of air, like maybe John was attempting a laugh. “Nothing,” he answered, and Sherlock could finally look at him only to see he was looking away. “Are those carol singers?” he asked, tilting his head before he moved away, and Sherlock found there was so much more air in his absence. “They are!” he said, delighted as he peered in at the window display. “And they *move!*** He turned briefly back to Sherlock, blue eyes alight as he grinned, and Sherlock hoped his face smiled in response on muscle memory because his brain was not of any help at the moment.

He stood at John’s shoulder, watching his face where it was reflected off the glass of the Hamley’s storefront, his smile wide and eyes darting everywhere, and Sherlock felt his heart pounding against the sides of his throat where it had caught, prohibiting speech. Not that he could have spoken anyway, his every thought devoted to memorizing the look on John’s face as the large animatronic teddy bears inside the display shifted their heads and arms along with the faint melody of “*We Wish You A Merry Christmas*” that drifted out of the speaker up above them.

“It’s amazing,” John breathed, shaking his head softly, and Sherlock agreed, but not about the robotics. Suddenly, he turned, and Sherlock was caught, blinking dumbly down at John’s warm expression. “Thank you, Sherlock,” he said with a smile that temporarily stalled Sherlock’s reply.

“For what?” he finally muttered, clearing his throat. “I told you, we were just walking by.”

John beamed. “Right,” he murmured, nodding as he looked back to the window. “Just walking by.”

“Obviously,” Sherlock snapped, twitching his shoulders to bring his neck further into his coat, and the reflection of John grinned at him.

“Can we go in?” he asked, twisting to look up at Sherlock, face open and vulnerable, like his every hope and dream lay entrusted in Sherlock’s pale hands.

Sherlock shifted uneasily on the pavement. “No,” he scoffed sarcastically, “we have fictional candles to buy.”

John grinned, and then everything became blurry as Sherlock found himself being tugged along by the sleeve of his coat.

“What- John!? What are you- Let me go! I can walk on my own, you know!”

“But what if you get lost?” the blond replied with a cheeky flick of his eyebrows over his shoulder, and, while Sherlock glared back at him on principle, keeping a hold on one another actually turned out to be rather necessary.

The store was packed, as you’d expect from a toy store the day before Christmas Eve, and Sherlock stayed close to John’s back, letting him mumble the ‘excuse me’s and ‘sorry’s as they elbowed their way to the escalator, where John staggered to a stop, peering up at the floor directory. Sherlock looked between him and the sign, and was about to ask what precisely John was looking for when the boy apparently found it, eyes widening before he was steering Sherlock toward the escalator.
“John, where are we-” he began, but John hushed him with a sharp hiss, completely ignoring Sherlock glaring at the back of his head.

They went up several floors, weaving around from escalator to escalator, John pointing things out all the while. He seemed particularly enamored with the employees who were demonstrating products, excitedly twisting Sherlock this way and that as he waved toward the whirling helicopters and “magic” hovering balls spinning with lights and glitter. Sherlock, for his part, didn’t look at the products more than enough to be able to make an appropriate comment of acknowledgement, but the smile never left his face regardless, a permanent quirk of his lips pressed into place by John’s rabid joy.

As it turned out, the spot John had wanted to go was the Lego section, the entire top floor devoted to it.

“Really?” Sherlock muttered, dipping his head.

John shrugged, blushing faintly as he tugged at the sleeves of his rugby jacket. “I never had any,” he mumbled, eyes darting evasively. “I mean, I-I don’t wanna buy any, but-but I thought…maybe…”

Sherlock ducked his head before he did something incredibly embarrassing, like grin. “We can look,” he offered, shrugging as if it were nothing of import.

John blinked, and then his face split around a dazzling smile. The expression faded though, turning puzzled as his focus shifted to something around Sherlock’s arm. “Is that—Is that St. Edward’s Crown…made out of Legos?”

Sherlock turned, following John’s befuddled gaze to find that it was, in fact, a replica of the crown, encased within glass and sitting grandly on a velvet cushion just like the non-plastic one was likely displayed in the Tower of London at this very moment. “So it would appear,” he mused, and John’s mouth fell open, as if he had thought he was hallucinating until Sherlock confirmed it. “I think there’s one of the queen around here somewhere as well.”

John blinked up at him, mouth still agape, and then began tentatively approaching the glass case before something else caught his eye, and he froze, eyes springing wide. “Is that a Darth Vader!?” he blurted, looking over into the corner where a life-size sculpture of a black figure Sherlock didn’t recognize had been assembled.

“Er…” Sherlock murmured, but John didn’t appear to need his approval on that one, and Sherlock pushed through the crowd after him as the boy darted away.

“And a storm trooper!” he cried, looking at a white figure arranged near the black one as if it were a miracle of modern science. “Holy shit! How did they even do that!?” he spluttered, twisting his head side-to-side as he circled the figures, and Sherlock had a rather strange moment of role-reversal, him standing by oblivious while John intricately examined.

The feeling didn’t agree with him. “Well, I imagine a rather large quantity of glue was involved,” he sniffed, but John only smiled at him, apparently unaffected by the show of disgruntlement.

John then paused, turning that inquisitive look onto Sherlock, and his inside wriggled, incredibly disquieted at knowing what that felt like from the other side. “You have no idea who these people are, do you?” John asked like he already knew.

Sherlock was trapped in some bizarre Dickens-esque Christmas nightmare, he was sure of it. “I—Of course I do,” he snapped, eyes darting to the left to catch quickly on one of the nearby boxes. “They
are characters popularized by the *Star Wars* franchise.”

John’s lips trembled. “Oh my god,” he said softly, mouth barely moving. “You don’t know what *Star Wars* is.” He rattled his head as he looked away, lips still twitching as they pressed together. “You- You don’t know what *Star Wars* is,” he repeated, almost dazed.

Sherlock bristled, shifting his shoulders under his coat as he scowled. “Of course I do!” he snapped, chasing his eyes across the section again. “It’s-It’s a film series. About outer space. Wars fought in outer space.”

John looked up at him, expression completely blank for an indeterminate amount of time, and then he physically seemed to crumple, head rolling forward as he bent in half around a laugh. “Oh my god!” he wheezed, staggering a few steps to his right to brace himself on a shelf. “Space! Wars in space!”

“Will you stop?” Sherlock snipped, face heating as passersby gave them curious looks, usually quickly followed by fond smiles that held assumptions Sherlock wasn’t quite mentally prepared to deal with. “That is clearly the subject matter of the films.”

“Well, yeah, but you’ve never *seen* them, have you?” John asked, eyes actually damp with mirth, and Sherlock ought to have been even more furious, but instead felt a strange sense of pride. “You probably don’t know who that actually is.” He waved a hand at the black-cloaked figure, prompting Sherlock to turn around.

“Of course I do,” he replied. “Darth Vader.”

“Yeah, but I said that,” John continued quickly, and Sherlock’s eyes narrowed at the man’s smirk. He had hoped John had forgotten that particular detail.

“I mean, you probably don’t know who he *is*. His proper name from when he was a Jedi,” the blond concluded, and then simply blinked expectantly.

Sherlock’s blinks were, in contrast, rather puzzled. “A…A what?” he squeaked, knowing he was doomed already, but the spark in John’s eyes confirmed it, and then the boy was laughing again.

“Okay, that’s going on the list,” he said with a nod of finality, pulling out his phone.

“What is? What list? What are you doing?” Sherlock stepped forward, peering upside-down at the screen of John’s mobile.

“The list of things we have to watch,” John replied, tapping his fingers over the electronic keyboard.

“You have a list?” Sherlock sputtered, looking open-mouthed between the offensive—and rather lengthy—series of bullet points and John’s face.

John smirked up at him, and Sherlock suddenly realized his eavesdropping had brought them rather closer than he’d like, the minimum safe distance for maintaining control of his thoughts long-since breached. “Yeah, well, I had to keep track of it,” he shrugged, hitting the save button before twisting the phone in his hand to face Sherlock. “Assimilating you is a lot harder than it looks, ya know.”

Sherlock snorted, taking the phone from his tan fingers, warm static leaping from where they brushed. “It doesn’t look hard at all,” he muttered, scrolling down the truly horrendously long list. “We sit on the floor and eat sweets.”

“You sit on the floor and eat sweets,” John clarified with a meaningful nod. “I have to wear my voice
out answering your questions and telling you to be quiet.”

Sherlock glared back into John’s glittering eyes as he returned the phone. “You do realize the easier solution would be to simply-”

“John?”

John turned, and Sherlock watched his face for a moment before turning himself, registering the boy’s reaction. Confusion, recognition, surprise, happiness. “Sarah!?”

The blond moved away, and it was then Sherlock turned, taking in the girl as she approached. She had auburn hair—a bit stringy, if you asked him—and a spatter of freckles over her pale face. Her eyes were a pale blue/green, and sparkling happily as she wrapped her arms around John’s shoulders.

Sherlock’s fists clenched as he looked on, the pair so far ignoring him, which was fortunate because he was sure his face was doing something horrifically obvious right now.

“I almost didn’t come over,” she said as they pulled apart, their arms—thankfully—falling back to their separate sides. “I wasn’t sure it was you.”

“Yeah, well,” John chuckled, rubbing at his neck as he shuffled back a small distance, “it has been awhile I guess.”

Sarah smiled broadly, her head tilting, and Sherlock’s insides crackled over with ice. Clearly a previous romantic partner, though it didn’t go very far, but she would not be averse to rekindling the relationship, what with the way her eyes flashed over John’s chest.

Sherlock’s knuckles cracked, his vision blurring as a steady stream of “NO NO NO NO NO!!” ran rampant through his mind, evaporating everything else.

“Not since we left for sixth form,” Sarah continued, and Sherlock tried to control himself, aware that he would likely be invited into the conversation very soon. “I hear you’re at Langley now?”

John absolutely beamed with pride, his hands slipping into the pockets of his rugby jacket as he nodded. “Yep! Just started this year.”

“That’s great,” Sarah replied, and Sherlock’s suspicion softened just a little when he saw how sincerely she meant it. “It’s a really good school. You still planning on med school next year?”

John nodded again, but, this time, he flashed a quick uneasy glance at Sherlock. “Er, yeah,” he replied, smiling back at Sarah, but the gesture was a bit stiff at the corners, and Sherlock’s eyes narrowed down at him.

Of course, that was the moment Sarah picked to flick her eyes to him, her own smile faltering a little, and John leapt quickly on the hint.

“Oh, sorry!” he sputtered, and, as loathed as Sherlock was to do introductions, he was happy it brought John back to his side. “Sarah, this is Sherlock. He’s my, er, friend from Langley.”

Sherlock put on his most charming smile, ignoring John’s disapproving scowl as he leaned forward and held a hand out for Sarah. “It’s nice to meet you,” he said, shifting the tone of his smile just a little when Sarah started to blush. He didn’t need this getting any more awkward.

“Sarah and I went to secondary school together,” John said, and, while he smiled, Sarah’s face fell a
fraction, clearly expecting a better introduction. John didn’t seem to notice, and chattered blindly on. “Lived pretty close together too. What are you doing in London?”

Sarah recovered quickly, brightening before she replied. “We’re staying at my aunt’s for Christmas, and she had to go out to get a few last-minute things for my cousins.”

“Oh, that’s, um, Aunt Emily, right? With Kendall and Melanie?” John asked, forehead crinkling thoughtfully, and Sarah blinked, lips parting.

“Er, yeah,” she said. “I can’t believe you remembered that.”

John chuckled, blushing lightly as he ducked his head. “Well, I helped you babysit that one time, remember?” he mumbled.

Sarah’s mouth opened in recollection. “Oh, that’s right. We watched Bambi.”

“Terrible idea,” John muttered, shaking his head, and Sarah laughed.

“It really was. Aunt Emily still hasn’t forgiven Uncle Dan for that, I don’t think.”

“I’m not sure I’ve forgiven him either,” John chuckled, and Sarah giggled, lifting her hand to her mouth flirtatiously.

Sherlock’s stomach slowly gnawed away at itself as they smiled at one another.

“Well,” John muttered, clearing his throat before he swallowed, bowing his head and somehow retreating from the conversation without physically moving, “guess we should let you go.”

Sarah looked up at Sherlock for the first time since the introductions, flicking her eyes between him and John as she smiled. “Yeah, I shouldn’t leave her alone too long. She gets a bit caught up in the demonstrations.”

“Oh, have you seen the helicopter!?” John blurted excitedly, and Sarah laughed, bringing a flush to the blond’s cheeks while Sherlock combatted the near overwhelming urge to grab him and drag him away, keeping that tint of pink beneath John’s freckles for his eyes alone.

“No, but I’m sure we will on the way back down,” she chuckled, smiling warmly at him. “It’s good to see you, John,” she added, soft and genuine. “We’ll have to catch up sometime. Maybe get a group together.”

“Yeah,” John chirped, a little stilted, the tone of someone clearly only agreeing out of politeness and really praying that you never called with a concrete plan. “Yeah, that’d be fun.”

Sarah didn’t appear to notice, grinning with a nod before she turned, throwing a wave at them. “I’ll see you around then. It was nice to meet you, Sherlock!”

Sherlock smiled, nodding in reply, and then immediately let the expression fall as she turned her back.

“She lives just down the street from Mum,” John explained, and Sherlock turned to him, confused. “We used to walk home from school together sometimes.”

Sherlock raised an eyebrow, not entirely sure why he was being provided this information.

John shrugged, apparently unaware himself of why he continued speaking. “We dated for a while, but… Yeah.” He coughed a couple times, looking back around at the Legos. “So! Ready to go?”
Sherlock let the awkward moment go, shrugging a single shoulder. “If you are. Mrs. Hudson will likely be awhile yet.”

“I dunno, I probably should actually pick up something for my aunt,” he muttered, smiling sheepishly. “She let me stay with her before school and all that.”

Sherlock shrugged again. “If you like. Mrs. Hudson was right about The Body Shop down the street. Although, they might have something here. Candles in the shape of Disney characters or something.”

“That’d be a bit creepy, wouldn’t it?” John chuckled, face creasing up at him. “Faces melting and whatnot?”

“Well, when you put it that way,” Sherlock mumbled in reply, and John laughed, beginning to move toward the escalator.

“Oh, wait!” he gasped, spinning back and wrestling with something in his pocket. “Come ‘ere,” he beckoned, crossing past Sherlock again and moving back toward the sculptures.

“Why?” Sherlock asked suspiciously, but his feet were already obeying.

“Because we gotta get a picture,” John muttered, apparently frustrated with Sherlock’s ignorance at the obvious course of action. He moved to the black figure’s shoulder, waving Sherlock over, but Sherlock hesitated.

“Just give me your phone,” he suggested, holding out a hand. “I’ll take a picture.”

“No, then you won’t be in it,” John snapped, and Sherlock could tell this was a battle probably already lost.

“But, I-” he tried anyway, but John cut him off.

“Sherlock,” he said sternly, “we are taking a selfie with Darth Vader, and there’s nothing you can do about it.”

Sherlock blinked at him. “Was any of that even English?” he sputtered, and John rolled his eyes with a sigh.

“Will you just”—he grabbed Sherlock’s arm, yanking him to his side—“get in?”

John’s chest was warm and firm at Sherlock’s side as he collided with it, the tan hand not loosening from his elbow as John held him close. He was pinned into John’s torso, struck a bit dumb by the sudden shift, and there was a long moment when he could do nothing but blink dazedly down at John’s hair, the smell of shampoo and laundry detergent and faint lingering mustard from lunch slamming through his senses like an EF-5.

“Okay!” John clipped, and Sherlock blinked back to himself in time to see his own face appear on the screen of John’s phone, a little paler than normal, but John’s beaming expression below him didn’t appear fazed.

Darth Vader looked a little suspicious, but he was plastic, and wearing a mask, so his facial cues probably couldn’t be taken into account.

“One,” John began counting down, twisting his wrist to angle the phone just right, “two…three!”

The phone clicked, their faces freezing on the screen for a moment, and then John was pulling the
phone toward them, tapping and swiping at the screen with his left hand, the right still hanging off of Sherlock’s elbow.

“Whadya think?” he asked, and Sherlock realized he was meant to be looking, quickly bending down to examine the mobile.

Their faces looked back at him, John grinning absurdly out of the screen, and yet something about the picture fell short at capturing the true splendor of that smile, the wrinkles Sherlock knew would have been at the corners of his mouth and the glint that would have been in his eyes lost in the translation into pixels. Sherlock, for his part, looked unenthused, save for a small quirk at the corner of his lips that he didn’t remember permitting to be there.

“It’s fine,” he muttered, not wanting to give any cause for continuing the photo session, although he might not have minded so long as John kept his hand on his arm, fingers soft over his coat, like an old gesture, subconscious with familiarity.

“You sure?” John asked, looking up at him, much more concern in his face than a picture with a life-size Lego person should cause.

“Yes,” Sherlock murmured, uncomfortable under all that caring. “It’s not as if Mycroft’s going to hang it on the wall.”

John chuckled, looking back down to the phone. “No,” he conceded, “but I might print out a copy or two.”

“Why?” Sherlock blustered, and immediately regretted it as John drew back, hand slipping away as he frowned. “I mean…what would you do with them?” he stumbled out, vainly hoping John would forgive the slip and go back to touching him.

Of course, that didn’t happen, and John only shrugged. “I dunno…put them in frames or something?” he muttered, shifting away as he slipped the phone back in his pocket. “Forget it. I-I probably won’t do anything with it. We should go.” He moved away, heading toward the escalator, and Sherlock followed, hands twisting in front of him, confused at the shame tightening his throat.

They didn’t speak as they moved down the first couple floors, and Sherlock’s stomach twisted more and more with everything John didn’t mention, every now-subdued reaction.

“What’s Bambi?” he asked, more to break the silence than for genuine curiosity.

John chuckled, at least, looking a little less sour as he turned back to Sherlock on the escalator. “It’s a movie,” he said. “An animated movie about a baby deer.”

Sherlock tilted his head, brow furrowing. “Why would it be bad for children to watch that?” he asked, inferring from the conversation with Sarah that something much more traumatic had happened.

John dipped his head, smiling gently. “Just trust me, it is,” he said, and Sherlock narrowed his eyes at him for a moment before relenting.

“So it’s not going on the list then?” he asked, and John laughed.

“No,” he chuckled, shaking his head. “Just this once, I think you’re better off not knowing.” He smiled, an odd warmth to it, something more than amusement hidden in the glint in his eyes, but, before Sherlock could piece it together, John’s mobile rang, pulling their attention. “Mrs. Hudson,” he said, waggling the screen toward Sherlock before he answered. “Hello? …Yeah, we’re, er, we’re
nearly done.” He waved his hand, encouraging Sherlock to hurry as they pushed their way out the main doors and onto the path outside. “M&S? No, we- Well, let me ask.” He moved the mobile away from his ear, covering it with a hand as he shooed Sherlock toward the edge of the building, tucking them against the wall and out of the current of shoppers. “Do you want anything from M&S?” he asked.

Sherlock thought for a moment, and then shook his head.

John lifted the phone back to his ear. “No, he doesn’t- … What? Beer? No, I-” He stopped, eyes widening a moment as his fingers twitched around the mobile. He closed his mouth, flicking an anxious glance at Sherlock as he swallowed. “Um, no, I-I don’t need anything. I...I don’t think I’ll be drinking much anymore.”

Sherlock tried to keep his own eyes from widening, angling his body and gaze away to give John a measure of seclusion for the remainder of the call.

“Yes … Yeah, okay … Yeah, we’ll be right there, we’re just down the street. … Okay … Okay, bye.” A small sigh. A rustle of clothing. “She’s at M&S.”

Sherlock turned as if he hadn’t been paying any attention whatsoever. “Hmm?”

John looked up at him, smiling knowingly as he slipped his hands into his pockets. “Come on,” he said, bobbing his head up the street. “She said she needs help carrying the groceries.”

Sherlock groaned, and John laughed, looping him around the elbow as he pulled him along, and Sherlock kept his arm unnaturally still as they walked, hoping John wouldn’t notice his fingers were still tangled in his coat.

~~~~~

“A good persuasion: therefore, hear me, Hermia. I have a widow aunt, a dowager of great revenue, and she hath no child: From Athens is her house remote seven leagues; And she respects me as her only son. There, gentle Hermia, may I marry thee - Sherlock, do we really have to do this?”

Sherlock sighed, rolling his head back to the ceiling as he sat on the rug in front of where John was leaning against an armchair. “Your rhythm is appalling; yes, we have to do this,” he muttered, looking back to the paperback in his lap.

John had helped him run over his lines earlier, and Sherlock had noticed a few flaws in his reading, so he thought he would return the favor by helping John practice as well, and throw in a few pointers along the way. John didn’t seem to be appreciating his efforts, however, fidgeting more and more the longer they worked through the scene, and apparently now completely unable to look Sherlock in the eye. Perhaps he was getting tired, however, as there was a heated flush on his face that Sherlock presumed was attributed to the fire they were sitting in front of.

“Do you want to move?” he asked, waving between the blond and the fire.


Sherlock shrugged. “You just look a bit warm.”

For some reason, John flushed deeper, ducking his head and lifting a fist to his mouth as he coughed. “I’m fine. Where was I? Right. And to that place the sharp Athenian law cannot pursue us. If thou loveth me then, steal forth thy father's house to-morrow night; And in the wood, a league without the town, where I did meet thee once with Helena, to do observance to a morn of May, there will I stay
for thee."

Sherlock watched him, eyes narrowing skeptically, but John wouldn’t look up at him, fingers twitching on the edges of the pages he clung tightly to. Slowly, Sherlock began reciting Mary’s lines. “My good Lysander! I swear to thee, by Cupid’s strongest bow, by his best arrow with the golden head, by the simplicity of Venus’ doves, by that which knitteth souls and prospers loves- What?”

John blinked, startled out of his staring. “Hmm?” he murmured.

“What are you looking at?” Sherlock snapped, much angrier than he felt, which was closer to flustered than anything resembling anger.

“Nothing,” John murmured, rattling his head, rocking a bit as he leaned further over his knees. “Go ahead.” And then he was back to trying to burn a hole through the page.

Sherlock warily continued. “And by that fire which burn’d the Carthage queen, when the false Troyan under sail was seen, by all the vows that ever men have broke, in number more than ever women spoke, in that same place thou hast appointed me, to-morrow truly will I meet with thee.” He waited, looking up, but John was still transfixed on the page, eyes unfocused, his grip white on the book. “John?”

The blond gasped softly, blinking blearily as he focused on Sherlock’s face. “Wha-What?”

Sherlock’s brow furrowed in concern. “It’s your line,” he prompted.


“Okay,” Sherlock began, still watching his friend curiously. “Then Helena and Hermia talk for a while, and your next line is right after… Ah! Take comfort: he no more shall see my face; Lysander and myself will fly this place. Before the time I did Lysander see, seem’d Athens as a paradise to me: O, then, what graces in my love do dwell, that he hath turn’d a heaven unto a hell.”

Silence. Again.

Sherlock looked up, intending to ask John where exactly his head was at this evening, but the snark stalled in his throat when he met John’s eyes.

The man was staring at him again, but, at the moment Sherlock had first looked up, he hadn’t been looking at Sherlock’s eyes. His gaze had been focused on his lips, a trancelike expression overtaking his face, but he quickly blinked up to meet the look Sherlock fixed on him. He parted his lips slightly, as if to speak, but then the thought drifted from his face, blue eyes flickering yellow in the firelight as they roamed aimlessly over Sherlock’s face.

The implications were obvious, and Sherlock suddenly realized just how close they were, how intimate it was sitting on a rug in front of a fire, a warm haven away from the howling December wind outside. The stranger realization, however, was that he didn’t mind. And that John’s hair had at least three different shades of blond in it that he had never noticed before, that there was a slightly darker ring of brown-gold around the pupils of his eyes, and that his lips were chapped in the center. Of course, that realization required Sherlock be looking down at John’s lips, which was not a shift of perspective he remotely remembered making, but then the tip of John’s tongue licked out at his bottom lip, and Sherlock wasn’t thinking at all anymore.

And that was terrifying.
“I-I have to-” He stood, stumbling a bit, and he braced himself on the armchair opposite John’s as he steadied his knees. “I have to-”

“Sherlock?” John stood, leaving his book on the floor as he took a step forward. “You alright?”

“Yeah, I’m-I’m fine. Just tired.” He attempted a weak smile, but John didn’t appear convinced.

“Sherlock-” He attempted, moving forward, but Sherlock downright darted away, enviously eyeing the door behind John’s back.

“I’m fine, really,” he spluttered, waving a hand out as he nodded fervently. “I just- The heat’s getting to me, I think.” He chuckled, but it sounded high and horrible, so he cut it off, clearing his throat. Ducking his head, he bolted past John toward the door. “I-I think I’ll just go to bed. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Sherlock, wait!” John called after him, but he was already barreling down the corridor.

The door to Mycroft’s office was closed, but he most certainly heard Sherlock’s footsteps pounding across the wood. He didn’t appear concerned, however, and, mercifully, Sherlock was left unhindered in his escape. He flew up the stairs two at a time, launching himself with pulls at the railing, his breathing loud in his ears as he ran to his room, flinging the door open and slamming his back against it as it clicked back into place. He gasped up at the ceiling, fingers trembling against the wood as he braced himself, knees quivering. He couldn’t make his body move for the moment, but his brain wouldn’t stop, darting through scene after scene.

His father shouting at his mother, Mycroft pushing him down the corridor so he wouldn’t hear. “Why is Father yelling at Mother?” he had asked, and Mycroft had just looked down at him sadly and not answered.

His father on his deathbed, calling them in, giving Mycroft a steady stream of instructions and nothing in the way of goodbyes. He had ignored Sherlock entirely.

His mother crying at the funeral, Mycroft ushering her into the arms of a family friend, and then standing there with Sherlock at his side, the both of them watching the pair walk away in silence. “Don’t forget this, Sherlock,” he had said, looking down at a young boy who was trying very hard not to sniffle, not to disappoint the marble countenance of his elder brother. “Love is a dangerous disadvantage.” He had nodded, and they had never spoken of it again. Not until mother died, at least.

“How can you even think about work right now!?” Sherlock remembered shouting, tears prickling at his eyes, his throat raw, but Mycroft had only levelled a dark-rimmed look at him across his desk.

“What would you have me do, Sherlock?” his brother had replied. “Lock myself in a room and weep? Or perhaps you’d prefer I run outside, fall to my knees, and scream at the sky, blaming a god neither of us believes in?”

Sherlock had shaken his head, appalled with disbelief. “She was our mother,” he’d whispered. “How-How can you-”

“Because grief won’t get anything done!” Mycroft had shouted, pounding a fist on the wood of his desk, sending Sherlock stumbling back at the unexpected show of emotion. “There are things to arrange, bills to pay.” He gestured out over the desk in front of him, and Sherlock had glanced down, recognizing the letterhead of his secondary school on one of the papers near the top. “What good would sentiment do, Sherlock? What purpose would it serve?”

Sherlock had had no answer for that, and merely stood still, lip quivering with silence, and Mycroft
had sighed, rubbing a hand down his face.

“Sentiment is a chemical defect, Sherlock,” he had finally said, looking up, and Sherlock would never forget how tired he had looked, how bloodshot his eyes had seemed to instantly become. “A chemical defect found in the losing side. It would do you well to remember that.”

And Sherlock had, he always had. And he couldn’t afford to forget it now.

Alone. Alone protects me.

No one else can be trusted to.

“Sherlock?” John knocked at the door, startling Sherlock into skittering away from it, spinning to face the rattling wood. “Sherlock, open the door.”

He wasn’t planning on doing any such thing, but, as he realized a moment too late, he hadn’t locked it, and he was now too far away to correct the mistake.

Sure enough, the handle twisted, and John stepped in, neck craning around as he cast his eyes over the room. When his gaze found Sherlock, however, his expression grew more determined, and he stepped confidently into the room, pushing the door closed behind him. “Sherlock, we- we need to talk.”

All the air left Sherlock’s lungs, and yet he still wanted to scream, to cry, to beg, because he couldn’t do this, he couldn’t.

“John, I-”

“No, Sherlock,” John said flatly, clearly determined beyond the point of dissuasion. “We have to talk about this.”

“I- John-” He shook his head down at the carpet, but John only moved further into the room, clenching and unclenching his shaking hand beside his thigh.

“Look, I- I’m not good at this sort of thing either, okay?” he continued, voice quivering, a self-deprecating smile twitching at his mouth. “But I-I feel like we have a couple choices here.”

Sherlock bit his lip, looking up at him out of the tops of his eyes as he waited.

John took a breath, blinking as he dropped his eyes to the ground. When he looked back up, shoulders lowered and spine straight, Sherlock knew it was too late, his mouth frozen from any attempt at stopping this by the steady blue gaze. “We can pretend…pretend none of this is happening”—he flicked a hand between them in a weak wave—“and have the most awkward Christmas ever.” He smiled softly, tipping his head. “Or we can talk about it. And- Well, I-I think… I think it’d be better to talk.”

Sherlock couldn’t argue or agree, couldn’t do anything but try to keep himself from hyperventilating and/or jumping out the window he calculated he could reach in between 2.3 and 2.8 seconds.

John swallowed, and then took a slow step closer, hands constantly twitching in nerves at his side. “I- Well, you-you know you’re my friend. My best friend,” he began, dipping his head in a quick jerk of a gesture as his lips twitched in an attempt at a smile that looked more nauseous than anything. “But- But lately-” He paused, biting at his lip as he turned his head away. When he continued speaking, it was with wide gesticulations, his weight anxiously shifting between his legs. “And-And I think- I think you know- At least, I’m pretty sure you know. How could you not know?
I mean, it’s you!” He pushed his hands out toward Sherlock, eyes moving up and down over his torso as he released a stilted chuckle.

Sherlock was losing control of his breathing, his lungs rising and falling quicker and quicker, the room blurring at the edges as he tried to focus on John’s face, his mind a mess of conflicting impulses: half demanding he rush forward, the other half screaming in terror.

With a sigh, John pulled his hands back, running one through his hair as he took a half step backward, eyes looking past Sherlock. The moonlight coming through the window caught at the panels, creating crossed shadows over his face as it shifted through hesitation, sadness, anxiety, and, finally, resolve. “I-” He looked to Sherlock, lips parted around a soft breath as he paused. “Sherlock, I-”

Sherlock was sure he was going to throw up, his stomach twisting and twirling like one of those horrible circus acts his mother had taken him to once as a child. He shook his head, lifting a trembling arm as he took a shaky step back. “John, don’t.”

“I have to,” John urged, matching Sherlock’s retreat with a forward step, even as his face looked physically pained with the effort. “I have to, Sherlock, I-”

“John,” he choked, a last, desperate effort.

“I like you,” he blurted out, those three words smacking into Sherlock with gale force, and his feet slid back even further, eyes glazed as they looked to the floor. “I like you,” John repeated shakily, face pulled tight with pleading, “and I-I don’t mean-” He stalled, sighing in frustration as he lifted his hands to his face, fingers pushing at the bridge of his nose before he flung them back down to his sides with a determined huff. “I don’t mean like a friend, I-I mean- Dammit!” He angled his body away, breathing heavily as he ducked his head, closing his eyes and licking over the bites at his lips.

“Don’t,” Sherlock wheezed, unable to see anything beyond a kaleidoscopic version of the room now, afraid to even continue his sentence, feeling that any opening of his mouth might produce vomit rather than words. “Please, don’t. John, please, don’t.”

John looked up at him, the agony in his eyes a breath-stealing stab to Sherlock’s heart. “Why not?” he breathed, shaking his head. “I-I mean, you must- You must know.” He swallowed hard, hands wilting out toward Sherlock, a plea for understanding, for reprieve. “What difference does it make if- if I say it? If I tell you? Because I know you know, and I know- Or, well, I think-” He paused over a single breath, never breaking eye contact. “I think you feel the same.”

It was barely a whisper, and yet Sherlock winced, recoiling from the—accurate, far too accurate—assumption as he jerked his eyes to the wall.

“At least, I hope you do. I- Well…”

Sherlock closed his eyes, swallowing hard, his hands shaking in fists as he bit into his lip, praying this was a dream, praying the sharp pinch of teeth would pull him back to waking in his bed, his eyes damp for a reason he would no longer be able to remember.

“Sherlock?”

He couldn’t look up, couldn’t do anything more than open his eyes at the carpet, even as he heard the floorboards creak with John’s tentative steps closer.

“Sherlock, say something,” he pleaded, voice choked, and Sherlock could picture all too clearly the fear in his eyes, magnified by the layer of glittering moisture that was surely covering the blue
Sherlock rattled his head, pulling in a ragged gasp of air. “I-I can’t,” he nearly whimpered. “I can’t-I-I don’t- John.”

“You don’t what?” John asked, a tremor of fear creeping through the phonemes. “Sherlock, talk to me. Sherlock!” He made a grab at Sherlock’s shoulder, and somehow that broke the dam.

He bolted away with a strangled gasp, air heaving through his lungs now as he blinked wildly, trying to give the room definition again. Retreating, he leaned back, bracing one hand on his mattress behind him as his knees threatened to buckle.

“Sherlock?” John was asking, and the swirling mess of his face looked concerned. “Sherlock, are you alright? Sherlock!”

“I-I can’t,” Sherlock sputtered, shaking his head, pure panic flooding his brain and wrapping around his throat. “John, I can’t.”

“You can’t what?” John challenged, moving forward again, but Sherlock flew away, rocketing away from the bed and slamming his back against the wall beside the headboard. “Sherlock, what are you talking about!?”

Sherlock couldn’t stop shaking his head, his hands waving outstretched before him, echoing the denial as he tried to push himself into the wall, through the wall, popping out the other side and away from questions he couldn’t answer. His mouth was metallic, nausea roaring violently in his stomach, and he was dizzy with the circles his brain was running, going over and over the same rhetoric that had kept him sane, kept him safe.

Alone protects me, love is a dangerous disadvantage, sentiment is a chemical defect found in the losing side, people leave, they always leave, love doesn’t help, doesn’t heal, doesn’t change anything but the amount it hurts, alone, alone, always alone…

John staggered a step back, arms slowly lowering to his sides, his face a twist of pain and confusion. “What?” he asked, everything about him—from the tone to the twitch of his eyelids—broken beyond anything Sherlock could have imagined in even the darkest of nightmares, and he knew some of his internal spiral of thoughts must have leaked from his lips. “You- A chemical defect?” John continued, voice failing into barely more than a hiss of air, and he dropped his face, Sherlock closing his eyes so he didn’t have to see the expression that went with the shudder of breath that rattled through the silent room. “Right,” he clipped, sharp and stilted, and Sherlock looked up to see him give a curt nod at the nightstand to Sherlock’s left. “Right, I- Of course.” He swallowed hard, and then his jaw set, shoulders drawing up as his spine stiffened.

It was like being doused in ice water, Sherlock imagined, as those eyes lifted up to fix on his. Cold crept down from his scalp, wiping the frantic thoughts from his brain, his insides hollowing out to match the empty planes of John’s eyes, and the wall was now the only thing holding him up for an entirely different reason than fear.

“I’ll call my aunt in the morning,” John said quietly, but steadily, although his gaze fluttered over to the wall rather than stay on Sherlock. “Get a cab to her place. And I’ll-I’ll email Mr. Parish or something, see if he can.” He paused, his firm composure breaking only for a moment as his chest leapt with a sharp breath. “If he can sort something out for a room.” His eyes held on the wall a moment, and then he nodded, an almost invisible gesture to himself before looking flatly back to Sherlock. “I’ll… I’ll see you around,” he said stiffly, and, without a backward glance, turned and left the room.
Sherlock watched the heavy wooden door drift shut after him, uncertain what he expected to happen, but, when it closed, the click shook through him like a gunshot. With a jagged pant of air, he slid down the wall, his arms trembling as he wrapped them around his shins, burrowing his forehead into his drawn-up knees. Eyes closed, he listened to the sharp rises and falls of his breath, his body still unsure if it wanted to sob or be sick, but a decision seemed to be made when the look of hurt on John’s face flashed through his mind. With a singeing suck of air, he threw his neck back, slamming the back of his skull into the wall, his eyes pressing tight against burning tears as he breathed out to the ceiling. Opening his eyes, he blinked up at the strips of moonlight above him, interrupted here and there by a fuzzy shadow of the snow that had begun to gently fall outside. He shook his head, looking back down to his knees, and then he gave up, gave in, and pulled his legs in tight to his chest as a sob rippled through his frame, shaking loose the fear and doubt until only bitter shame was left stinging hot in his throat.

He didn’t cry for long, but he sat there for hours, watching the shadows tick across the room as his body began to go numb, the heavy feeling bleeding out from where the base of his spine was pressed between the floor and wall. He had no precedent for this, no preconceived action plan derived to deal with such a situation, and was left feeling as if he were groping blindly in the dark, grasping for the right words, the right actions to explain a sensation he had never felt before. Well, perhaps that metaphor was flawed, because he did know the words, had had them bouncing around his head long before he was willing to acknowledge them, but how was someone actually supposed to say something like that? John had managed it, of course, but John was stronger than him, braver than him, better than him, and wasn’t that part of the problem? What right did he have to feel this way, to want John, to dare to even think about taking him when there were so many people more worthy, more capable of giving back all the things that John deserved?

He sighed, stretching his legs out in front of him, hands falling to the carpet at his sides as he blinked at the wall across from him.

Maybe that was all true. Maybe he didn’t deserve John. Maybe he really was a freak, a sociopath, a broken arrangement of flesh and bone that no one could ever get close to without coming away with scars, but John wanted him. Against all odds, John wanted him, and maybe...maybe that in itself made him worth something. Maybe Mycroft had been wrong, maybe love wasn’t a weakness, not when it came from John Watson. John Watson, who was so loyal, so clever, so good that he made even Sherlock Holmes more human, a bit of his heart bleeding in where Sherlock had known only loneliness before, something he had thought was completely normal until John had stepped into his laboratory that afternoon, a blinding example of all he’d been missing.

And it was terrifying. Absolutely, completely terrifying to let a piece of yourself live in someone else, but, even as he tried to push it away, to tell himself that John was better off, was safer with someone else, Sherlock knew he was already a lost cause. John was there now, the voice in his head, the epicenter he had accidentally oriented his entire life around, and he couldn’t carve him out now, not without leaving a gaping hole he knew would never stitch entirely back together.

He swallowed down a rush of bile, realizing, of course, that that could still happen, that John could grow tired of him, grow frustrated, that he might think he wants this now and then claim temporary insanity. John could leave, just like everyone else, and Sherlock would never recover, could never delete him. It was stupid, completely illogical, a gamble against the balance of probability based on every interaction with every other person he had ever had, but he got up anyway, hobbling on half-asleep legs to the bathroom, splashing his face clear of grief.

Lifting his face to the mirror, he watched the water run down his cheeks, small independent rivers he smothered with a towel, and he held his own eyes in the glass, fingers gripping the edge of the counter on either side of the sink as he breathed a slow steadying breath. Watching the shift of
determination in his own gaze, he nodded to his reflection, straightening up and striding out the door, decided that, just this once, he was tired of thinking.

*****

I-I can’t- Sentiment is- It’s a chemical defect, and I-I don’t-

John wasn’t entirely aware he was awake until he heard his own waking inhale, slowly releasing the groggy hiss of air as he blinked at the window across the room. The moonlight was fading, a sure sign that dawn was creeping in, and the snow softly falling past the panes of glass was now barely illuminated, much different than what was likely a few hours ago, when he had forced himself to sleep watching the snowflakes flit down. He closed his eyes, turning his face into the pillow as he sighed, his breath clinging hot to the cotton of the pillowcase beneath him, and curled his legs up a little tighter to his body. The moment after, however, he stiffened, eyes snapping open, the prickling sensation of someone watching him tugging at the hairs on the back of his neck. Turning slowly even as his heart rate quickened, he craned his neck around behind him, searching for the source of his uneasiness.

“Sherlock,” he sighed, rolling properly onto his back as a familiar silhouette of tousled hair came into view.

“What if you’re allergic to bees?” Sherlock was sitting on the corner of the bed, legs crossed beneath him, his body facing the window as he held his chin in his hands, eyes looking straight ahead.

John blinked, wondering if perhaps he had missed part of the conversation, Sherlock talking to him while he was asleep not exactly an unfamiliar occurrence. “What?” He sat up, leaning against the headboard as he wiped the last of sleep from his eyes. “Sherlock, what are you doing in here?” he asked, their previous interaction coming back the forefront of his mind with a sweep of humiliated nausea, and his fingers tightened into the duvet at his sides.

“Trying to ascertain if you’re allergic to bees, obviously,” Sherlock muttered, eyes narrowing in irritation as he snapped them to John in a brief flash of grey, but there was something else in his face, an anxiety lingering just below the haughty façade.

“Why does that- Shit, did you inject me with something!?” He scrabbled at the sheets, pulling the sleeves of his white t-shirt up as he twisted his arms, feeling for pain and looking for puncture wounds.

Sherlock lolled his head to meet John’s wide eyes. “No, John,” he sighed, rolling his eyes, “I didn’t inject you with anything. And why would I use bee venom anyway? The effects of that are already widely documented.”

“Oh,” John murmured, relaxing his arms to the mattress again. “Right… So why are you asking?”

Sherlock shifted on the mattress, weight bobbing side-to-side as rocked, looking down at his hands twisting in his lap. “I-I always wanted to keep bees,” he said, perplexingly, and John only blinked, waiting for context. “When I retire,” he clarified, flashing a glance over to John as he twitched a shrug. “I wanted to move to Sussex, get a house—no neighbors, if I can help it—and keep a colony of bees. Fascinating creatures, bees.”

“I-I guess,” John murmured, still not entirely sure how this was relevant to his histamine reactions.

Sherlock fidgeted a few inches closer across the duvet. “Did you know honey bees travel in swarms, scouting nests and moving en masse as opposed to forming their colonies around a solitary queen?
No other genus of bee does that, although some types of wasps have been known to exhibit similar nesting behavior.”

“That’s…interesting,” John replied, because it was, he supposed, but he still didn’t understand how it applied to him. He tilted his head, frowning as he watched Sherlock’s face, which was still focused intently down at his lap even as he shifted closer.

“And, in the winter,” he continued, gesticulating over his knees, “they form a cluster in the center of the hive—the queen in the middle—and shiver to keep the temperature up, rotating from the outside to the inside so no bee gets too cold.”

“Wow,” John said, genuinely impressed, “that’s pretty cool, actually. But I still don’t understand how this—”

“If you were allergic,” Sherlock interjected, voice quieting as the silence seemed to grow even stiller, “I-I’d have to keep them away from the house.”

John might have gasped if there had been any air left in the room.

“Because there’s no way I’d get rid of them altogether,” Sherlock rambled on, a swallow bobbing down his throat. “That would be ridiculous. But it would be better to have them nearby.”

“Sherlock,” John rasped, licking at his dry lips, “what…what are you saying?”

Sherlock shrugged, his knuckles popping loudly as he twisted and tugged at his hands. “That it would be inconvenient for you to be allergic to bees.”

“Yeah, okay, but why?” John shifted higher up on the bed, leaning forward, heart thudding in his ears.

“So I can put the colony in an ideal location,” Sherlock mumbled in answer. “Have you not been paying attention?”

“No, Sherlock,” John snapped, shaking his head as he scooted down closer to the infuriatingly evasive detective, “I mean why does it matter if I’m allergic to bees? Why does that have any impact on where you put your future beehives?”

“Well, I—” The brunette shrugged, lifting a hand to scratch at his neck. “I wouldn’t want you to be uncomfortable.”

“But why would I be there at all?” John asked, opting for directness, trying to phrase the question so clearly, it was impossible to wriggle out of an answer. “This is when you retire, right?” he asked, and Sherlock nodded even though John barely paused for an answer. “That’s not for years yet. Decades!”

Sherlock quirked his head in agreement, but made no attempt to reply.

“Sherlock, why would I be there decades from now?” He fixed the detective with a steady look, not daring to even blink in case he missed the moment that explained it all.

Sherlock stilled, fingers falling limp in his lap, and his brows twitched anxiously as he took a slow breath while John held his. “I-I don’t know,” he murmured, giving his head a soft shake. “But—” He paused, lifting his eyes, and the fading moon caught in the grey, illuminating an open honesty John wouldn’t have dared imagine they were capable of, and he wondered if anyone had ever seen this, if even he ever would again. “I-I don’t want you to leave tomorrow. Well, today,” he muttered,
shrugging in a quick spasm of his scapula bones. “And I don’t want you to move out, and…well…” He blinked down to the dark blue duvet, his lips forming a circle as he expelled a deep breath before looking up. “If-if you would be amenable,” he said, suddenly steady, “I would prefer you not to leave at all. Beyond the unavoidable absence that advanced academia would require, of course. Although, if you chose a medical school in London—”

“Sherlock,” John interrupted, lifting a hand, fairly certain he was still asleep if he was hearing things like that, “what exactly are you saying to me right now?”

Sherlock’s mouth floundered for a moment around a series of choked-off sounds before his eyes flittered away and he swallowed. “I had thought it was obvious,” he snipped, but this was too important, too heavy to leave with a mutter and a glare, the answer too significant for John to translate it himself this time.

“Sherlock, I need you to tell me,” he said softly, not wanting to spook him into taking everything back, but still trying to convey the urgency.

“You know what I mean,” Sherlock murmured, fiddling at his fingers again.

“Probably,” John allowed with a dip of his head, “but sometimes people need to hear things.”

Sherlock gave him a sharp glare, but John lifted his brows right back, a challenge of its own. Finally, Sherlock sighed, but he did roll his eyes in a last act of defiance, prompting John’s lips to quirk a smile in response, his stomach leaping impossibly high. “Fine, I- Well, what I’m trying to say- What I have said, but you insist on making me repeat myself—”

“Sherlock.”

“Alright, alright!” he muttered, huffing in irritation with another glare before he dropped his eyes back to his hands, sucking his lips over his teeth. “I-I suppose I”—he waved over his chest—“may… possibly…like you as well,” he finished stiffly, wincing over the word.

John didn’t care, didn’t mind in the slightest that Sherlock looked like he was in the middle of a root canal, and a broad grin spread across his face. “You- Really?” he asked, his foot rattling against the mattress with nervous energy.

Sherlock gave him a withering look. “John,” he sighed, frustrated, and John laughed, a little wild with relief.

“I just- Really?” he spluttered again, face aching with the breadth of his smile, and then burst into giggles as Sherlock rattled his head, looking back to the window with a faint flush around the collar of his shirt.

Slowly, his laughter died away, and he smiled distractedly at the side of Sherlock’s face. Every feature was suddenly so much more defined, from the slope of his neck to the shades of steel in his eyes, and John just couldn’t stop beaming, his ribs stretching to the breaking point around the bubble of happiness that expanded exponentially in his chest at the thought that he might actually have this, might get to trace those cheekbones and brush at those curls, find the answers to all the questions he tried not to ask himself.

Sherlock turned to him at that moment, and there was a flutter of panic wherein John instinctively wanted to hide his staring, but then he remembered he no longer had to, and simply met Sherlock’s gaze levelly as the detective lifted an eyebrow.

They weren’t particularly close, but close enough, and John couldn’t help but wonder, couldn’t
avoid considering it, and his eyes slipped to the bow-shaped lips for a fraction of a blink. When he
looked back up, however, Sherlock’s eyes were wide, and it wasn’t the good kind, nothing expectant
or surprised about it, only naked terror housed in the slate orbs.

“I- John, I-” he began, physically retreating somehow in the shift of his shoulders and slight tip of his
head. “I’m not- I don’t- I-I’ve never-”

“Never?” John asked, blinking in surprise.

“I mean, I’ve done…other things,” Sherlock murmured, looking everywhere else, and John wanted
to ask so much his throat burned with it, but now was probably not the time, “but not- Never…that,”
Sherlock stressed, nodding his head toward John’s face.

John smiled softly in spite of himself, temporarily putting his probably unfounded fear and jealousy
aside. “Don’t worry about it,” he assured, shaking his head, the physical, mental, and emotional
exhaustion beginning to wear on his eyelids. “I have morning breath anyway,” he joked, but
Sherlock didn’t smile, only tilted his head and frowned.

“It’s 4am,” he snipped, and John shrugged.

“Still. I was asleep, now I’m awake. Therefore: morning breath.” He grinned as Sherlock shook his
head in bemusement, although a small smile tugged at his face too.

“If you insist,” he relented with a nod, and John chuckled. Then, for what he hoped was the last time
for a good long while, yet another awkward silence descended in around them. “So…what now?”
Sherlock murmured, looking up at John out of the tops of his downcast eyes, utterly helpless, and
John tried not to find that adorable.

He shrugged. “I don’t know,” he admitted, although he wasn’t particularly concerned about it. The
worst part, as far as he figured it, was over. The details could all be ironed out in the morning. Or
whenever. He didn’t really care so long as he got to sleep. “But we’ll figure it out,” he added
reassuringly, smiling sleepily at the still-disturbed detective. “For now,” he strained, shifting down
the bed as he wrestled the blankets up to his shoulder, “I’m gonna go to sleep.”

“You- What?” Sherlock sputtered, untangling his legs to lean across and catch John’s eye. “You’re-
You’re just going to…go to sleep!?”

John yawned. “Yes,” he mumbled, and Sherlock’s jaw dropped. “Well, I’m not sure what else there
is to do right now,” John defended, shrugging as best he could lying on his side. “Unless- Did you
have something else you wanted to say?” he asked, pushing up off his shoulder a little.

“Well…no,” Sherlock murmured, shuffling across the mattress a little, moving up between John and
the window. “I just- Well, what am I supposed to do?”

John chuckled, not accustomed to being asked for advice by Sherlock Holmes, but it was something
he could very easily get used to. He shifted back on the mattress, moving away from the detective,
who looked rather alarmingly hurt by the added distance. His expression quickly shifted, however, as
John tugged at the top of the duvet in front of the other pillow, flipping it down. “Go to sleep,” John
suggested, swallowing around his nerves as he tried to affect completely confidence.

Sherlock’s eyes were comically wide, flipping between the turned-down sheets and John’s face. “I-”
He stopped, swallowing audibly. “I’m still in my clothes.”

John laughed, burrowing into his pillow. “You can borrow some of my pajamas, if you want,” he
yawned, his blinks slowing, “but I don’t care if you sleep in jeans.”
Sherlock hesitated a long moment, long enough that John thought he might fall asleep and miss the decision, but then Sherlock slowly shifted his legs off the bed, lifting up just enough to pull the blankets out from under his body before climbing back in, gingerly covering himself with the duvet. He lay rigidly on his back, John resting on his side as he watched the brunette stare at the ceiling.

“You look like a wax figure,” he chuckled, wondering if that would be anywhere near funny in the morning, but it did get a glare out of Sherlock, so it must have been a little amusing.

Sherlock did relax after that, however, eventually turning onto his side, back to John on completely the opposite side of the mattress, so far away, John was sure he was bare centimeters from falling.

It was probably a bit untoward to remind him he could move closer, so John only smiled at the back of his head. “Goodnight, Sherlock,” he said softly, closing his eyes as he turned his face into his pillow.

Gently, such a slight pressure, John first thought it was merely a shift of the blankets, the toes of Sherlock’s sock-clad feet bent back to brush against John’s, a fitting barely-there touch to round off weeks of them.

“Goodnight, John,” Sherlock replied, and John was asleep scant seconds later, a smile stuck on his face.

*****

A clock chimed loudly somewhere in the house, John counting seven chimes, but he knew from the light pouring in his windows that it must be later than that. With a groan, he tugged at the duvet, intending to shield his eyes, but the blanket snapped taut, held down by some unseen weight. Slowly, eyes still blinking against the light, he craned his neck, trying to find the culprit. Which turned out to be six feet of consulting detective, elbows perched on his crossed knees, pale face resting atop his folded hands as he stared down.

John groaned all over again, but the flutter in his stomach was notably less disgruntled. “Are you going to make a habit of that?”

Sherlock smiled, half of his mouth shifting up. “I may,” he teased lightly, “but I’ll be sure to leave before you wake up in the future.”

“Creepy,” John remarked, and the brunette chuckled, disentangling as he moved off the bed and out of sight, forcing John to sit up to follow his movements.

The man was wearing different clothes than the night before—and John was going to have to subtly hint around to make sure all of that actually happened—so he must have been up for some time, his hair appearing still slightly damp from the shower.

“What time is it?” John asked, turning toward the clock even as he did.

“9:30,” Sherlock answered, and John moved back to leaning up against the headboard. “Mrs. Hudson has breakfast planned for 10.”

“Oh, alright,” John said, rattling his head at the end of a yawn. “I’ll, um… Get ready then,” he murmured, gathering duvet up in his lap, a certain unavoidable morning situation making it impossible for him to start getting ready quite yet.

Sherlock smiled, apparently oblivious, which was, of course, always suspicious. “Alright. I’ll see you down there,” he bade, and then, equally perplexing, left without another word.
John squinted at the door he closed after him, wary, but Sherlock didn’t burst back in with a water pistol or anything, so John slid out of bed, hurrying to the bathroom all the same. He showered quickly, wiping at the mirror with his towel so he could see what he was attempting to do to his hair, and then returned to his bedroom, plucking his phone off the nightstand and firing off a text to Lestrade.

The sergeant responded quickly, which was lucky, as it was nearly 10, and John doubted Sherlock would waste any time dragging him down if he were late. After a quick virtual conversation, John silenced his mobile, stowing it in the pocket of his worn-soft jeans as he headed downstairs, tugging at the hem of his thin grey jumper—a rather expensive cashmere blend his aunt had given him on the pretense of his uncle having grown out of it. John never mentioned that the tag was still on it, but he did mention it was a bit smaller than what he usually wore, prompting a lecture from his aunt on “flattering his physique” that he never needed to hear from another soul as long as he lived.

He put his hand on the door of the dining room, pausing to allow a yawn to run its course, and then gave his head a rattle, centering himself for Christmas Eve breakfast at the Holmes’. He pushed into the room, the entire assembly turning to him, and he froze, letting the door swing shut behind him. Sherlock’s eyes widened, his gaze roving up and down John’s torso—yeah, okay, he was definitely going to get his aunt those candles—while Mycroft watched Sherlock, eyes narrowing on him before flicking to John. Mrs. Hudson, for her part, was peeling waffles off a large plate with a fork, plopping them onto the plate in front of Sherlock, and turned to John with a wide smile. She opened her mouth, but Mycroft beat her to it, although he most assuredly said something much different than what she had planned.

“Oh, thank god!” he cried, fork and knife collapsing out of his hands as he released them, throwing his back into his chair in apparent relief. “I thought you’d never get around to it!”

John blinked, Sherlock was nearly bending his fork as he glared, and Mrs. Hudson looked just as confused as John for a moment until she straightened up, eyes and mouth stretching wide as she looked between the three of them.

“Oh,” Mrs. Hudson huffed, flitting a hand at him as she drew closer. “You and Sherlock, of course.” She was smiling, but John’s stomach had just fallen through the floor. “Are you finally together?”

John choked on nothing, clearing his throat with a small cough. He opened his mouth, nonsensical sounds garbling out while Mrs. Hudson beamed expectantly at him. Finally, he weaved his head around her, looking desperately to Sherlock for a save, but the brunette only shrugged with a vaguely sympathetic grimace. John shook his head faintly in gesture of his uselessness, and then looked back to Mrs. Hudson, still with no idea what to say, but, thankfully, the woman seemed to have reached her own conclusions.

“You are, aren’t you!” she gushed, and John thought it best to force a tight smile, which turned quickly into alarm as the woman positively squealed. “Oh, I don’t believe it! Finally! I swear, you two,” she muttered, shaking her head as she turned to include Sherlock in the disapproving scowl. “Thought I was going to have to do it myself.”
Sherlock smiled stiffly as she turned to him, and then returned to glaring at a snickering Mycroft the second she looked back to John, who was spared reacting by Mrs. Hudson grabbing his arm and ushering him to the chair beside Sherlock.

“Now, now, you sit here, dear,” she fussed, pushing him down at Sherlock’s left with surprising force, a small oomph forced out of him as he landed. “How many waffles?” She grinned down at him, plate back in her grasp and fork hovering over the veritable mountain of carbs.

“Er,” John murmured, still several minutes behind in this conversation, “just the one for now, thanks.”

Mrs. Hudson somehow smiled broader, and John wasn’t sure how much longer he could force a smile before it turned into the cringe he felt in the rest of his body. Thankfully, she left after placing the waffle on his plate, muttering something about getting more butter before disappearing into the pass-through to the kitchen.

“Sorry,” Sherlock murmured, leaning near John’s ear.

John turned to him slowly, face stone and eyes narrowed. “Yeah, I can really feel that in all of your abandonment.” He held his glare as Sherlock opened his mouth, but seemed to think better of defending himself, and instead closed his lips, turning mutely away and quickly grabbing the glass syrup dispenser in front of him.

“So, John,” Mycroft started, planting his elbows on the table as he interlocked his fingers, placing his chin atop the linked digits with a smile that John had already had it up to here with. “About what time would you say you two had your little, er… discussion.” He blinked benignly at Sherlock as the brunette choked.

“Why?” Sherlock spluttered, wiping the back of his hand across his mouth, and John snapped up the syrup himself, bowing his head to his waffle.

Mycroft shrugged, leaning back in his chair as he crossed his legs with an airy wave. “No particular reason,” he muttered, and John focused intently on the syrup pooling in the golden divots as he felt the beginnings of the tension sparking off of Sherlock.

“No,” Sherlock mused, and John had to give up on the syrup before his waffle drowned, placing the bottle on the table and looking up to find Sherlock tilting his head across at his brother. “No, you most certainly do have a particular reason.”

Mycroft blinked almost innocently, head inclining inquisitively. “I’m only curious, brother dear,” he said, and Sherlock’s lip actually curled briefly at the endearment, “as to whether it was yesterday, or if this is a Christmas Eve miracle.”

Sherlock narrowed his eyes even further while John busied himself with cutting his waffle, looking between the psychic staring contest as he chewed. “Why would you-” the detective began, but Mrs. Hudson, once again, intervened.

“We had a sweep going,” she answered simply, and John choked, but, this time, it was from laughing.

“You what?” Sherlock shouted, looking between Mrs. Hudson and Mycroft like they were the most appalling creatures that had ever crawled out of the brine. “You—You were betting on us!?!”

Mycroft was glaring at Mrs. Hudson, who only shrugged, placing a bowl of butter on the table in front of them.
“It made it a bit more exciting,” she explained, and Sherlock began shaking his head dazedly at her. “Probably would have gone mad otherwise, watching you two dance around it like that.”

“I-I-” Sherlock stammered, still shaking his head, and then he looked to John for solidarity, but his eyes quickly widened with affront. “What are you smiling at!?” he snarled, and John just flashed him a grin before turning to Mrs. Hudson.

“So who won?” he asked, slipping another chunk of waffle off his fork.

Sherlock made a strangled sound, but didn’t say anything, settling down enough to look between Mycroft and Mrs. Hudson.

“Well,” Mycroft muttered, clearing his throat, “that would be why I asked. Once we found out you would be staying here”—he dropped a nod to John—“we accelerated our timelines a bit. One of us had yesterday, and one of us had Christmas Eve.”

“Who had what?” Sherlock snapped, glaring white fire at Mycroft.

“Oh, we can’t tell you that,” Mrs. Hudson chuckled, apparently unaware of the volatile atmosphere, or perhaps just too accustomed to it to care. “It wouldn’t be fair. Now, John.”

He looked up, wondering why he always got dragged into these things. All he wanted to do was add his butter and eat in peace.

“Which was it?” Mrs. Hudson asked, and all eyes turned to him, even Sherlock’s, although he surely knew the answer better than John did.

“Um,” he mumbled, tapping at his lips with a napkin—actual linen, of all the ridiculous things. “It was this morning,” he said hesitantly. “About…About 4, I guess.”

“3:52,” Sherlock supplied, because of course he helped now.

Mycroft turned away, jaw grinding as he looked down the table, while Mrs. Hudson whooped in triumph.

“I knew it!” she trumpeted, clapping her hands beneath her chin. “Christmas Eve! It’s so romantic!”

“Yes, that was the plan exactly,” Sherlock muttered under his breath, and John gave him a sharp kick to the ankle, the detective glaring as he stifled a hiss.

“I want cash, Mycroft,” Mrs. Hudson said, pointing a stern finger down at the man. “None of that check nonsense. For all I know, it could bounce, and then where would I be?”

Mycroft spluttered in objection, leaning back from the table. “Bouncing?” he parroted. “You work for me! I give you checks all the time!”

“Yes, well, this is different,” she clipped, lifting her chin, and Mycroft stared at her a moment longer before heaving a sigh.

Mycroft spluttered in objection, leaning back from the table. “Bouncing?” he parroted. “You work for me! I give you checks all the time!”

“Yes, well, this is different,” she clipped, lifting her chin, and Mycroft stared at her a moment longer before heaving a sigh.

“Fine, fine,” he muttered, dropping his forehead into his hand while the other waved at her in dismissal. “Take it out of my wallet. But I know how much is in there!” he called after her, straightening up as she moved toward the main door. “If you take any more than 400 exactly-”

“400 pounds!?” John spouted, fork clattering on the edge of his plate as he dropped it. “Jesus! Can I dump him and take odds on tomorrow?”
“John!?” Sherlock bleated, scandalized, mouth open and brows creased as he rounded on him.

“What!?” John spat right back, and they were frozen there for a moment, staring at one another in an offended tableau before laughter broke the scene.

Mrs. Hudson started it, her puffs of air quickly moving from laughter to absolute gasps of mirth as her hand darting out to brace on one of the dining room chairs.

Mycroft quickly followed, a low chuckle in his throat as he shook his head.

John turned to him, shocked to see the man doing anything even close to laughing, and then, as he looked away, his eyes caught Sherlock’s, and they were both lost.

The room rattled with laughter, Mycroft and Sherlock actually moving into proper bouts of it after a while, and John’s faded down into a grin as he simply watched them.

The room was decorated festively, holly and red ribbons draped along the chair rail moulding around the room. The table linens were embroidered with gold thread at the edges, a centerpiece of candles and a fragrant pine wreath the crowning glory of the table, directly beneath a crystal chandelier. It was the perfect Christmas scene, a home filled with laughter and—albeit unconventional—love, and John was a part of it. For once, he was a part of it.

Sherlock, of course, had noticed John’s withdrawal, and turned to him, smile still lingering on his face even as he squinted in confusion.

John smiled back, shaking his head, assuring the needlessness of worry, and then, without a thought, without a chance to reconsider, he reached across the gap between their chairs and plucked Sherlock’s hand out of his lap, interlocking their fingers before turning their combined grip up on Sherlock’s thigh, the back of John’s hand balancing on the dark denim.

Sherlock blinked down at it, fingers twitching as if testing the tangibility of John’s, and then his eyes trailed up John’s arm until he found his face.

John smiled softly at him, belatedly nervous, and he swallowed around a knot in his throat as he gave Sherlock’s hand a briefly tighter grip.

Sherlock, mercifully smiled back, and then they both turned back to Mrs. Hudson and Mycroft, who had somehow devolved into an argument over brussel sprouts vs. asparagus with dinner the following night.

John let the sniping wash over him, content at the normalcy of the holiday squabbling, and he slowly shifted his hand beneath Sherlock’s, freeing his thumb so he could trace paths over the dry palm of his detective.

The rest of the day went both exactly and not remotely as John had pictured it. It was how he would have imagined it himself, visualizing what the first day of any long-time-coming relationship would be like, all shy glances, flushed cheeks, and tentative touches. But it was nothing like what he had imagined those moments would be like with Sherlock Holmes.

Sherlock, as it turned out, was almost frighteningly normal about it, not that John would ever tell him or he would ever admit it. He walked closer, sat closer, and orchestrated the most transparent excuses to touch John at every possible moment. When they were going over their lines, he muttered something about being too close to the fire, shifting his body just enough so his leg pressed all the way up the side of John’s as they were leaning against their opposite armchairs. His feet tapped impatiently every now and again, no doubt a physical outlet for the boundless energy that seemed to
spin through him all the time, but it brought his toes into annoyingly rhythmic contact with John’s
hip, necessitating more than once that John give him a reminding swat on the ankle with his book.

He actually asked to watch Doctor Who, straightforward suggesting it as opposed to going through
the rather tiresome process of hinting that John liked to draw out sadistically. He even fetched
snacks, the kitchen somehow stocked with John’s favorite flavors of crisps and Haribo, but only
blinked with an innocent “What?” when John fixed him with a suspicious glare over it.

John would have been content to set up his laptop in the library, but no, Holmes Manor had a media
room—because of course it did—and Sherlock insisted on cueing up John’s DVDs on the massive
television before flopping into one of the reclining seats on the sofa next to him. It took probably five
solid minutes for Sherlock to explain the buttons that operated John’s seat, another seven to go over
the remote, and, in the end, he ended up working both of them, moving John’s footrest up and
headrest back to match his own. The only thing that might have made it better would have been cup
holders, but that would have come between him and Sherlock, and that wouldn’t have been any
good at all. Sherlock slouched down so his head was level with John’s, and then he slouched down
even further, his hair occasionally brushing at John’s cheek when he moved, their arms pressed
together entirely. At one point, Sherlock had somehow—John wasn’t discounting on purpose—got a
chunk of crisp caught in his hair, and John had pulled away, laughing as he brushed it out, and then
he couldn’t quite stop brushing, lingering in Sherlock’s hair several seconds longer than it had
actually taken to remove the fragment. And Sherlock, through all of it, didn’t pull away, initiated it
more than once, and the entire thing might have driven John to the point of insanity, launching him
across the sofa to pin the detective to the suede and kiss the clever out of him, but he had bigger
things to worry about, a looming secret he knew Sherlock was already suspicious of, and, sure
enough, the man asked as evening deepened around them.

“What are you planning?” he stated simply as they packed away the snacks, and John turned to him,
ever intending to lie.

“Your Christmas present,” he said, and Sherlock blinked, head recoiling back in surprise.

“My… What?”

“Your Christmas present,” John repeated, smiling even as his stomach rolled with nerves. “It’s
technically gonna be a bit early, but it’s the only time I could do it.”

“Do… Do what?” Sherlock pried, head tilting, curiosity clearly piqued, which was the worst thing
for John’s surprise.

Luckily, it was time for them to leave, so he didn’t have to answer so much as usher Sherlock into
his coat and scarf, countering every question with an insistence that they hurry. Lestrade had the car
waiting for them, as they’d agreed, and, though John knew Sherlock would know where the car was
from instantly, in spite of it being unmarked, it wouldn’t give away everything.

“You’re getting me arrested for Christmas?” Sherlock asked as they walked out to the car, and John
chuckled, opening the door.

“Yes,” he said brightly as he climbed in after. “Just wait til New Year’s. I plan to hire an assassin.”

“I won’t plan any resolutions then,” Sherlock replied, clearly trying not to smile.

John tutted, shaking his head in mock disappointment. “Such a defeatist attitude,” he sighed, and
Sherlock barked a laugh before they lapsed into comfortable silence.
John watched him as they drove, collected his own data on the way the man’s leg bounced more and more the closer they got, the disjointed rhythm his fingers tapped on his knees, the closer he got to the window, his breath fogging the cold glass as snow fell across the streetlamps outside.

Eventually, they pulled up in front of where Sherlock must have known they were going, but John’s heart nearly broke free from his chest as he watched the detective feign surprise.

“‘The Yard?’” he asked, turning to John, brow furrowed, but he let the confusion slip away when he saw John smirking knowingly, and instead smiled sheepishly before ducking his head and following alongside. “It’s nearly midnight, though,” he continued as they approached the door. “And on Christmas Eve. There’s no one here.”

John reached into his rugby jacket pocket, grinning with proud triumph at the pure surprise on Sherlock’s face as he produced an ID card. Without a word, he swiped it to a chime and a green light, pushing open the door with a stretched arm before waving Sherlock in ahead of him. “After you,” he chirped, not caring how smug it sounded.

Sherlock rolled his eyes, but he was practically vibrating with excitement now, his eyes looking every which direction, as if something could fall from the sky at any moment.

They didn’t go quite up to the sky, however, hopping on the elevator and taking it a single stop, getting off at the floor just above ground level.

Sherlock stayed behind him, which was odd enough, but he also stayed quiet, which made John even more nervous than he already was.

What if Sherlock didn’t like it? What if it was so awful, so off the mark, Sherlock decided he didn’t want John after all, that he would rather keep his dorm and his Christmas and his bees all to himself?

John rattled his head as they neared the door of the incident room Lestrade had set up for him, and he supposed he owed the man the “good news” sooner rather than later, considering the knowing smiles and smart remarks he’d had to deal with when he came up with this idea those couple weeks ago. They’d figure it out, Sherlock and him. Making decisions together. How mature.

John smiled to himself, and then took a breath, turning to face Sherlock in front of the door.

The detective came up short, looking around John as he tried to see through the window in the door behind him.

“Okay,” John said, probably more to himself. “Well…yeah,” he muttered, licking at his lips, but there was nothing for it now but to move aside. “There ya go,” he concluded brilliantly, waving a hand between Sherlock and the door.

The brunette gave him a curious look, tilting his head, and then slowly stepped forward, turning the handle and pushing the door inside. It was dark, and he had to move a few feet forward to the light switch—no doubt having memorized the layout of this room from being in here one time two years ago or something—but, when the neon flooded the room, he froze.

“I wasn’t sure how many to pull,” John explained, stepping in behind him as he closed the door. “Lestrade picked them out. Said they were the most interesting ones.”

Sherlock didn’t reply, still staring blankly over the room, mouth agape, and John used the silence to do the same.

Lestrade had done everything he’d asked, and John pulled out his mobile right away, shooting a text
of thanks. The boards were all there, post-it notes, tacks, reams of paper, and every color marker imaginable spread out on the long tables. The cold cases, dead-ends, locked-rooms, whatever Lestrade could find that had a question mark hanging over it were piled in the corner, a tower of boxes that they most certainly couldn’t make it through tonight, and John nearly sighed at the realization the rest would be coming home with them. The coffeemaker plugged in and arranged with sugars and creamer on a table in the corner John hadn’t asked for, but definitely appreciated, and he could tell from the lingering hint of spice in the air that the small fridge below the table would hold Thai food, the microwave beside the coffee maker ready to reheat it, topped with paper plates and napkins.

God, now that he looked at it all, if he hadn’t already cracked and told Sherlock he was a little bit in love with him, this would’ve let the cat out of the bag in a big way.

“John?” Sherlock breathed, blinking as he turned back, eyes wide and adrift.

John smiled softly, stepping closer. “I-I had Lestrade set it up,” he murmured, slipping his hands into the pockets of his jeans as he shrugged. “So, yeah, if you get a weird text or twenty in the next few minutes…” He let the sentence hang there, closing it with an awkward chuckle.

Sherlock still didn’t speak, looking back around the room again.

“We have all night,” John continued, filling in the space. “There’s food and coffee. And no one’s supposed to be in until 7 tomorrow.”

“You- You did all this?” Sherlock asked, and it was such a normal thing, questioning the obvious when you just couldn’t believe it, and John smiled, strangely proud that he’d knocked Sherlock down to ordinary for a moment.

“You- And you don’t mind?” Sherlock turned to him, continuing the far-too-human thing as he looked earnestly over John’s face, not even a small attempt to shield the fearful hope in his eyes.

John laughed lightly, shaking his head. “No,” he chuckled. “I brought my laptop”—he tugged at the shoulder strap of his backpack—“and I figured I could help you most of the time. I mean, if you-“

“No, no! I mean, of course, I- You always help,” Sherlock stumbled, but seemed to be coming back to himself, haughty demeanor creeping back into his posture. “I merely- Well, won’t you be bored?”

John chuckled, tilting his head affectionately. “Sherlock, you’re a lot of things,” he smiled, “but boring has never been one of them.”

Sherlock smiled shyly, ducking his head, and John didn’t think he—or his stomach, for that matter—would ever grow accustomed to seeing a blush on those pale cheeks. “Well…alright,” he muttered, flashing a brighter smile before turning to the boxes. “I suppose we should get started,” he sighed, as if this wasn’t his literal and figurative Christmas. “What do you think?” he asked, opening the tops of a few of the boxes and giving the contents a quick flip-through with fluttering fingers. “Poison or stabbing first?”

John laughed, shaking his head as he tossed his backpack onto the end of the table. “Spoilt for choice, aren’t I?”

Sherlock grinned, and then picked one, plucking up a cardboard box by the handles and setting it down at the opposite end of the table with a heavy metal-leg-rattling thump. He began unloading the files and bags, brow creased thoughtfully as he occasionally stopped to flip through some of the
pages, and John watched him with a listless smile for a while before turning to his own supplies, pulling his shoulder bag open in front of him as he gingerly removed his laptop.

It was a few moments of unloading pens and notebooks, intending to catch up on his blog, before he noticed Sherlock had gone quiet, and he turned to find the detective standing beside him, twirling an envelope in his hands. He blinked, startled by the sudden proximity, and was about to make a joke about bells or squeakier shoes when he noticed how nervous Sherlock looked, eyes downcast as he nibbled at the corner of his bottom lip.

“I-” he began, tapping his fingers against the envelope. He swallowed hard before continuing. “I have something for you as well. I mean, in comparison, it’s rather- Well…” He dropped his head, turning the envelope up to his face before pushing it across toward John’s chest.

John took it slowly, eyebrows raised, and then froze, stomach seizing and heart lurching as he caught sight of the letterhead on the front—a black crown sitting beside rather telling words. His fingers couldn’t go any further, but the envelope was open, and surely Sherlock wouldn’t have given it to him if it wasn’t— if he hadn’t-

“I- And, in retrospect, perhaps it was taking rather more liberties than I ought to have,” Sherlock muttered, bobbing his head at the aside, “but I- You wanted to go—clearly Bart’s was your first choice—but you didn’t apply and- Well, you already had your predicted grades for the other schools, and had taken the UKCAT, and I filled out the rest of the application based on your other ones. I reused one of the essays—the questions are always so similar on these things—and copied your handwriting, and- Well…” He shrugged, shoulders shifting beneath his blue plaid shirt as he quieted, returning to biting at his lip, waving John on with a quick flick of his hand.

Slowly, mind still in a daze—and oddly fixated on the potential illegalities of all of that—he lifted the sheet of paper out from the white housing and peeled it open at the folds with shaking fingers. His breath left him in a disbelieving huff as he read the first few sentences. “I…I got an interview…” he breathed, blinking down at the words in case they changed. “I- Fuck, February 11th, that’s-”

“Plenty of time,” Sherlock interjected, and John looked up at him, honestly having forgotten there was anyone or anything beyond those few words on that page. Sherlock smiled at him reassuringly, but he was clearly still on edge. “I-I probably should have told you earlier, but-” His mouth moved soundlessly for a few moments, and then he seemed to give up, breath easing out before he closed his lips.

“I got an interview,” John repeated, hands starting to shake again around the paper, the words now blurring. “But I- I can’t afford- There’s no way I could-”

“They have scholarships,” Sherlock quickly supplied, stepping a bit closer and pointing down at the envelope held aloft between them. “There’s a pamphlet or something in there.”

John didn’t take it out, just went back to staring down at the page, his head slowly beginning to shake. “Why?” he finally asked, barely a whisper as he looked up. “Why did you- I applied other places. You-You didn’t have to-”

“I know,” Sherlock interrupted, and John would probably be annoyed at that later, but, for the moment, he couldn’t possibly give less of a damn. “But they were all far away, and- Well, you didn’t want to go to any of them anyway, and now you’re thinking about the army, and-”

“What?” John snapped, his turn now to break in. “How- How do you-”

Sherlock looked a bit caught, but still managed to muster a disgruntled huff, waving a hand over his
chest, and, well, John did suppose that was explanation enough.

John blinked at him, mouth opening indecisively, and he flicked another glance down at the paper before continuing. “Why would you- You can’t just do things like that, Sherlock,” he sputtered, brow furrowing together in growing anger as he looked up at the detective, who was evading his gaze. “This isn’t your decision, it’s—it’s not—”

“I’m not trying to make the decision,” Sherlock challenged, evidently growing frustrated himself, a glint in his eye that signified this could turn into a larger fight if John persisted. “I was just…giving you the option. You want to go to Bart’s, and I’m going to Imperial, and, alright, so maybe I’m not overly thrilled with the idea of you getting shot at any more than you already have been, but I—I’m not making the decision.” He held John’s eyes a moment, defiant, and then sighed, shoulders wilting as he dropped his head. “I—I just,” he mumbled, twisting his foot on the tile, “I don’t want you to go.”

John stared at him while the detective looked anywhere else, trying to muster up the indignation he knew he should feel at the interference, at the sheer gall of it, but this was Sherlock Holmes, and, honestly, he was more surprised by the admission of the reasoning than the brazen gesture itself. “You,” he sighed irritably, shaking his head. “You’re impossible, you know that?” he muttered, looking up as he flicked the papers through the air in a quick gesticulation.

Sherlock blinked at him, brow furrowing as he looked over John’s face, clearly trying to piece out what the appropriate reaction should be.

John left him to it, looking back down at the page in his hand, reading over the sentence he knew would soon and forever be attributed to memory. “I got an interview,” he whispered, still unable to entirely believe it, because this was Bart’s and he was just…John.

“Of course you did,” Sherlock said softly, feet coming into view as he shuffled a little closer.

John grinned down at the ink, the reality of it finally sinking it, wiping whatever lingering affront or fear he had from his mind, because he had an interview at Bart’s, the school he had wanted to go to since he was in Year Two and they asked them to write a speech on what they wanted to be when they grew up, and it was all thanks to the brilliant, mad, completely infuriating man in front of him, and that was just more than John could reasonably handle at the moment.

The paper crinkled in his hands as he dropped them briskly to his sides, releasing the leaf and envelope to the ground before shooting his arms back up, one hand at the collar of Sherlock’s shirt and the other tangled in his hair before he even stopped to think about it, and then, when he did, they were already far too close, John stretched up on his toes and the detective bent down with the force of the tug, breath puffing out over John’s face in surprise. John opened his mouth, intending to apologize, to release the right hand twisted up in Sherlock’s shirt, smooth the collar back and return to the business of either poison or stabbing, but he couldn’t quite manage the words yet, the will to follow through evaporating in the face of Sherlock’s grey eyes flicking between his. Of course, it didn’t stay quiet for long.

“Well, get on with it then,” Sherlock snipped, but the uneasiness was not entirely hidden, eyes blinking spasmodically, lips twitching as his throat bobbed with a quick swallow.

John puffed a brief laugh, elated at the stark reminder of just who exactly he was standing here with, and then he lifted that little bit higher onto his toes, pulled that little bit harder on Sherlock’s shirt, and then, finally—oh, god, finally—their lips met.

Perfect wasn’t the right word. Perfect was for when you finally got a picture to hang straight or achieved the right balance of salt in a soup, not for this, not for Sherlock’s small gasp that hissed past
John’s lips in a break of contact; for the way he hesitantly, almost painful with care, began to respond under John’s mouth, clearly every kind of new at this; for the way his fingers shook against John’s sternum when he clutched back at the grey jumper; for the soft almost-whimper that vibrated between their chapped lips when John twisted his mouth just slightly, closing entirely over Sherlock’s lips as his fingers clenched tighter into satin curls.

No, this was nowhere near perfect. This was messy and confused, and maybe a little bit more damp than it ought to have been, and Sherlock didn’t seem to have any idea what to do with his hands, and their teeth clicked here and there, and lips slipped off to more cheek than anything, and the detective hadn’t figured out how to regulate his breathing and frequently had to break off to gasp in unhealthily ragged heaves, but none of it mattered. It was unpracticed, rough and too soft at alternating intervals, and it was the best kiss of John’s life, because it tasted of the mint tea Mrs. Hudson had forced on Sherlock before he left—an attempt to curb his caffeine consumption that the coffeemaker in the corner was most certainly going to undo—it was in an incident room of Scotland Yard, surrounded by boxes of grisly crime scene photos that he was going to put out of his mind now, and, paramount, it was with Sherlock Holmes.

John Watson was kissing Sherlock Holmes, his interview request from Bart’s crinkling beneath his trainer as he shifted even closer, snow falling outside the windows he really ought to have had the foresight to close the blinds while the lights of London flickered out beyond them, heralding in the Christmas that was likely just beginning, alarm clocks shifting from 24th to 25th, and it was all just too incredible to be real.

Eventually—what was probably seconds, but felt like roughly an hour—they broke apart, both panting, John surprisingly strung out considering it wasn’t his first kiss, but it was his first one with a man, and with Sherlock, who was something else entirely, so maybe he had an excuse.

“I-” Sherlock stammered, never content to just let silence lie, but John only smiled, loosening the hold on his hair, but not removing it entirely. “I-I didn’t- I never-” He swallowed, looking more perplexed than John had ever seen him. “I didn’t think it would be like that,” he said slowly, as if he couldn’t believe the truth of his own words. “I- It always seemed so boring.”

John chuckled, shifting his fingers through Sherlock’s hair to rub briefly at where the curls gave way to muscle beneath bare skin. “So…not boring,” John summated with a small smirk.

Sherlock’s lips trembled around a stifled smile, and he shook his head, gentle enough so as not to dislodge John’s hand. “No,” he confirmed softly. “Not boring.”

John grinned, far too happy about what shouldn’t have been a compliment, and then he lifted up to Sherlock’s lips again, this time almost worryingly better, Sherlock clearly far too quick of a study for John to allow this to continue if they hoped to get any work done tonight. He pulled back, trailing his hand down Sherlock’s neck to soften the separation, and then removed entirely, hands falling back to his sides as he stepped some distance between them.

Sherlock looked like he’d been dragged through a hedge backwards: hair a mess, face flushed, already perpetually pouted lips further swollen and reddened, and, though John couldn’t imagine he looked much better, he couldn’t help but smile smugly as he mentally accredited himself with the disarray.

“We should, um,” he muttered, waving a hand at the box Sherlock had gotten halfway through unpacking.

Sherlock blinked at him, turning to follow the gesture, and then leaned back, searching his eyes around as if stunned to see there was more to the room. “Oh…right,” he murmured, and then he
cleared his throat, running a hand back through his hair and tugging down at the front of his shirt to reset himself. “Stabbing,” he added, pointing unnecessarily at the box, and then he moved back to unloading it, neck flushing anew as he avoided John’s eyes.

John smiled down at the ground, sucking his lips in quickly to smother it, and then swept his letter up off the floor, reading it just once more before stowing it away in his bag, which he lowered to the ground beside his chair as he sat down.

Their eyes met over a few awkward smiles at first, but—quite quickly, all things considered—the awkwardness dissolved, and Sherlock began muttering to himself, pacing around the room and flipping through folders and pictures, occasionally darting over to one of the boards to pin something up and scribble on notepads with various colors of sharpie. He asked an opinion every now and again, which John readily offered, but mostly kept to himself, fingers steepled and hair gradually turning more and more wild as his hands coursed through it in exasperation at poor penmanship in police notes or shoddy lighting on photos.

John watched him, smile widening whenever the raving reached a particularly comical fever pitch, and slowly worked at his latest blog entry, consulting the notes he had taken to scribbling at crime scenes. It was an odd normal, but it was theirs, Sherlock muttering away about blood spatter while John typed on strangulation marks, and the smile never quite left him, even when it was probably inappropriate—nothing charming about petechial hemorrhaging, after all. As the timbre of Sherlock’s voice lulled on into the wee hours of the morning, John’s thoughts turned to bees, to the years that stretched out in front of him—most of which would likely be spent in various derivatives of this moment—and, though it was nothing like the white picket fence, 2.5 kids, and dog he had always been told to strive for, he couldn’t bring himself to anywhere near regret it.

Of course, that was the moment—John caught up in daydreams and feeling rather sappily dewy about the whole thing—that Sherlock chose to pounce on the back of his chair, neck stretching past John’s head as he poked at the computer screen.

“You split an infinitive.”

“What!? Where?” John spluttered back, and, as an argument about the validity of descriptive grammar intertwined with statistics on rates of tissue decay, John supposed their kind of normal was one he could absolutely learn to live with.

Chapter End Notes

Okay so the scene that popped into my head first was the bees. It was just a few lines of dialogue, just a thought that that's how I wanted the conversation to start-Sherlock waking John up with some random nonsense about bees-but it wouldn't really work for current Johnlock, so I figured I'd make them teenagers! And that's how this epic Teenlock adventure began! Just a quick origin story for you.
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

Check the notes at the bottom for important info about this chapter, but I want to avoid spoilers here

“Mrs. White with the rope in the library.”

“Check again!”

“I'm not reading the cards wrong, Sherlock. They have handy little pictures and everything.”

“But it's not possible!”

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was a dreary Christmas morning, although, by now, it was more Christmas afternoon. They had gotten back to the manor at just before 8 that morning, Mrs. Hudson already up with bacon, tomatoes, eggs, and toast with a veritable army of jam jars ready on the dining table.

John had nearly cried at the spread, wilting into a chair at the table as if he’d never thought he would see such majesty again, and making truly obscene noises as he ate his body weight in breakfast.

Sherlock didn’t quite understand the theatrics. He hadn’t slept at all through the night, whereas John had gotten in a solid two-hour nap, which was more than adequate. Nevertheless, he hadn’t protested when John had insisted on getting a bit more sleep before the Christmas festivities properly commenced, and had retreated to the library while the blond had teetered to his bedroom.

It was now 10:53, and, feeling he had been more than generous—as well as being thoroughly exhausted with fielding Mrs. Hudson’s attentions all on his own—Sherlock was waiting for John to rouse. He was going to be scolded for this, he was sure of it, but, for the moment, he couldn’t bring himself to regret it.

John was on his side, face pointed toward the window where he lay on what was, from Sherlock’s perspective, the left side of the bed. His brow was relaxed, nostrils shifting as he breathed, his shoulder rising and falling with the exchange of oxygen. The duvet was pulled up under his chin, the tips of his fingers protruding from beneath the navy fabric, and, as Sherlock shifted lightly where he sat cross-legged on the opposite corner of the bed, the fingertips twitched, a sure sign of waking, and Sherlock used what he knew would be his last few seconds to memorize every aspect of the scene.

It was so sentimental, he nearly cringed. For one thing, it was Christmas, snow falling outside the window he had peeled the curtains from to make John wake up faster. For another, the soft tones of cloud-shielded sunlight were skipping over John’s freckles, catching in his hair to make the blond look almost frosted, and, wow, he really was addled if he was thinking descriptions like frosted.

Clearly, John’s blog had gone to his head.

As if summoned by the mental insult, John made a soft sound—Sherlock’s heart most certainly not
moving from its rightful place—his eyelids fluttering as he rolled onto his back, a hand worming up from under the blanket to wipe over his face. Blearily, he opened his eyes, blinking as he orientated himself to consciousness, and then, as if he had been expecting the intrusion, the blue irises locked to Sherlock’s face. John shook his head, lolling back to the pillow. “Yeah, we need to have a talk,” he sighed, but he was smiling as he hinged his neck back up.

Sherlock smiled back, lifting his chin from where it had been resting on his hands, but assumed he did not need to reply.

John grunted wearily, pushing up on his palms as he hoisted himself up against the headboard, and then froze, fixing Sherlock with an alarmed, curious expression. “The hell are you wearing?” he blurted, looking over Sherlock’s torso.

Sherlock had forgotten for a moment, but now looked down, face falling to a scowl. “Christmas jumper,” he muttered bitterly, plucking at the navy material, the collar rimmed down into the chest and shoulders with a stripe of red and white pattern Mrs. Hudson had referred to as ‘Fair Isle’. “Mrs. Hudson bought them at Gap the other day.”

John laughed, the sound growing as he slowly shook off the last of his grogginess, his face tilting up to the ceiling as he rested a hand over his stomach.

Sherlock narrowed his eyes, fingers gripping into the fabric he had been holding in his lap. He cleared his throat, and then lifted the object, stretching it between his hands as he smirked at John over the top.

John’s face quickly fell, the laughter freezing on his lips as he slowly closed them, eyes scanning with growing horror. “What… What is that?”

“Yours,” Sherlock chirped, grinning as he held the jumper aside by the shoulders, the colors the mirror of his own—red through the body, the pattern navy and white.

John looked mutely between the article of clothing and Sherlock’s face, clearly expecting the latter to burst into laughter and reveal some grand joke. “No,” he finally said.

Sherlock beamed, loosely bundling the fabric and tossing it at the blond, who caught it clumsily, one sleeve slapping him across the face. “She wanted us to wear them when we came down to open presents. I suspect photographs are inevitable.”

“Presents?” John asked as he pushed the jumper down to his lap. “Like… for me too?”

“Yes,” Sherlock muttered, squinting curiously at the man. “Of course. You got Mycroft and Mrs. Hudson presents as well, did you not?”

“Well, yeah, but— Wait, that’s not why they did it, is it?” he asked, scrabbling at the duvet as he leaned forward, eyes frantic. “You didn’t tell them I got them something, and then they thought they had to get me something too?”

“What? No,” Sherlock snapped, rattling his head. “Why would I do that? I assure you, they both purchased gifts for you entirely of their own accord. Or rather, Mrs. Hudson did and put Mycroft’s name on one of them. Although Mycroft did ask her to pick something up for him, so I suppose that still counts.”

John pushed out a breath, running a hand back through his hair as he looked down at the duvet, distressed. “But—but my gifts are stupid! Mrs. Hudson probably got me a… a gold-plated Rolex or something, and all I got her was one of those neck pillows you can put in the microwave!”
“Alright, first of all,” Sherlock began, lifting a hand to halt John before he devolved into hyperventilating, “that neck pillow can also go in the freezer.”

“Sherlock!” John bleated, helpless and exasperated.

“And,” he continued, batting two hands now, “second of all, she did not get you a Rolex, gold-plated or otherwise.”

John’s eyes narrowed shrewdly.

“I can’t tell you what she got,” Sherlock answered before he could ask, and John wilted, lips popping open to argue. “You wouldn’t be able to act surprised. It would ruin Christmas,” he said with a firm nod, and John snorted, but appeared to let the matter drop, shaking his head with a small smile. Sherlock returned it, and then slapped him lightly across the knee. “Come on. She’ll come fetch you yourself if we don’t hurry. She was growing rather impatient.”

John sighed, looking to the ceiling, and then began to pull the blankets off, his fingers stalling when they met the red jumper once again. “Do I really have to—”

“John,” Sherlock interjected, sliding off the bed to stand at the side, arms crossing in front of him. “Just put it on over your shirt. I think she wants that whole Christmas-jumper-and-pajamas aesthetic. The full Rockwell.”

John huffed a laugh, shaking his head down at the offending article, but did take it with him as he slid off the bed. “Fine,” he sighed, twisting at the cloth until he had it pointed the right way, and then tugged it over his head, flapping his arms through the sleeves. He pulled the hem down over his holey white t-shirt, twisting at the cuffs to align the seams properly down his arms before brushing the static from his hair. “Well?” he asked, lifting his arms in a weak flick as he looked up.

Sherlock’s lips twitched, and he quickly sucked them in over his teeth, but he could feel the corner pushing up and betraying him.

“Shut up,” John snapped, and Sherlock laughed, unable to stop himself as the blush crept up John’s neck, blending in with the lurid red at the collar. “It can’t be that bad,” he muttered, pushing past Sherlock and charging into the bathroom. He turned in front of the mirror, the side of his face Sherlock could see going slack. “Oh my god,” he deadpanned. “I’m a Cleaver.”

He would likely never tell anyone, not even John, but Sherlock found he was having to grow accustomed to laughing. It was an odd feeling, the breathless tightness in his chest and pressure around his eyes as his cheeks pinched up to meet them, and he wasn’t quite yet familiar with the sound of it in his voice. He’d never had much cause to laugh before, not like this, the type of laughter that skirted the precipice of pain, but he supposed it was just one more thing to add to the list of post-John experiences, his life now split in two by that single stroke of kismet. He crossed into the bathroom, smothering his grin to a smile as he stood beside John, meeting the distraught blue eyes in the mirror.

“Seriously, look at us!” the blond spluttered, waving a hand over their chests. “All we need is a little white dog and we’re a Christmas card!”

Sherlock laughed again, shaking his head across at mirror-John’s morose expression. “Don’t give her any ideas,” he chuckled before giving John a nudge with his elbow, bobbing his head toward the door.

“Just a second,” John muttered, fumbling over the counter for his toothbrush.
Sherlock rolled his eyes. “John, really, no one is going to care about your breath.”

“You might,” John said as he squeezed a stripe of white paste over the bristles.

“Me?” Sherlock snipped, frowning in confusion. “Why would I-”

John was looking at him in the mirror, somehow still smirking even with a toothbrush in his mouth, a single eyebrow pointedly quirked.

Sherlock swallowed. “Right,” he murmured, embarrassingly raspy, and quickly cleared his throat.

“I'll just... I'll wait out here.” He pointed back over his shoulder, slowly retreating from the bathroom.

John huffed a frothy laugh. “Yeah,” he mumbled through a mouthful of foam, “you do ‘at,” and then grinned with smug eyes through the polished glass.

Sherlock didn’t quite trip on his feet as he skittered away, but it was a near thing, his knees fumbling uncoordinated beneath him as he dodged a bureau that had no business being there. Removed from the entendre, Sherlock could breathe again, taking a few slow drags of air as his mind cleared.

He didn’t imagine it would be like this, not really. He understood it conceptually, of course, but he always figured it would be different for him, that he would remain somewhat removed, just like he always had. But John… John was different. Sherlock had known that already, of course, but he hadn’t realized quite how much John would make him different, how unprepared he truly was for this kind of thing when John Watson was the other half of his pair. Yes, there were the physical responses that were rather new, but other things unsettled him so much more, not in the least because they didn’t really unsettle him at all.

He wanted. For the first time, he really wanted, and not just in touch and taste and any other tangible way. He wanted to know John, wanted to count the creases around his eyes when he laughed, to work out the average amount of time it took him to fall asleep, to finally make sense of what prompted him to switch between grape and strawberry jelly at apparently random intervals. He wanted to have him, to keep him, to never again give the world the chance to see what it had missed, but you couldn’t exactly ask someone to never go outside without their hand in yours for the rest of their life, so Sherlock would just learn him, reconstruct John in his mind for as long as he was his.

“Alright,” John sighed, ruffling at his hair as he emerged from the bathroom, “let me just grab my presents and we can go down.” He crossed the room, bowing his head to rummage through his suitcase on the chair, entirely unaware of the detective watching him behind his half-turned back.

The sun was stretched in through the open window, catching on dust before coming to rest in John’s hair, glittering prismatically off the flaxen strands. His brow furrowed while he searched, tongue sticking out between his teeth as he wriggled a package loose from the confines of his clothes, and then turned back to Sherlock, haggardly wrapped bundle in his hands and triumphant smile on his face. He looked up, meeting Sherlock’s eyes, and then blinked, tilting his head with a small frown.

“What?” he muttered, confused smile slowly lifting up his lips at the corners.

Sherlock opened his mouth, but his tongue failed him, lolling around uselessly behind his teeth. Whatever force of god or fate that had thought dropping John Watson into his life would be a good idea had clearly overestimated Sherlock, because all he could manage to do was stay standing and just barely avoid blurting out something ridiculous about how blue John’s eyes were. There was a word for this, a word that had prickled around the edges of his mind for weeks, months even, but he couldn’t bring himself to say it, not even in his mind, because that was the sort of thing you couldn’t come back from, and at least half of Sherlock’s brain was still resolutely certain John was going to
call the whole thing off every time he opened his mouth.

The blond smiled fondly, crossing the room to where Sherlock was frozen. With his free hand, he reached down between them, intertwining the very tips of his fingers with Sherlock’s where their arms hung down by their sides. “I’m not going anywhere,” he said softly as he lifted his face, and Sherlock’s eyes widened at his shy smile, now certain the boy had been hiding psychic abilities. “If…If you were worried,” he added, a light shrug shifting at his shoulders as he looked down to where his fingers were now sliding aimlessly between the gaps of Sherlock’s

“I wasn’t worried,” Sherlock snapped, his tone stilted, and John lifted his head again, smiling in a knowing way that compressed all of Sherlock’s chest into a tight ball around his stuttering heart.

“Course not,” John replied, brow furrowing seriously, completely incongruous with the smirk battling over his lips.

Sherlock glared at him, and John grinned, shifting his hand to give Sherlock’s a single squeeze of reassurance.

“Let’s go,” he said, tugging at their hands to turn Sherlock toward the door, “before Mycroft figures out his present.”

“You put it in three bags and wrapped it twice. And he’s downstairs,” Sherlock argued, but let himself be towed along, John dragging him out the door and down the corridor.

“Yeah, but, now that it’s out of the suitcase, I feel like he can smell it or something,” John whispered conspiratorially, and Sherlock huffed a sharp laugh.

“Not unless you rolled it in frosting first,” he muttered back, and John laughed, tossing a grin over his shoulder, and it was a lucky thing he was still holding onto Sherlock’s hand, because, otherwise, Sherlock may very well have tumbled down the stairs.

*****

“Mrs. White with the rope in the library.”

“Check again!”

“I’m not reading the cards wrong, Sherlock. They have handy little pictures and everything.”

“But it’s not possible!”

“And yet,” John sighed, shrugging as he lowered the small envelope and combination of cards he had successfully guessed to the carpet.

Sherlock sniffed at him, scowling from across the board game, the light flickering from the fire beside them casting sinister shadows over his cross-legged figure. “You expect me to believe that a woman of her age and stature hoisted a grown man up to the ceiling?”

John opened his mouth, but Sherlock evidently hadn’t been looking for an answer.

“It was clearly a suicide. Anyone can see that!” he spat, glaring down at the game as if personally accusing it.

John smiled. “We’ll call Hasbro first thing in the morning,” he clipped with false conviction, and Sherlock turned the glare on him. John chuckled, leaning back against the armchair he was propped
against as he lolled his head to the left, staring into the flames of the library fireplace.

It had been a pretty good Christmas overall, the best in John’s not-just-recent memory.

Mrs. Hudson had cooed over her neck pillow, insisting Sherlock go microwave it for her right away, and then had sat in her chair for the remainder of the presents, demanding hers be brought to her lest she disturb the relaxation process by moving.

Mycroft had looked genuinely surprised by his gift—the biggest book of The New York Times crossword puzzles John could find. Sherlock had said he enjoyed doing them, but wasn’t religious about it, so there were bound to be some in there he hadn’t memorized at a glance five years ago or something ridiculous like that.

As for what they had bought John, he was pleasantly surprised by the normalcy of it. From Mrs. Hudson, he had received a scarf and mitten set, both a rich navy blue, and, from Mycroft—via Mrs. Hudson, at least—he got the latest edition of Gray’s Anatomy, something he knew through various longing looks in bookstores cost easily over 100 pounds. He had held the book reverently in his hands, tracing over the pristinely sharp corners of the hardcover binding as he falteringly tried to express his gratitude. Of course, then Sherlock had had to go ahead and not-so-surreptitiously prod him to reveal his “big news”, in spite of John’s muttered insistences that it wasn’t a big deal, before finally taking it upon himself to divulge John’s interview with Bart’s.

The reaction was immediate, Mrs. Hudson even abandoning her chair to latch onto him, whispering pride in his ear before darting to fetch some sparkling cider for a toast. Mycroft hadn’t said anything beyond a remark that Bart’s was an extremely selective school, but John could read between the lines enough to know he was impressed. Mrs. Hudson returned, glasses were passed, and, though even John’s internal organs were probably blushing, he had grinned through the quick dedication and clink in his honor, a bit dizzy with the feeling of family, of home.

Turning away from the fire, he looked to Sherlock, watching as the detective reached across to pluck up the cards, brow furrowing in displeasure as he scanned through them himself. John smiled wistfully, watching the firelight flit across Sherlock’s eyes as he stared hard down at the cards, as if he could change them with his mind. Maybe John was still feeling a bit dizzy.

“I don’t understand,” Sherlock crabbed, shaking his head as he lowered the irrefutable evidence to his lap. “It doesn’t make any sense! Don’t they want their games to make sense? What’s the point of it if it doesn’t make sense?”

“I think it’s supposed to be fun,” John replied, smiling across at the still-distracted man.

“Fun?” Sherlock scoffed. “Please. Fun is the boxes of real cases we have right over there.” He waved a hand to the piles arranged in front of the bookshelves—one for solved, one for to-be-solved, and one for solved-but-so-obvious-that-Sherlock-had-to-remember-to-point-out-the-imcompetence. It wouldn’t have taken Sherlock Holmes to figure out which pile was the largest.

“We worked on those all day,” John reminded, leaning forward to begin packing up the game, “and you’re the one who wanted to play this, remember? I listed off every game in there and this is the one you picked.” He flapped the cards in the air for emphasis, waggling them at the detective before tossing them inside the box.

Sherlock sneered. “As if you would’ve picked anything better. We’d have been putting together a puzzle or something.”

John barked a laugh, shaking his head as he arranged the last of the small pieces into the box, closing
the lid and pushing it aside. “No, I wouldn’t have picked a puzzle.”

“Well, what then?” Sherlock challenged, leaning back to brace himself on his palms, his elbows locked. “What would you have picked?”

John smirked. “Twister.”

One of Sherlock’s palms slid out, and he fell back, catching himself with a heavy thump down to the opposite elbow, and John had never known how accurate the term ‘side-splitting laughter’ could be until now.

He clutched his arms over his stomach, toppling sideways onto the floor as he choked and gasped, legs rolling up toward his chest.

“John!?” Sherlock spouted, red-faced and glaring, but John couldn’t feel anything remotely close to ashamed.

“That,” he gasped between long wheezing breaths, “was the best thing!”


John heaved in air, coughing a bit as his breathing levelled out. “Only a little,” he grinned, wiping at his eyes as he rolled back upright, legs bent out to the side as he steadied himself with an arm.

Sherlock squinted his eyes at him, jaw squaring and lips tightening, a whole new level of glare, and John had never loved anyone so much in his life.

He hissed a small laugh, shaking his head. “You’re ridiculous,” he muttered, and Sherlock’s glower barely had time to blink to confusion before it was too close for John to see at all.

Sherlock’s lips vibrated in a small sound of surprise when John’s hit them, and John lifted the hand he didn’t need for support to the side of Sherlock’s head, pushing back over his skull as he combed through the soft curls.

A whisper of a whimper shook Sherlock’s throat, and then he was pressing back, tilting his head as tentative fingers brushed against John’s collarbone just beneath the crew neck of his jumper.

Sherlock was getting too good at this, John decided, with his tiny pushes and pulls against John’s mouth, the shiver-inducing contact of his fingers ghosting up John’s neck to rest uncertain on his jawline, so, naturally, John licked a slow, soft stripe across his bottom lip.

Sherlock shuddered—actually shuddered—and gasped, his fingers leaping back down to grip into the jumper over John’s shoulder, but he wasn’t pushing him away, just holding on for dear life, and, carefully, watching for any sign of hesitation, John tilted his head, pressing his tongue just a little more deliberately. Sherlock sucked a breath in between them, his mouth opening, and John just grazed past the seal of his lips, curling his tongue down to stroke along the interior edge.

There was really no other word for it—Sherlock moaned, a warbled, desperate thing that didn’t seem to know what it was doing any more than Sherlock did, but he made up for it with sheer enthusiasm, his hand moving to the back of John’s neck as he pressed their mouths just a bit harder together, a wordless encouragement, and John took it.

John had been told he was good at this, but not even all the words of the handful of women before combined spoke half as loud as Sherlock’s silence.
He went where John guided, shifted and turned this way and that with the slightest twist of John’s fingers in his hair, and, if that wasn’t enough power to get drunk on, there were his noises! It was unholy, really, the soft gasps and broken moans and whimpers whispering between them as John traced his tongue over Sherlock’s mouth, paying special attention to the roof after it became clear Sherlock had a weakness for it, fingernails digging into the back of John’s neck in a way he almost hoped left a mark.

Even John’s heart stuttered a beat or two, however, when Sherlock’s tongue gently brushed across his own, a question written in the slide, and somebody that might have been him groaned as he shifted closer, getting better leverage.

Sherlock made to pull away, moving just far enough for John to see the confusion in his eyes, the anxiety he had made some miscalculation, and then John slipped his hands to either side of his jaw, tilting the brunette’s head up as he dove down to crash their mouths together. Sherlock responded immediately, his tongue twisting around John’s, and it was John’s turn to shiver, hands roaming back into Sherlock’s hair.

When air grew scarce—and Sherlock seemed to have gotten the hang of that too—John pulled back, slowly withdrawing to kissing at Sherlock’s lips again before daring a single soft pinch of teeth to the swollen flesh. Sherlock hissed in a breath, a weak gasp, and John smiled to himself as he pulled away, glancing a single soft kiss across Sherlock’s jaw to soften the distance. He didn’t go far, however, Sherlock holding him there with a weak hand to the back of his neck, and John resigned himself to just breathing his air for a while, stroking small circles into the hair at the base of Sherlock’s skull as he watched the blurred face of the detective slowly reorient itself to reality.

Eventually, he looked to be himself again, brow twitching in and out of creases as he blinked at some unfixed point down past John’s torso.

“What?” John asked, fingers slowing to a stop as he leaned further back, looking curiously at Sherlock’s vexed expression. “Sherlock, what?” He pulled his hand away entirely, letting it fall to his lap, anxiety beginning to frost over his chest.

Absentmindedly, Sherlock shook his head, slowly dragging his hand away from John’s neck. “I-I don’t- I don’t understand.”

John waited for him to continue, but the detective only blinked, eyes shifting side-to-side as if trying to read answers from the carpet. “What?” John pressed, and the man flashed a brief glance at him before darting his eyes away again.

“I- All day, I-I wanted to-” He stopped, flitting glances up at John through his eyelashes as his mouth shifted with left-unspoken words.

The corner of John’s mouth twitched, but he kept it relatively in check.

“You know,” Sherlock snapped, grey eyes narrowing sharply, and John couldn’t help but chuckle, ducking his head to the floor. “But I-I don’t know- How do you- How do you know…when?” He tangled his fingers in his lap, face twisting between lost and irritated, and John tilted his head, confused.

“When?” he repeated, and Sherlock flashed him a helpless look. “When you wha- Wait.” He
stopped, lifting his hands up in halting disbelief. “Do you mean…kiss me?” Sherlock winced, and John gaped, shock slowly giving in to amusement as his mouth curled into a grin.

“Well, I don’t know!” the brunette suddenly bleated, head rattling in frustration as his eyes flared. “Some film and television depictions suggest it’s appropriate to ask first! I told you this wasn’t my area, I told you I—”

“Sherlock!” John interjected, and the man fell silent, ducking his head with heavy breaths. “Sherlock,” he repeated, softer this time, but the boy did not look up, only shifted his gaze to the side and swallowed. John reached across, tangling his fingers within the paler ones. “You don’t have to worry about that,” he assured. “I’m pretty much game to kiss you whenever you like,” he added with a smile, and a slit of grey peered up through dark lashes. He turned Sherlock’s hands over in his, reaching around with his thumbs to stroke at the palms. “And you certainly don’t have to ask first. I mean, you’re my boyfriend, for chrissake, it’s not like—”

“What?”

John blinked, looking up, caught off-guard by the stunned expression that met him. He frowned, tilting his head, and Sherlock shakily opened his mouth.

“I… Boyfriend?”

The library was suddenly transformed into a vacuum, no air to be found as John’s mouth worked soundlessly for it. “I- I just- I thought—”

“No. I- It—” Sherlock stammered, and then paused, dropping his head to swallow down at their combined hands. “It’s fine,” he said, nodding jerkily as he lifted his head, but there was a small smile. “It’s- Well—” He shrugged, turning his hands within John’s slightly with the gesture. “I actually… It’s fine,” he finished in a sharp mutter, nodding again, but John raised an eyebrow.

“Are- Are you sure?” he pressed. “Because, I mean, we can just forget I said it. Well, you probably can’t—you never forget anything—but—”

“John.”

John snapped his head up, lips pressing shut.

Sherlock smiled, still shy, but also something like fond. “It’s fine. Really,” he added, turning his hands to once again thread through John’s fingers. “I was just…surprised.”

John huffed a laugh, too awkward to know what else to do. “You? Surprised?”

Sherlock’s smile broadened. “Only with you,” he replied, and John blinked dumbly, rather at a loss for words after that. Thankfully, Sherlock seemed content to carry on, bowing his face as his expression turned thoughtful again. “John, what- When we go back to Langley…” He left the thought unfinished, but it weighed down the air around them, pulling to the forefront what John had tried very hard to shove to the back corners of his mind.

“Yeah,” he breathed, nodding resignedly, “I-” He looked up, and, for a second, meeting Sherlock’s fire-hued eyes, his fortitude faltered, but it was the only option, and he quickly reminded himself of that and rallied. “I don’t think we can tell anyone,” he said, hating every syllable of it, directing the words down to Sherlock’s chest. “Not for a while, at least. It— We couldn’t—”

“I know,” Sherlock interrupted, and John closed his eyes, sighing at the salvation. “Langley isn’t
exactly…well…” He shrugged, and John nodded, the homophobia of the aristocracy not exactly news.

The silence stretched into awkward around them until John couldn’t take it, clearing his throat. “And,” he drawled, tilting his head and smiling as he switched to coping humor, “you’d definitely have to get a new roommate.”

Sherlock, perceptive as ever, followed the shift, puffing a brief laugh. “Well, we can’t have that,” he replied, shaking his head, eyes dancing with a grin within his forced-severe face. “I only just broke the first one in.”

And, just like that, the heaviness lifted, John laughing in the warm glow of the fire as light and shadow swirled across their tethered hands.

*****

“God!” John snarled, throwing the cab door shut before moving to meet Sherlock on the pavement. “I’ve never seen traffic like this! What was that, an hour?”

“Little more,” Sherlock replied with a shrug, and then quirked his head, urging John to follow along as they began walking down the bustling street.

“Bloody hell,” John hissed, shaking his head as he hoisted his overnight bag onto his shoulder. “I hope this case of yours is worth it.”

Sherlock’s stomach rippled with repressed anxiety, and he swallowed, steadying his voice before replying. “As do I.”

It had been rather late when Sherlock pushed into John’s room, derailing the plans for a quiet New Year’s Eve rung in with sparkling cider in front of the tele, and instead dragging the reluctant blond out into the cold, crowded streets with only the order to pack a bag.

“I don’t see why it couldn’t wait ‘til morning,” John grumbled, true to form. “It’s not like the jewels will be any less stolen tomorrow.”

Sherlock sighed, rolling his eyes as he hastened them along, his nerves beginning to fray at the edges. “I told you, the hotel owner wants us in tonight. There are a lot of wealthy people staying for the holidays, so the thief probably is as well, and the owner would rather not get the authorities involved, if at all possible—bad publicity and all that.”

“But why do we have to stay there?” John whined, sliding sideways through gaps between mostly drunk pedestrians.

“Because,” Sherlock groaned, explaining this for the fourth time and still somehow feeling guilty about it, “this way, we can catch the thief red-handed. I suspect it’s one of the employees, someone with access to the computer system. We’re inputted as some famous someone or other”—he waved his hand in the air, dismissing the details—“who are quite publically going to be in attendance at a charity event tonight. It’s the perfect opportunity for the thief; he won’t be able to pass it up.”

“But we’ll be there,” John said flatly from over his shoulder.

“Yes,” Sherlock clipped, nodding, pleased to finally be understood.

“Sherlock,” John beckoned at his back, and Sherlock half turned over his shoulder, “what are we gonna do then? What if they have a-a gun or something?”
Sherlock winced, not wanting to add any more to the list of small deceptions. “It’ll be fine,” he assured, but there was a definite strain in his voice, albeit not for the reason John would assume.

“Sherlock,” John said, tone turning toward dangerous, and Sherlock could all too clearly imagine the stiff jaw and stern eyes that would be boring into the back of his head about now.

Luckily, they had arrived, and he stopped outside the glass doors, waving a hand up the few steps that separated the entrance from the pavement. “We’re here,” he announced plainly, and then just waited, holding his breath for the inevitable.

It was a slow build, John blinking blankly at the entrance, his eyes trailing to the carved stone walls flanking the small staircase, denoting the name of the Corinthia. He then looked back to the doors, past the confused doorman and into the bit of the lobby that was visible beyond. Finally, his mouth opened, but it was a moment before any words came. “No,” he muttered briskly, eyes glued to the entry with growing horror.

“John,” Sherlock urged, turning back to him, the reaction not entirely unexpected, but John was having none of it, shaking his head as he swallowed.

“No. No, Sherlock, I am not going in there,” he clipped, still not able to tear his eyes away.

“You have to,” Sherlock plead, dipping his head, and John turned a look on him, an almost audible pleading not to go there. “They called us.”

“They called you,” John challenged, but Sherlock only huffed, rattling his head in dismissal.

“Same thing,” he muttered, and John gave him that look, a startled sort of expression that always meant Sherlock had been accidentally sentimental. “It’ll be fine,” he coaxed, and John’s face shifted to helpless hesitation, eyes flicking anxiously between Sherlock and the hotel. “We just have to get through the lobby.”

John let out a strained breath, brow creased with unease. “Sherlock, I-”

“Please?” he added, and John shot him almost a glare, clearly conveying how unfair he thought that was.

A moment later, however, he let out a frustrated growl of a sigh, hoisting his bag higher onto his shoulder. “Fine,” he muttered, and Sherlock beamed, “fine. But you so owe me for this.” He thrust a finger up, prompting the detective to lean back as the shorter man glowered at him.

Sherlock thought it best to respond mutely, and simply nodded.

John lowered his hand, shaking his head bitterly as he looked over Sherlock’s face. “Please,” he sneered. “You and your fucking please.”

Sherlock couldn’t help but grin, and, though John looked like he might punch him for a moment, he followed when Sherlock walked up the steps.

The doorman nodded deeply to him as they approached, pulling on one of the handles of the tall glass-paneled entrance. “Mr. Holmes,” he greeted, and Sherlock’s answering smile hitched as he heard a strangled choke from behind him.

“Phillip,” Sherlock replied, because this was going to be bad either way; he might as well use the man’s name. “Enjoying the holidays, I presume?” he added, a small gesture of sociability he hoped would at least mildly placate John, who was always tutting at him for refusing to make small talk.
Phillip, for his part, looked surprised, blinking a moment before smiling brightly. “Yes, sir. Very much.”

Sherlock nodded in a quick jerk, reaching his limit for time spent outside his comfort zone. “Good. Er, Happy New Year,” he bade, words awkward and stilted, but Phillip just beamed.

“And to you as well, sir,” he said, nodding them farewell as they passed through the doorway.

Sherlock clenched his teeth, face drawing up in a gradual wince.

3…2…1-

“You know the doorman!?” John hissed furiously, shoulder bumping into Sherlock’s arm as he drew up closer.

Sherlock closed his eyes, a scant moment to feel sorry for himself before he replied. “I-I may have stayed here…a few times in the past.”

“A few times- Sherlock!” John sputtered. “I thought you said he just called!”

“He did,” Sherlock mumbled. “I just also knew him beforehand.”

John let out a disbelieving huff, and Sherlock chanced a glance to find him shaking his head down at the floor. “Unbelievable. Unbelievable!”

“I didn’t want you to feel uncomfortable,” Sherlock beseeched, but John only scoffed.

“Uncomfortable?” he spluttered. “Sherlock, I can’t afford to breathe the air in a place like this.”

“I highly doubt they charge for air.”

“Sherlock!”

“Alright!” he conceded, spinning back to placate the scowling man properly, considering they were nearing the lounge, their frantic snarls and whispers starting to garner attention. “I probably should have mentioned it—fair enough—but we’re here now, it’s too late to go back, and the owner said we could charge whatever we wanted, so will you just…please?” he added, a bit more of his desperation sneaking in than he would have liked, but John couldn’t leave, couldn’t be angry, even though Sherlock couldn’t yet tell him why.

The blond looked at him curiously, scanning over his face in that eerily perceptive way he sometimes had, eyes narrowing in suspicion. After a moment though, he sighed, shrugging in resignation.

“Oh, okay,” he murmured, nodding. “Okay.”

Sherlock nodded his thanks, the words still a bit difficult, and then continued across the lobby, making their way straight to the lift, the key already in Sherlock’s pocket—something he was grateful John didn’t ask about, as he had no idea how he would have explained it.

John was silent as they went up the lift, looking over the surroundings. Every now and again he would pause, and then lean closer to something, eyes narrowing before he would shake his head, clearly the necessity of crown moulding framing the overhead light far beyond him. It didn’t get much better when they reached their floor—the top one, though John wasn’t to know that quite yet—and passed ornate door after ornate door, each branded with a different title, but all with the same
“Sherlock?” John asked, his voice close at Sherlock’s shoulder. “Are we- These are all penthouses.”

Sherlock paused as long as he could without prompting John to repeat himself, trying to stall. “Yes.”

John made a garbled sound. “Who exactly are we supposed to be?” he spouted.

Sherlock shrugged. “I don’t know, I just picked a name out of the paper. This one’s ours,” he clipped, trying to almost sneak it by as he lunged for the door handle, sliding in the key, but John’s eyes were slightly quicker, catching the name on the door just before Sherlock got it open.

“The Royal Penthouse?” he questioned, giving Sherlock a scandalized look he wasn’t entirely sure he deserved. “The Royal Penthouse? Jesus, Sherlock, this must be the most expensive room in the place!”

“I told you,” Sherlock muttered, shouldering the door open and stepping inside, pushing the wood off his fingertips for John to catch as he followed, “I’m not paying for any of it.”

“Yeah, but still, it must normally be-”

Sherlock turned back from placing the key on the entry table to find John frozen just inside the closing door, which clicked shut with a soft thud that nevertheless echoed around the marble foyer.

The blond looked around, eyes trailing slowly above his gaping mouth, and then, after a long moment, he let his bag slide off his shoulder, lowering it gingerly to the floor. “Holy shit,” he breathed, taking a tentative step into the room. “Holy- Is that a chandelier?” He moved across the room, craning his head to look up at the draping crystals that spanned the center of the spiral staircase. “There’s another floor!? Why would-Why would anyone need- A lift!? Is that-Is that a lift?” He twisted back to Sherlock, pointing at a double door with small glass panels along the wall.

Sherlock nodded, watching John’s face unfold with shock once again.

“Bloody hell,” he murmured, shaking his head, staggering backward a few steps as his gaze roved back over the entrance. “I- This is mad! I-I can’t believe- I shouldn’t even be allowed to stand somewhere like this! I mean, this-this is marble, right?” he asked, jabbing a finger down to the floor, and Sherlock nodded. “Jesus,” John breathed, shaking his head again as he turned back to the chandelier. “And I’m wearing knockoff Converse.”

Sherlock laughed, swiping John’s bag off the floor and passing it to him as he crossed in front and started up the stairs. “Come on. Bedrooms are upstairs.” Two bedrooms. Plural. Because Sherlock wasn’t presumptuous or clingy or anything.

“I don’t need my own bedroom-”

Oh thank god.

“-but can I even go up these stairs in my commoner shoes?”

Sherlock laughed, turning back on the third step to find John frowning up at him, hand lolled toward the railing.

“They’re not gonna go flat and boot my off-brand ass out?” he muttered, waving a gesture back toward the door.
Sherlock shook his head, continuing up the spiral steps. “Even marble stairs aren’t sentient, John,” he tossed over his shoulder, and the blond huffed doubtfully, but his footsteps soon started following.

“What about, like…a rich people sphinx?”

“A what?” Sherlock chuckled, face creasing with confused amusement as he looked back, footfalls slowing.

“You know,” John shrugged, faint smile pulling at his mouth, “a sphinx. From mythology? But, in this case, instead of riddles, it won’t let me pass until I…I dunno, list my favorite French dishes or something.”

Sherlock laughed, gripping tightly to the railing as he bent down over the steps, barely not stumbling. “Coq au vin,” he replied, nodding sagely as he reached the top and turned back. “Just go with coq au vin.”

John chuckled, smiling at the detective, and then his eyes drifted away, blinking with a small startled gasp.

Sherlock twisted his hands in front of him anxiously, but, thankfully, John wasn’t looking at him, his eyes focused out the double doors that Sherlock had made sure would be open upon their arrival.

“Oh my god,” John breathed, stepping across the marble to break out onto the terrace. “Oh my god!”

A low wall ran along the curved edge, framed at the base with large metal lanterns and boxed hedging, alternating between the two as they stretched along the entire perimeter. From where he hovered just a few steps outside the doorway, Sherlock could see across the various seating—chaises and a table with chairs—to where the bonfire was already burning in the outdoor fire pit, surrounded with a spattering of silhouetted chairs. The centerpiece, however, was the view—a clear panoramic shot of the Thames lit up gold and blue in the brisk night—and John was quick to rush to the edge of the wall, leaning out to take it in.

“That’s-That’s The Eye!” he gushed, pointing out across the water. “And-And St. Paul’s! And is that- Holy shit, that’s Big Ben!” he added, turning and moving a few feet back toward the door as he pointed out along the bank to their right. “This-This is amazing!” he breathed, moving back out along the edge, leaning forward to peer down over the side of the building. “And it’s New Year’s Eve, too! We’ll be able to see the-”

Sherlock stopped breathing as John froze, head slowly straightening up, his back growing rigid.

“Sherlock,” he began slowly, speaking out to the river, “there is no jewel thief…is there?”

Sherlock hesitated, and then shuffled a couple steps closer, hands pushing nervously down into the pockets of his coat. “There was,” he murmured, and John turned, expression dazed with shock. Sherlock twitched a smile, dropping his face to the ground as he twisted his foot. “Last Christmas. This is”—he shrugged to their surroundings as he paused—“the requited favor.” He chanced a small smile up through his lashes, but John only blinked at him.

“A-A favor?” he parroted breathlessly, and then seemed to shake out of it, fingers slipping off the edge of the parapet as he turned, a huff of disbelief escaping him as he scanned across the terrace. “Sherlock,” he said, meeting the detective’s eyes with his frustrated ones, “you really expect me to believe you didn’t pay for-”

“I didn’t,” Sherlock interjected, taking a plaintive step forward, but John dipped his head disparagingly. “I didn’t,” he repeated, and the blond looked away, crossing his arms. “I didn’t even
“Really?” John muttered flatly. “He ‘insisted’ on giving you the room literally made for royalty? And over the holidays, no less?”

“Yes!” Sherlock bleated, because, however ridiculous, it was true. “The holidays aren’t as busy for hotels as you would think, and Mycroft sends a lot of business his way—visiting diplomats and the like—and I did solve a jewel heist here last year.” He held John’s eyes, watching the doubt give way to something else, something closer to what he’d seen in the lobby, a sort of lost exasperation.

“Why? Why would you do this?” he urged, rattling his head. “I-I didn’t ask for this! I don’t expect you to do things like this!”

Sherlock blinked, caught off-guard by the frantic desperation of John’s speech. “I-I know,” he murmured, and blue eyes tore away, jaw setting as he looked toward the fire pit. “I just- You said you’d never seen a fireworks display, and you didn’t tell me that until after I’d made the ones at Langley, so I didn’t get the chance to do it properly.”

“Sherlock,” John sighed, sounding at least a little amused now.

“And then I got you a horrible Christmas present-”

“It wasn’t-”

“It was a piece of paper, John,” Sherlock snipped, and the man ducked his head, lips trembling over a smile.

“But it was nice paper,” he crooned, grinning as he lifted his face. “Really smooth finish.”

“John.”

The blond chuckled, dropping his head again as he kicked at the tile at his feet, expression slowly flattening back out to serious. “He really just insisted?” he asked, looking across to Sherlock skeptically.

Sherlock nodded.

John raised an eyebrow. “And you didn’t pay for any of it? Not a thing?”

Sherlock shook his head, hope creeping its way back to life from the pit in his stomach.

“So, if we go in there and order the entire action movie section-”

“It’s all covered,” Sherlock assured, his head shaking shifting to nodding. “Room, room service, pay-per-view. Although, I’d rather not watch the entire action movie section.”

John huffed a small laugh, turning to look back out off the side of the terrace. “Are you sure?” he blurted suddenly, twisting back. “Like…130%?”

Sherlock blinked, brow creasing. “That’s not-”

“Yes,” he sighed, rolling his eyes to the sky in exasperation. “I am 130% sure I won’t be paying for any of it. 140%, if you’d like, so long as we’re talking in mathematical impossibilities.”
John shook his head, smiling at Sherlock like he wasn’t sure if he wanted to hug him or strangle him. Finally, he shrugged, beginning to amble away across the terrace. “Alright,” he said, as if to himself, and watched out over the water as he edged along the perimeter.

Sherlock dared move closer, slipping his hands out of his pockets to twist at his fingers, but stopped when John did, though he was still meters away.

“What the-” John breathed, eyes focused on something to his left, and then he strode back toward the room, prompting Sherlock to make chase.

They stopped in the doorway of the master bedroom, the double doors of which opened out onto the terrace, and John stared down at the massive bed, bedecked with throw pillows Sherlock had never seen the point of.

“That’s the biggest bed I’ve ever seen!” John bleated, entirely back to normal, and Sherlock smiled softly across at him.

“I’m pretty sure it’s just a ki- What are you doing?”

John disappeared from his side, dropping his bag and bolting across the hardwood floor until he reached the rug, where he leapt up, spinning in the air to fall onto the bed with a muffled thump.

Sherlock stayed where he was, leaning against the doorjamb with a fond smile as John burst into giggles.

“I have always wanted to do that!” he cried, sitting up, kicking his legs against the mattress as he propped himself up onto his elbows. “Try it,” he added, beckoning with a jerk of his head.

“What? No,” Sherlock muttered, shaking his head.

John sat up fully, shifting closer to the pillows. “Come on, try it!”

“No!” Sherlock spluttered, but he was half laughing now.

John fixed him with a stern look, and, for a moment, Sherlock actually felt chagrined, the force of the Captain-Watson-face not something to be trifled with. “Sherlock,” John said firmly, pointing down at the expanse of mattress beside him, “jump on this bed.”

“No,” he chuckled, but John only glared.

“No.”

“Jump.”

“No!”

“Sherlock, jump on this fucking bed right now!”

“No!” He was laughing outright now, shaking his head against the doorframe as he leaned back into it for support. “I don’t- I’m not going to jump on the bed!”

John snorted bitterly, rattling his head as he slipped off the mattress. “Killjoy,” he grumbled as he passed, but there was a smirk playing at his mouth, and Sherlock just smiled after him as he followed the blond through the doorway into the bathroom. “Fucking hell, is this whole place marble?!” he
spouted, the words echoing off the polished floor and walls.

“The fixtures are metal.”

“Oh, shut up,” John spat over his shoulder, and Sherlock laughed.

He followed along in John’s wake through the rest of the self-guided tour, his smile broadening with every drop of John’s mouth and sputtered exclamation. John insisted on taking the lift back downstairs, buzzing with excitement, but it was a bit like trying to keep track of a whirlwind from there. He opened every door he came to, equally excited for everything from closets to kitchens.

The study was the first room, with its three televisions that were apparently incredibly offensive. The lounge came next, yet another room with a fireplace John was quick to point out, and he paused a moment to leaf through the various guides and menus on the table before skittering off again, the main hotel directory open on his palm as he leafed through it.

“Oh, so it’s not all marble,” he muttered, waving a hand down at the floor. “But that’s probably mahogany or something.”

“Oak parquet,” Sherlock supplied.

“Gesundheit,” John answered, and then bounded from the room, flipping through the guidebook as Sherlock laughed. “I can’t pronounce any of this!” he raved a few moments later, grin a little wild as he waved a hand down at—as Sherlock saw after a quick glance over the blond’s shoulder—one of the room service menus.

They stalled in the entrance of the dining room—a massive room with a table for ten and walls entirely covered in facetted mirrors.

“Oh, good,” John murmured, closing the book and tucking it under his arm. “Now I can watch myself eat the food I can’t pronounce.”

Sherlock wasn’t entirely sure how he was still standing, laughing as hard as he was, and it was a good thing they had only the kitchen left before they returned upstairs, setting about closing the terrace doors to keep the chill out and getting themselves settled in the bedroom.

It was about an hour before midnight, and thus the fireworks display, and Sherlock returned from putting on pajamas and storing his shirt and trousers for tomorrow in the walk-in closet—something John had been adamant someone named Harry Potter would have cried at the sight of—to find the blond had also changed—now wearing grey track pants and a dull red hoodie that seemed to be from his previous school’s rugby team. He was lying across the bed on his stomach, facing the direction Sherlock would have to return, and his feet were drawn up behind him, threadbare socks bobbing as he bent and stretched his legs.

“What’s kohlrabi?” he asked, bereft of introduction, and pointed down at a spot on the menu open below his face before looking up at Sherlock, puzzled.

Sherlock rattled his head. “No idea,” he replied, moving to where he was storing his suitcase on a corner chair. He rifled through it, locating his dark blue jumper, and then pulled it over his head, tugging it down across his white t-shirt to meet the blue/green plaid trousers.

John hummed thoughtfully, frowning down at the page. “It sounds like the name of a pop star whose name is actually Dave,” he muttered, and Sherlock chuckled, moving across to stand at the edge of the mattress, his knees leaning against the duvet. John looked up, smiling at him, and then wriggled, shifting over on the bed. “Hey, come here,” he said, swatting at the spot beside him. “You speak
fancy.”

“I think it’s Italian,” Sherlock remarked, but John only snorted, and Sherlock chuckled as he obeyed, slotting into the offered spot. His legs were longer than John’s, but, as he moved to be level with John’s shoulders, their feet brushed where they both bent them up, socks tangling together until they were swinging mostly in tandem.

“What’s hake?” John asked, pointing to a different spot.

“Type of fish.”

“And sweetbreads?”

“You don’t want to know,” Sherlock assured, shaking his head. “Just never eat it.”

John smiled, but nodded, continuing to search over the fare.

In the end, the decision was to choose everything, half the starters menu and the entire dessert menu being called down to the kitchen as John giggled in the background at Sherlock having to insist “Yes, all of them” more than once until he was silenced with a projectile pillow. Of course, the second Sherlock was off the phone, it hit him in the back of the head, but that was to be expected, he supposed.

They killed the time before the food showed up alternating between flicking through channels and looking out over the edge of the terrace to the massive crowds of people lining the bridges and boardwalks, and then Sherlock bolted downstairs to answer the door, John a bit too distracted by the fact that there was a doorbell to follow.

It took three trips, but they managed to get all the plates to the terrace, dragging the table over beside the fire pit, whatever dish they were currently working on resting on the surround in front of them, reaching off the edge to avoid being melted by the flames. Just as they shifted from starters to desserts, the bell began to chime, and the crowd below them erupted in cheers.

John haphazardly unfolded himself from where he was cross-legged in his chair, flailing a bit in his haste to right himself. He bolted to the edge of the terrace, looking out over the low wall with nothing short of awe. “Hurry!” he hissed, waving frantically at Sherlock. “You’re gonna miss it!”

“It’s only chime four,” Sherlock replied, but rose, falling in at John’s side by stroke eight.

John was practically quivering with excitement, searching the crowd and the sky in alternating earnest glances as the last seconds ticked by, and Sherlock simply watched him.

It wasn’t his first time seeing these fireworks, a poor attempt at family bonding or two in the past having taken care of that, but he’d never seen them like this, the first firework spreading out across the curve of John’s widening eyes.

“Woah!” John cried as it shattered into a shower of sparks, the explosion reaching them with a rattling bang. “That was huge! I mean, not that yours weren’t impressive—because they were—it’s just that this is- Well, I mean, with the water and the people and-”

Sherlock wasn’t aware of making the decision, or even considering it, but apparently he had, and whatever further backtracking John had in mind was abruptly cut off as Sherlock grabbed him by the chin, turning his face to catch his lips around a startled breath. It was a small kiss, brief and fairly chaste, the kind of thing you just have to do without expecting it to really go anywhere, and Sherlock most certainly would have talked himself out of starting it had his brain been consulted.
As it was, however, they broke apart with a gentle click, Sherlock’s fingers trailing off John’s chin as he withdrew to find blue eyes blinking blearily up at him. He opened his mouth, panic beginning to spin in his gut, but before he could mutter some apology or excuse he’d regret later, a barrage of fireworks lit the sky, and they both turned away to the spinning spirals and flashes. A moment later, though, John took his hand, and he supposed that was reassurance enough.

“Come on,” he beckoned softly, nodding back toward the fire as he tugged at their combined hands. “It’s cold over here.”

So they returned to the fire, eyes angled to the sky in-between bites, and a complex rating system quickly developed, ranking the desserts in several categories until a clear winner emerged—a salted caramel and chocolate parfait that John said he wanted to be buried with.

When the fireworks concluded, John running to the barrier again to cheer with the rest of the partygoers down below, they moved back inside, leaving the dishes for tomorrow when they weren’t so full from them. Sherlock produced the Doctor Who series they were on from his bag, along with a fair amount of blushing from him and teasing laughter from John, and they hooked John’s laptop up to the television and settled in. While they had initially both been leaning against the pillows, Sherlock had shifted down during “Silence in the Library” when John had laughed at him for jumping, and the blond was still giggling about it now that they lay head-to-foot, his socked toes batting against Sherlock’s shoulder until Sherlock lifted his own black-cloaked feet to swat him in the head.

“Gross,” John spat, pushing him away, and Sherlock chuckled, turning back to watching Donna begin to become suspicious of her computerized life. “Hey, Sherlock?” John asked, and it was his tone more than anything that made Sherlock twist fully around, moving to sit up on the bed. John bit at his lip, looking down at the duvet between them. “If-If this all goes pear-shaped—and I’m not saying it will,” he added, flapping his hands, eyes widening. “But, if it does…do you- Do you think you’d-” He paused, taking a breath down at the cotton before lifting nervous eyes. “Would you…delete me?”

Sherlock blinked, waiting a moment for it to make sense, and then tilting his head when nothing came.

“Like-Like how you did with the episodes where you disagreed with the science,” John added, waving a hand at the TV.

Sherlock frowned. “What episodes?”

John chuckled, shaking his head, but Sherlock thought he understood now.

“No,” he said softly, meeting John’s surprised eyes for a second when they first flashed to him, and then needing to look away. “No, I-I wouldn’t.”

“Not even if it was awful?” John pressed, leaning forward. “I mean really ugly. Like never-speak-again, can’t-look-at-each-other, don’t-even-wanna-breathe-one-another’s-air kind of ugly.”

“I-” Sherlock stammered, twisting his fingers into the duvet, because John was looking at him so intensely, it was a moment before he could calm his pounding heart enough to think. “No, I-I wouldn’t,” he finally said, shaking his head as he swallowed. “I think, sometimes… Some things… Some memories are worth keeping,” he settled on, looking up at John through his lashes, “even if they hurt.”

John stared at him a moment, entirely motionless, and then broke into that smile again, the one that
told Sherlock he had, on yet another exceptionally rare occasion, said exactly the right thing. John didn’t say anything, however—which was probably for the best as Sherlock’s throat had now closed up—and merely nodded, releasing Sherlock from the hold of his eyes as he looked back to the television.

Sherlock couldn’t move, however, still frozen staring at John as the lights and colors flashed across his face, and, after a moment, John looked back to him, expression curious.

He glanced over Sherlock’s face, and then twitched a small smile, leaning forward to hook his fingers into Sherlock’s jumper. He gave a small tug, and that was all the encouragement Sherlock needed, crawling up the bed to flop down at John’s side. John chuckled, slipping an arm in behind Sherlock’s neck as the detective bounced against the pillows to situate himself, finally getting comfortable settled atop John’s bicep, his head slightly turned to rest against the blond’s shoulder.

They watched in silence after that, movement minimal apart from John’s hand lightly tracing over the parts of Sherlock’s arm and shoulder he could reach, and Sherlock was slowly drifting off when a question flickered to life at the back of his mind.

He couldn’t even understand himself at first, and John turned, his shoulder shifting as he hummed inquisitively into Sherlock’s hair. “What-What episodes?” Sherlock murmured, intelligible on the second attempt, but John merely chuckled.

“Don’t worry about it,” he whispered, words warm in Sherlock’s curls as his lips shifted against the strands, and, for what may very well be the first time, Sherlock didn’t, slipping into the dark to the sound of John’s heartbeat.

*****

He had known it was coming, of course, had mentally prepared himself for days, but now, driving up to the gates of Langley on that dreaded Sunday afternoon, John found himself seized with a terror he didn’t have words to explain.

Sherlock sat beside him, for the moment oblivious as he looked out the windshield ahead, and John trailed his eyes down the man’s arm, ending at where his hand was resting on his knee.

He wanted very much to take it, to twine his fingers with Sherlock’s pale digits that held an almost supernatural strength, but he couldn’t, not here, so close to prying eyes and unshielded by tinted windows, and the lie of it sent a potent shot of bile up his throat. He had been the one to tell Sherlock it would be alright, that they would figure it out, but now that he was staring down the barrel of reality, he was not nearly so certain.

How could they do this? They had been so safe, so caught up in their little bubble of the past few weeks that John had all-but-forgotten it wasn’t normal, but he could feel it now, creeping in through the cracks between the metal with voices and light that seemed to him like noxious fumes. The parts they would have to play were there, waiting just outside, and his stomach tumbled as he saw the backs of some of his teammates walking down one of the paths across the lawn. There was no way he could do this, no possible way he could ever in a million years-

“Hey.”

He startled, turning at the soft voice to find Sherlock looking at him, expression uncommonly soft around his ever-alert eyes.

“It’ll be fine,” he assured, a gentle smile flickering around his mouth, and John’s chest was
unclenching before he had even entirely processed the words.

Slowly, but growing in fortitude, he nodded. “Yeah,” he answered, looking back out the window as the driver came to a stop. “Yeah, I know,” he added, and placed his fingers on the handle, pausing for a steadying breath before pushing out into the winter sunlight, confident in nothing but Sherlock at his back.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so the hotel they stay at is a real place, and that room is a real room, and this is it, so, yeah, feel free to check that out.

These are going to become permanent notes down here, because I keep getting questions, so here is my Tumblr, and my email address is prettysherlocksoldier@gmail.com. Please don't hesitate to talk to me about anything, ask me any questions, send me any of your stuff you want help with, or whatever!

Also, I made a survey so you guys can weigh in on the next fanfic that I start working on for after MHITAS ends, so please take it and help me out!
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

IMPORTANT STUFF YOU WILL WANT TO READ

Right to the point here, I want to do a 31 Day Johnlock Challenge through October, and I need prompts! Something that can be written fairly quickly/be on the short side, and is autumn-related. Beyond that, anything goes! Scary, fluffy, smutty, Teenlock, Kidlock, just good ole Johnlock, I don't care! So, please, give me your ideas (and feel free to send more than one, as well as sending them past October 1st, as I can always add extras) either in comments here, at my Tumblr, or to my email address (prettysherlocksoldier@gmail.com). I will post the list of prompts and links on Tumblr, and the actual fics will be posted here, so you can keep an eye on either of those places.

Second, I have a survey set up for you guys to decide what the next fic I write is, which will start posting after MHITAS ends, so please take literally three seconds to vote in that. If you want more details on any of the fics listed, don't hesitate to ask. I just had limited characters I could put for the questions, so the summaries are a little bare-bones.

Last thing, I made a Teenlock Throwback playlist that I think might be my favorite thing ever, so, yeah, check that out!

Alright, ON TO THE FLUFF!!

The first day back at school was, as it turned out, much easier than John had thought. Well, easier may not have been quite the right word, but at least he wasn’t worrying about how to handle his relationship with Sherlock.

He’d gotten a call from his mother early that morning, telling him she was checking into the rehab and wouldn’t be able to contact anyone for the first two weeks. It was a strained conversation, the kind with a script of forgiveness and reassurance already written out in the kinder parts of your brain, but John had mostly just hummed in acknowledgement and muttered agreements, choking out an ‘I love you too’ that Sherlock had kindly dropped a notebook during to pretend he hadn’t heard. John hadn’t been able to focus the rest of the day, prompting a rather significant role reversal that he would probably be able to appreciate much better tomorrow.

Sherlock had watched him worriedly all through breakfast, reminding him at least three times that forks were meant to deliver food to your mouth, not make modern art on the plate. He cast worried sidelong glances all through biology, taking notes himself for once, as John hadn’t even bothered opening his notebook to the correct page. He assured John over and over that restricting communication was something every rehab did, that his mother was fine and this was just a way to get her acclimated to the new surroundings, and John tried to be less morose after that, wanting to avoid reminders of Sherlock’s past vices as much as possible, though he wasn’t entirely sure whose psyche he was protecting more. Sherlock sat with him at lunch, even eating a little when John halfheartedly prodded him, and, by the time they got to the end of their classes, John was feeling considerably better about the whole thing. Which turned out to be extremely fortuitous, seeing as Sherlock’s patience took a nosedive the second they started in on their scenes.
There was a brief portion of the first half of their section where John, Mary, and Molly were all in the scene together, so it was decided to practice as a whole group this particular time around. Of course, with Sherlock not coming in until later, that freed him up to glare at the side of John’s face, foot tapping furiously in some unheard rhythm where it lolled off the arm of the adjacent chair he was draped sideways across.

In retrospect, it would have been highly beneficial to tell Sherlock that Mary had all but thrown him at the detective instead of leaving the story on the somewhat troublesome detail of a kiss, but it hadn’t gone anywhere, and he thought he’d made it very clear it was never going to. Still, there was no mistaking the serrated scowl John could feel slicing across his cheeks, and he fidgeted uncomfortably as he looked across to the oblivious Mary and Molly on the couch.

“Great!” Mary said, beaming around at them all as she lowered her book at the conclusion of the scene, and John watched out of the corner of his eye as Sherlock pulled a quick mask over his anger. “Should we try it without the books this time?” she asked, eyebrows rising hopefully, and John clung to the edges of his paperback.

“I-I don’t know,” he murmured, too much anxiety whirling around in his mind to even think about summoning up his lines.

“It’s not like I have my lines memorized or anything,” Mary offered with a small smile, and that did make him feel a little better. “I just don’t think we’ll really know how much work we have to do until we give it a shot without reading.”

She was right, unfortunately, and John nodded, comforted when Molly paled a bit, clearly not confident either.

Mary smiled at them all. “Alright, great! Now, John, you start.”

“Oh, I- Right,” he muttered, closing his book with slow reluctance as he looked down at his lap, trying to think through everyone’s eyes on him. “Um… How now, my love! why is your cheek so pale? How chance the roses there do fade so fast?”

Mary grinned, giving him a small affirmative nod, and he smiled back, relieved.

At least until Sherlock sniffed, and John’s lips abruptly flatlined.

“Belike for want of rain, which I could well,” Mary spoke, looking up at the ceiling, her brow furrowing in thought. “Beteem them…from the tempest of my eyes,” she finished in a mutter, dropping her head expectantly, and John tried to dredge up his reply.

“Ay me,” he said slowly, the words appearing in a hazy scroll before his eyes, “for aught that I could ever read, could ever…could ever hear by tale or history…” He stalled, blinking down at his legs, eyes shifting side-to-side as he mentally repeated the last few words in his head, trying to call up what followed.

“The course,” came a soft mutter from his right, and he looked to find Sherlock now avoiding his eyes.

John frowned, tilting his head in confusion, and Sherlock cast him a flicker of a glance before sighing dramatically, rolling his eyes and unfolding his legs as he stood.

“The course of true love never did run smooth. I’m going to grab some homework from my room; I should be back before you reach any of my lines.” He nodded at no one in particular, and then turned, his footsteps silent as ever, but John winced regardless.
He watched after him until he rounded the corner, and then looked back down to the closed book in his lap, tapping anxiously at the cover. “So,” he chirped, clearing his throat, “where were-” He looked up, words breaking off as he found Mary and Molly giving him matching looks of tired condescension, made all the worse by the identical uniforms they had yet to take off. “What?” he muttered, gaze shifting warily between them as he tugged at the knot of his tie, and they rolled their eyes as if they’d choreographed it.

Mary dropped her head at him, a look in her eyes he had previously thought only Sherlock was able to produce when he thought John was being particularly obtuse. “John,” she clipped, “if looks could kill, I’d need a Ouija board to talk to you right now.”

John’s lips clapped closed, a tense swallow moving down his throat. “I-I don’t-”

“John,” Molly interjected softly, leaning forward with a gentle smile, “maybe you should go talk to him.”

John’s fingers twitched over his book, fighting the urge to tug at his collar as a flush crept up his neck. “About what?” he squeaked.

Neither of the girls answered right away, but their eyebrows rose in knowing tandem.

“John, look,” Molly said, casting a brief glance over her shoulder before leaning in toward him again, Mary following suit. “You don’t have to say anything, okay? You don’t- We don’t- We’re not-”

“I think what Molly’s trying to say,” Mary interrupted, flashing Molly a small smile, which she returned by wilting back into the couch in relief, “is that…we’re your friends. And we…support you.” She lifted her eyebrows a bit, further pushing the subtext that had John’s throat closing up. “And it’s not- We’re not-” She rolled her eyes, growling in self-frustration as she shifted to the edge of the couch and leaned so close, he could smell her perfume. “We’re not going to tell anyone,” she nearly whispered, eyes soft but pointed, “and you don’t have to talk about it, but- Well, we’re not blind either.”

John’s lips twitched in a quick smile in spite of his churning nerves, and Mary tilted her head at him, smiling warmly.

“So, just…you don’t have to lie about it, alright? It’s okay.” She lifted her brows, entreating, and John skeptically met her eyes. “And, frankly, it’s beyond about time,” she muttered, and Molly hissed at her, forehead furrowing in rebuke as she swatted the blonde’s arm.

John chuckled in spite of his anxiety, which was waning rather quickly in the wake of the girls’ support, and found himself nodding without any real intention to.

Half of Mary’s mouth quirked up in a smile, and then she pulled back, her hand swatting through the air toward the corridor. “Now, go on,” she muttered. “Go talk to him. I don’t fancy being glared at for the rest of this project.”

John huffed a brief laugh, but did get up, tugging at the hem of his grey jumper as he went. “Alright, I’ll-I’ll just- Yeah.” He pointed a thumb backward, swallowing hard, and then spun on his heels and hurried from the room, almost positive he heard giggling break out as soon as he rounded the corner.

Belatedly, his heart began to stutter, as if only now catching up to the awkwardness of the previous moments, and he hovered outside the dorm for a few seconds, slowing his breaths. When he thought he no longer looked like he was about to pass out, he leaned in to the door, listening for movement,
and then gently rapped against the wood.

“Why are you knocking?” Sherlock’s voice replied, quick and sharp, and John startled back at the closeness of it.

“I-I wasn’t sure- I dunno,” John mumbled, fingers clenching and stretching in embarrassment. “Can I- Can I come in?”

There was a sniff John took as affirmation, or at least indifference, and twisted the handle on the door, gently pushing it open as he peered his head around.

Sherlock was no longer at the door, instead having moved to his desk across the room, riffling through papers and notebooks in a manner that was clearly only to be doing something with his hands, but his brow was furrowed as if deeply considering every page.

“Um, Sherlock?” John started warily, closing the door behind him with a soft click.

“Hmm?” Sherlock hummed, apparently distracted, but his fingers twitched slightly against the binding of the blue notebook he appeared to be holding upside-down.

“I- Are you…alright?” John moved slowly into the room, approaching cautiously down the aisle between their beds, his hands twisting in front of him.

“Of course,” Sherlock replied offhandedly, snapping the notebook shut and grabbing up a handful of loose paper. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Er,” John mumbled, scratching at the back of his neck as he cast a glance down at the tile, “you just- You seem kinda…upset.”

“Why would I be upset?” The detective’s face remained impassive, but there was a touch of bite slipping into his tone now, and John hesitantly shuffled a small step closer.

“Um, I-I don’t know, about…about Mary,” he muttered, and Sherlock’s jaw clenched.

“What about her?” he bit, eyes no longer even pretending to move across the words, and John sighed, moving to the boy’s side.

“Sherlock,” he breathed, but the owner of the name made no indication to have heard other than a stuttering blink. “Sherlock,” John repeated, pressing lightly on the man’s arm, and, obviously reluctant, Sherlock turned just marginally toward him, eyes averted, the pages held up between them like a shield. “Nothing happened with Mary,” he said, looking steadily at the brunette who wouldn’t look at him. “Nothing. I didn’t even know I was supposed to be dating her, remember?” He smiled, trying to coax Sherlock into reciprocating, but the man would not be moved. “Sherlock,” John implored, but he was abruptly cut off.

“You kissed her,” Sherlock said, eyes meeting John’s for the scantest flash, his voice tight and bitter.

John blinked, startling back as he searched between the man’s now-averted eyes. “I- She kissed me,” he clarified, but Sherlock only gave him a withering look, so he quickly moved on. “I told you what happened with that though. We were never together.”

“But you wanted to be.” Sherlock swept past him, across the room at the opposite end of the beds before John could even turn around to follow the movement. “You liked her,” he muttered, hands twitching at his sides, expression pinched as he looked down at John’s bed.
“Well, yeah,” John admitted with a tip of his head as he attempted to close the distance between them again, “but that was before.”

“Before what?” Sherlock snapped, but there was more anxiety in his eyes than anger when he fixed them on John.

John frowned, trying to piece together the picture in front of him, but Sherlock always did tend to defy the logic he lived so strictly by. “Before you,” he answered, soft and simple.

It was apparently the wrong thing to say, however, because Sherlock huffed a bitter laugh and turned his head away. “It’s that simple, is it?” he murmured at the wall, and John shook his head, perplexed.

“Yes,” he answered, stepping closer. “Sherlock, what’s this about? What are you really trying to say?”

Sherlock did not reply for a moment, merely continuing to stare at the wall, jaw stiffening above the rumpled, ever-bereft-of-a-tie collar jutting out from his required grey vest. “You liked her,” he said deliberately as he slowly turned his head, his arms—bare up to the elbows where his sleeves had pooled—crossing over his chest. “You like women, John,” he added, almost haughty except for a twitch of his eye. “You’ve always liked women.”

John stared mutely back a moment, not at all expecting that particular turn. “Oh,” he murmured, blinking down at Sherlock’s chest as he composed an intelligent thought. “Well, yeah, but…now I like you.”

John was evidently batting 0 for this entire conversation, because Sherlock rolled his eyes with a scoff. “It’s not that simple; it can’t possibly be that simple,” he muttered, rattling his head, as if arguing more with himself on the validity of John’s assertion. “People don’t just turn gay,” he snapped, fixing John with a scornful look.

“Well, I dunno,” John mumbled with a shrug, “maybe some people do, but that’s not what I’m saying.”

Sherlock tilted his head at him, frowning, and John sighed, frustrated at the failure of that damned deductive reasoning now, of all times.

“I- I still do like women, alright?” he rambled out, hands shifting in the air between them. “I’ve never found men attractive; I still don’t find men attractive, I just- It’s you.” He lifted a hand in a wobbly gesture to Sherlock’s chest, fingers mere inches from grazing the grey wool. “It’s just you.”

As hard as John was trying, Sherlock was trying harder to ruin it. “But I am man!” he blustered, and John’s fists clenched, his eyes closing in a long blink and brief prayer for serenity.

“Yes, I know, but-” He broke off, pinching at the bridge of his nose as he sighed to the floor. “Look, it-it doesn’t exactly make sense to me either, okay?” he said, tired and pleading. “I never expected this, never even considered-” He paused, twisting his hand helplessly in gesture over his chest as his mouth floundered. “But then you just...happened!” he spluttered, flailing an arm out toward Sherlock’s chest to even more clearly identify who was to blame here. “You burst in, and suddenly everything I’d always thought—always wanted—seemed really, really stupid, and I can’t even think about it now. I can’t imagine breakfast with analyzing strangulation marks, or watching Doctor Who without a constant stream of scientific commentary I honestly don’t understand a word of.”

Sherlock’s lips twitched in a small smile, his eyes flicking up from the floor for a moment, and John’s lips lifted in response, the approval emboldening him enough to push on.
“So, it doesn’t matter that you’re a man,” he continued, softer now as he took a small step closer, crossing over the platonic line of personal space, “because you’re you, and I- Well, I want you.” His voice was fading, syllables tangling together as the words grew more sincere, and, unable to meet Sherlock’s eyes right this second, he busied himself with twisting his right hand into Sherlock’s left. He smiled softly down at the intertwined fingers, and then looked up with a small shrug. “My white picket fences have beehives now,” he tried to pass off as a joke, but Sherlock didn’t so much smile as look profoundly struck with shock. John swallowed, eyes flitting away again as his feet shifted against the tile. “So, you’re just gonna have to get used to it,” he muttered briskly, rattling his head up at the brunette, “because you’re not getting rid of me. Not ever.” He was aiming for stern, an order to dissuade all doubt, but the fond smile blooming on Sherlock’s face didn’t exactly look browbeaten.

“I think the Shakespeare’s gone to your head,” the detective murmured, shifting their linked arms as he swung his hand to tap teasingly against John’s side.

John puffed a surprised laugh, shaking his head at Sherlock’s chest as the knot in his stomach unraveled. “Perchance,” he replied, grinning as he lifted his face, and Sherlock had just barely begun to laugh when John’s lips fell on his, sealing the sound within their traded breath.

One of the points on the endless list of ‘Unfairly Adorable Things Sherlock Does’ was that he was always surprised when John kissed him, always still for a small moment before he responded, and John smiled every single time, a quick quirk of his mouth against Sherlock’s frozen one before he tilted his head, prompting reciprocation. This particular time, the kiss was not long, John’s fingers barely gripping into the collar of the brunette’s uniform before he was using it to gently shift them apart, his hand lingering there to drag a thumb back-and-forth over Sherlock’s collarbone through the woolen vest.

“We should go,” he murmured, forcing himself to step back, his hand trailing down Sherlock’s chest a ways before it separated completed, his fingers physically aching in dissent. “Before they come down here looking for us.”

Sherlock chuckled, half turning back toward the door as their hands pulled apart. “I highly doubt they’d do that.”

“Why not?” John asked, receiving only a quirked eyebrow in return, and his own expression quickly shifted to a suspicious frown. “You knew,” he accused flatly.

Sherlock blinked, his eyes dropping to the ground. “Knew what?” he chirped, looking back up, lashes fluttering in an innocence John was not anywhere near the neighborhood of buying.

“You knew they knew!” he blustered, looking over Sherlock’s shoulder to the door as he waved a hand at the wood.

“Oh, really, John,” Sherlock sighed, rolling his eyes. “It’s hardly that dramatic. It’s not as if you were in mortal peril.”

“Wolves, Sherlock, you threw me to the wolves!” John insisted, eyebrows cinched over narrowed eyes, but Sherlock only quirked a small smile.

“Flattering comparison,” he mocked, and John huffed.

“Come on,” he muttered, moving around Sherlock to the door, but the detective caught his arm as he reached for the handle.
“Wait,” he bade, and John paused, turning back as the brunette pulled something from his back pocket. “I- Mycroft insisted on having someone stay… with your mother,” he explained, flashing a steady look out through his lashes as John’s throat clamped shut. “She doesn’t know, of course, but, just for added security-” He tapered off, tapping at the screen a few times before passing the phone to John, expression uncertain as his eyes darted between the mobile and John’s face.

John took the device from his hand, looking down at the screen, his head beginning to tilt with curiosity before he understood.

It was a picture of a simple room, spacious and bright, with wide windows along the back wall. The room was painted a warm grey, with wooden furniture and pale yellow chairs positioned behind the twin desks, and blue floral bedspreads could be seen protruding from behind the two figures standing in the center of the space. One of them was his mother, her smile tired, but still warm as she shook hands with a figure John did not recognize, a woman with short brown hair and a large blue overcoat.

“She has a roommate?” John asked, looking up to find Sherlock watching him anxiously, though he quickly smoothed the expression and nodded.

“Amelia Vance. 45, recently divorced, two children—both sons, one in his final year of secondary school, and the other-“

“I don’t need to know everything about her, Sherlock,” John interrupted gently, his smile fond.

“I-I know, I just-” Sherlock made a vague, stilted gesture with his hands before dropping his face, teeth pinching hesitantly at the center of his lip. “We were careful,” he finished, grey meeting John’s face once again. “And the man who-who took the picture, he’s one of Mycroft’s. Got hired on as a custodian. And there’s another as an assistant in the security office, so there’ll be someone there all the time.” He paused, though clearly not done speaking, and John could do nothing but blink at him, dumbfounded. His mind left him entirely when Sherlock met his eyes again, unwavering and almost painfully tender. “I-I just- I don’t want you to think- We were careful. With your mother, we-we were careful.”

John closed his parted lips, his throat strangled with affection. “I knew you would be,” he tried to reassure, smiling frailly even as he choked. “I-I didn’t doubt you.”

“I know, but… I just wanted you to know,” Sherlock murmured, shrugging as he dropped his face down to the wardrobe at his left.

John smiled, shifting forward to graze his left hand down Sherlock’s arm. “Thanks, Sherlock,” he said, smile brightening as Sherlock looked up tentatively. “It’s-It’s good to know. Good to see her,” he added, bobbing the phone in his hand. The picture had disappeared, however, and John hit the button to unlock the screen, something catching his eye as he went to swipe across the surface.

“What?” Sherlock asked, leaning forward to peer at the mobile John had tilted toward him.

“Is that- Is that the date?” John questioned, tapping his thumb at the words before looking up.

Sherlock barely reacted at all, a flicker of eyelids and tremble of lips, but John knew exactly what it meant.

“You weren’t gonna say anything?” he sputtered, lifting the phone between them in jagged gesticulations.

“I didn’t want you to do anything,” Sherlock blustered, shifting a small step back from John’s
indignation. “And it’s so soon after Christmas. I thought we could just…” He trailed away, tipping his head in helpless hesitation, but John broke in to finish it.

“Forget it?” he supplied, and Sherlock’s eyes skittered to the ground. “You thought I’d _just forget_ your birthday?”

“You almost did,” Sherlock muttered, and John tried to bore a hole through him with a glare. “Well, you didn’t have anything _planned,_” he added, tone snobbish while his expression was leery.

“But I wouldn’t have _forgotten,_” John snapped back. “I can’t believe you weren’t gonna say anything!” he exclaimed, shaking his head. “I would’ve felt _terrible_ tomorrow, you know that!”

“I would’ve…alluded to it,” Sherlock murmured, and then sighed in resignation when John glowered up at him. “Alright, fine,” he clipped, his eyes roving over the ceiling before settling back to John’s. “I just- I don’t want to do anything. And I don’t want you getting me anything—and I know you haven’t yet, so don’t try and buy something and pretend you’ve had it all along.”

“I wasn’t—”

“John.”

“Fine,” John grumbled, scowling across at the wall as he folded his arms. After a moment’s silence, the frustrated creases of his face unfolded, and he looked back to Sherlock with a sigh. “So…what _do_ you want to do?”

“Nothing,” Sherlock answered, one shoulder twitching in a shrug.

John’s arms fell to his side in an irritable wilt. “We have to do _something,_ Sherlock. It’s your birthday! The big one-eight!” he added with a cajoling grin, but Sherlock only scoffed.

“So, what, now I can legally drink the alcohol that’s been freely accessible for years?”

“No,” John muttered, sneering up at him, “but it’s still a milestone. You should do something.”

“But I don’t _want_ to do anything,” Sherlock whined, stopping just short of stamping his foot to complete the display of petulance. “And it’s _my_ birthday. Shouldn’t I get to pick?”

Well, John supposed he was rather beaten there, and Sherlock seemed to know it, a smile beginning to tug at the corner of his mouth. “Can we at least, like…order pizza or something?” John mumbled, and Sherlock chuckled, shaking his head.

“If you must,” he allowed, as if resigning himself to a torture session, and John rolled his eyes, refusing to pander to the theatrics.

“Come on,” he beckoned, feeling Sherlock grinning at his back as he turned to the door. “We have Shakespeare to butcher.”

“You have Shakespeare to butcher,” Sherlock snipped, closing the door behind them as they headed abreast down the corridor. “I’ve known the lines for weeks.”

“What?” John spluttered, rounding on the taller man, who nodded. “When did you- But, we were practicing over break.”

Sherlock did not reply, ducking his head as he lifted a hand to scratch at his curls.

“You already knew them over break?” John asked, eyebrows furrowing, and Sherlock sucked his
lips over his teeth. John blinked down at the tiled corridor, his steps slowing as they neared the common room. “Then…why did you say you needed help?”

“I never said I needed help,” Sherlock snipped, glare glinting sharply across at him.

“Yes, you did,” John countered, the two of them stopping entirely now, turning toward one another just shy of the entrance into the common room. “I was talking to Mycroft, and you came and said—” He stopped, frowning suspiciously as he watched Sherlock.

The brunette was turned away, his hands in his pockets as he rocked back and forth on the balls of his feet, and John felt fairly confident in a few deductions of his own, a slow smile building on his face.

“You lied,” he began, voice drawling slyly as he stepped forward, as close as he dared when someone could walk around the corner any moment. “You didn’t need to practice; you just didn’t want me talking with Mycroft.”

“Don’t be absurd,” Sherlock scoffed, but the pink bleeding up from his collar belied the nonchalance. “Why would I care if you talked to Mycroft? Although, really, why would anyone want to talk to Mycroft, so you should probably be thanking me.”

“Really?” John chirped, tilting his head with a faux-frown of consideration. “Why would I have to thank you? After all, you did just need my help, didn’t you?”

Sherlock looked as close to completely gobsmacked as John had ever seen him, his eyes wide as he shuffled back a bit closer to the wall, a swallow moving down his throat. “I- You- Why does it matter?” he clipped. “You didn’t want to be talking to Mycroft anyway.”

John shrugged. “I don’t really mind, to be honest, but I’m curious.” He quirked an eyebrow, searching between Sherlock’s eyes. “Why did you interrupt if you didn’t actually need my help?”

Sherlock blinked, mouth opening haltingly before it clapped closed again, and his eyes narrowed shrewdly. “You’re not going to let this go, are you?”

John shook his head, smirking, and Sherlock glared at him a moment before sighing exasperatedly.

“I just- I prefer you…with…me.” He finished with something like a grimace, his hands twisted together in front of him as he looked up at John through his lashes.

John tried not to grin too stupidly, but it was no doubt a near thing, and it was probably to everyone’s benefit that no one was passing through the corridor at that moment, as it would have been all-too-blatant how much he wanted to kiss his roommate breathless.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” Sherlock muttered, looking over John’s face like it was a bomb that might explode.

John smiled, shaking his head. “Nothing,” he said, withdrawing as he turned to the common room again. “I prefer me with you too,” he added softly, and Sherlock looked suddenly so flustered, John could do nothing but laugh as they turned the corner, the curious glances from Mary and Molly never receiving an answer.

****

“Close your eyes.”
Sherlock twisted his head up toward the door from where he sat on the floor of the laboratory, every pillow and blanket they could spare shoved against the wall behind him in a ramshackle attempt at back support for the upcoming Doctor Who marathon set up on John’s laptop in front of him. “Why?” he asked, eyes narrowing up at John in the doorway, or, more specifically, the blond head that poked around the doorframe, the rest of him hidden behind the wall.

“Just do it,” John muttered, bobbing his head in earnest, but Sherlock had no such intentions.

“I told you not to buy me anything,” he snapped, John’s drastic leaning out of view not exactly the most subtle of tactics.

“I didn’t,” John very obviously lied, and then dipped his head in acceptance when Sherlock shot up a withering look. “Okay, I kind of did, but”—he wrestled with something in his hands, and then one arm appeared to point a finger down at where Sherlock sat—“I had it planned ages ago, and, technically, Mycroft bought it.”

“Mycroft?” Sherlock spat, fundamentally offended that his brother should have anything to do with his birthday beyond the ‘Many happy returns’ text he had received that morning. “Why did Mycroft buy it?”

“Because you’d never let me sneak away to buy anything,” John answered, quick with impatience, and Sherlock supposed the logic of that had been rather obvious. “Now will you just close your eyes?”

“Why?” Sherlock asked again, and John’s neck collapsed, his head lolling down to the floor as he sighed.

“Because I’m going to strangle you, and I don’t want to have to look you in the eye while I do it,” he snipped as he lifted his face, finishing with a tight-lipped smile.

Sherlock lifted a brow. “I hope Mycroft sprung for nylon rope.”

“Sherlock!” John bleated, and, even as Sherlock opened his mouth to argue the absurdity of annual celebrations of not being dead yet, he stopped, catching something in John’s eyes.

This was important to John—for whatever ridiculous, sentimental reason—and Sherlock, eternally weak against anything John Watson wanted, only managed to sigh. “Fine,” he grumbled, but couldn’t manage to feel as annoyed as he sounded when those damned blue eyes lit up like that. He rolled his eyes, a final gesture of defiance, and then closed them, turning his attention instead to listening. Without anything to go on, however, it was difficult to interpret the sounds—a sort of rustling rattle that shifted into the room with John’s steps.

“Alright, open,” John beckoned, and Sherlock obeyed, his eyes blinking as they searched for a focal point.

“A piñata,” Sherlock said flatly, eyebrow rising at the yellow disc dangling from John’s hand, black paper eyes and curled mouth smiling across at him. “You got me…a piñata.”

“Not quite,” John said, the hand holding what looked to be a rounders bat bobbing to him. He shifted, flipping the smiley face to the other side and halting it against his leg, revealing a piece of paper taped to the visage. Grinning, John looked back up at him. “A piñAnderson,” he corrected, waving the rounders bat in a demonstrative circle around the blown-up face of the technician, which appeared to be the same picture used for the man’s ID badge.

Sherlock blinked, lips parting, his eyes glued to the loathsome face. “Gimme,” he muttered, darting
an arm out toward the bat, and John laughed.

“I have to hang it up first,” he chided, turning away and pulling a chair beneath the room’s light fixture, a plan apparently already conceived.

“Why?” Sherlock whined, pushing up from the floor as he moved to John’s side, sulking up at the blond, who was fiddling with the piñata’s string near the ceiling.

“Because, if I just hold it, you’ll hit me,” John quipped, flashing a grin down at the detective before returning to his task, tongue caught between his teeth in concentration.

Sherlock grumbled, but did not argue, and, after a moment, John descended from the chair, hitching it under his arm and moving it to the edge of the room once more.

“Alright, here,” he said, passing Sherlock the bat. “You’re technically supposed to be blindfolded, but you’d probably just cheat. Make sure I’m well clear before you start swingin’, though, okay?”

Sherlock nodded, perhaps a bit too excitedly, because John laughed, shaking his head at him as he retreated, kicking at the cardboard box supporting his laptop as he shuffled it out of harm’s way across the floor.

When he appeared to be comfortable with his distance, he nodded, and Sherlock didn’t waste any time, bringing the bat down hard in a slice to the side of Anderson’s face.

“Jesus!” John startled, somewhere between amused and alarmed. “Pent-up aggression much?”

“No buts,” Sherlock interjected, turning the bat on the man once more, and John laughed behind him, the jovial sound overtaking the crinkling of cardboard and tissue paper.

“You know, you’re supposed to take turns,” he chuckled, moving closer, albeit still thoroughly out of swinging range.

“What?” Sherlock asked, sending the piñata flailing away in a dizzying rotation as he turned to the blond.

John smiled at him, catching the piñata as it came barreling back toward his head, and then slowly releasing it to dangle in the center. “People generally take turns hitting it,” he explained, gesturing between them. “You take a swing, then I take a swing, then you take a swing-”

“But that’s ridiculous,” Sherlock snapped staunchly. “You’re stronger than me, you’d probably break it. And it’s my birthday, so I should be the one to crack his skull open.” He said all of this with a rigidity one might normally reserve for discussing matters of law, and finished with an equally stern nod, but John only blinked at him a moment before bursting into peals of laughter. “What?” Sherlock blustered, shoulders shifting as he bristled at the mocking.

“Nothing,” John panted, shaking his head as he waved a hand in dismissal. “Nothing, it’s just- That was adorable!” He collapsed into laughter again, bowing in two as he clutched his arms to his stomach, and the bat swung limply down to Sherlock’s side, arms numbed with shock.

“I- What?” he murmured, swallowing in hopes of clearing his obviously defective eardrums. “A-
Adorable?"

John nodded, shrugging helplessly as he straightened. “Yes! I-I have no idea why, but-”

“I said I wanted to crack a man’s skull open,” Sherlock continued flatly, pointing the bat up at the slowly spinning object of his ire. “That’s- That’s latent homicidal tendencies at best.”

“I know.” John wheezed, wiping at his eyes where they were seemingly permanently creased by a grin. “And it was adorable.”

Sherlock just blinked, forehead furrowing as he tilted his head. “You have exceptionally strange standards,” he remarked, and John barked a laugh.

“But I know it. Now, finish your acute subdural hematoma before the Chinese gets here. We can’t let it get cold, considering we don’t have a microwave anymore,” he said with a scolding look, and Sherlock rolled his eyes.

“I told you, I cleaned it!” he bleated, but John just shook his head.

“Eyeballs, Sherlock. Eyeballs!” he spouted, pointing at the appliance.

Sherlock groaned exasperatedly. “They were in a dish!”

John stared at him, that gaping thing he did with his mouth when Sherlock was missing an extremely apparent point.

“I covered them with cling film,” he added tentatively, hoping that was the sought-after response, but John only gaped wider.

Finally, he closed his mouth, lips forming a fond smile as he shook his head gently at the detective. “Just bludgeon Anderson,” he advised, moving back to sit on the floor behind his laptop. “I’m gonna cue up the episode.”

Sherlock was going to argue the point further, but the small smile John shot up over the screen indicated he wasn’t truly upset with him, so Sherlock turned back to the piñata, mentally cataloging the injuries as he proceeded.

In the end, they couldn’t agree on cause of death—Sherlock insisting it was a depressed fracture, while John considering it only compound—but they split the sweets that rained down across the floor rather amicably, jabbing at the dangling cardboard carcass every now and again to send another shower when their supplies ran low. They bickered over their food, John pretending to be unbearably frustrated whenever Sherlock swiped a piece of his sweet-and-sour chicken—“Why do you order Kung Pao if you’re just gonna eat all of mine!?”—but he always let him, and the hours passed easily between them, interrupted only when John had to get up to switch discs.

He probably could have gone on like that, alternating between Drumsticks and Smarties until they went to bed regretting all of it, but his mobile chirped at half-seven, signaling a shift in the festivities.

“Case?” John asked, craning his neck to see over where Sherlock was leaning against his shoulder.

Sherlock nodded. “Murder. Woman found strangled in her flat. The sister lived with her; she’s in interrogation now.”

“Lestrade think she did it?”
Sherlock smiled, twisting his head up to John’s face. “Well, that would be where we come in, now wouldn’t it?” he answered, and John grinned.

They were at the Yard in under an hour, giggling entirely inappropriately when Anderson walked by—the man eyeing them suspiciously as he checked his reflection not-so-subtly in the surface of his phone—and then following Lestrade down to the interrogation room.

The sergeant apologized time and time again for calling them in, but John patiently assured him they hadn’t been doing anything, that they’d just been watching TV, at which point Lestrade gave them a look that was so transparently skeptical, they both blushed.

“She’s in here,” Lestrade explained, bobbing a thumb at the door they were about to enter. “I don’t think she had anything to do with the murder,” he said, tipping his head in allowance, “but I can tell there’s something she’s not telling us, and I need all the information I can get.”

“No other leads then?” Sherlock supposed, and Lestrade shook his head, frowning.

“We can’t find anything on her. No priors, not even a parking ticket,” he muttered, frustrated. “Middle class upbringing, did well at uni, worked as a bank teller. By all accounts, she was—”

“Average,” Sherlock finished, nodding thoughtfully. “Well,” he clipped, thrusting his hands in his pockets as he looked up at the sergeant, “we’ll just see about that.” With a flash of a smirk, he moved to push around Lestrade to the door, but John’s voice stopped him short.

“Wait,” he bade, and Sherlock turned back, puzzled. “What was her name?” John asked, directing it now to Lestrade. “The victim, what was her name?”

“Joanna Trager,” Lestrade replied, looking between them both. “Sister’s name is Alice. She’s younger by three years, just finished uni. That’s why they moved in together; Alice was looking for a job in the city.”

“Did she find one?” Sherlock asked.

Lestrade nodded. “Yeah, she’s a nurse at a hospice center. Same situation with her, nothing criminal in her past at all.”

Sherlock nodded down at the floor, considering, and then flashed a glance to John through his lashes, seeking permission.

John nodded as he adjusted the strap of his laptop bag, apparently now content, and Sherlock grasped the handle of the door, pushing inside, the sergeant and John at his heels.

Lestrade had been right, it was clear Alice knew something, but how that connected to the crime, it was impossible to say. She was obviously distraught, and the grief was real—something John was quick to offer sympathy for the instant the girl started to cry, producing a tissue from seemingly thin air as he knelt down beside the young woman—but Sherlock had infinitely less patience for waterworks.

“Look, enough games,” he snapped after a time, letting the woman whimper her way through the tragic retelling of going to work and returning to find her sister dead in her bedroom for quite long enough, as far as he was concerned. “It’s obvious you know something you’re not telling us, and, if you obstruct this investigation any further, Sergeant Lestrade and I are inclined to believe it’s that you murdered your sister.”

“Sherlock,” John hissed reproachfully, but Lestrade backed him up, folding his arms and affecting a
stern expression.

The petite blond blinked up at him, her green eyes swimming above tear-flushed cheeks. “I- What?” she stammered, mouth flapping around the words as she looked between them, eyes settling on John the longest, instinctively gravitating toward the only ally in the room. “No, I-”

“Your DNA and fingerprints are all over the crime scene,” Lestrade chimed in, and John’s glare shifted to him, allowing Sherlock’s shoulders to relax just slightly.

“I-I live there!” the girl bleated, eyes wide and earnest—and innocent, but Sherlock wasn’t done yet. “I- She was my sister! I was in her room all the time!”

“Where were you today at 3pm?” Lestrade pressed, leaning down across the steel table toward the woman.

The woman shook her head, dazed and terrified. “I-I was at work, I- I didn’t kill her!”

“Well then you know who did!” Sherlock thundered, and the woman flinched away. “Who was it, Alice? A friend? A coworker? A friend of yours?”

“No, no!” Alice wailed, tears streaming from her eyes. “I don’t know! Please, I don’t know!”

“Yes, you do!”

“Sherlock!” John grabbed him hard around the upper arm, wrenching him back away from the table, his eyes glinting in threat.

Sherlock opened his mouth, more than ready to argue, but Lestrade cut in before he had the chance.

“You know something, Alice,” he said, more venomous than Sherlock had ever heard him, and the woman’s faint trembling became even more pronounced, “and we’re going to get to the bottom of it.” He flicked a glance their direction, indicating to go ahead of him through the door. “I’ll give you some time to think about what you wanna say next,” he added, and they left, leaving the woman to hang her head and sniff quietly down at her lap.

They didn’t speak until they were in the observation room, Lestrade closing the door with a dull thud behind them.

“What the hell-”

“She’s hiding something, John!” Sherlock immediately defended, the outrage expected. “Look at her!” he added, waving a hand out the window at the quivering figure beyond.

“She’s just lost her sister, Sherlock!” John countered, and, judging by the muscles straining in his neck, he would be shouting if the situation allowed for it. “And you heard Lestrade. He doesn’t think she had anything to do with the murder!”

“It doesn’t matter!” Sherlock urged, and John blinked at him, scandalized. “She’s hiding something, and we need to know what it is.”

“And you think threatening her is going to work?” John snarled. “That girl is terrified, Sherlock,” he added, pointing back into the interrogation room. “You’re not going to get anything out of her by scaring her more!”

“Alright, enough!” Lestrade interrupted once again, and they turned to him in tandem before looking
back at one another, begrudgingly falling silent. “Maybe...Maybe we were a bit harsh,” he murmured, and Sherlock snapped his head to him, betrayed, but Lestrade only gave him a pointed look. “We’ll give her a bit of time to calm down, and then we’ll try again, alright? Try a different approach.”

“What, hand-holding?” Sherlock scoffed, and John glared at him.

“I don’t know,” Lestrade said evenly, looking between them, “but, whatever it is, we won’t figure it out by ripping one another’s throats out. Okay?”

Sherlock dropped his eyes to the ground, stubbornly avoiding John’s gaze, and, after a moment, John backed away with a sigh.

“Okay,” he muttered bitterly, probably running a hand through his hair, if his tone was any indication. “I’m gonna run to the vending machine. Either of you want anything?”

“No, thanks,” Lestrade replied, while Sherlock merely rattled his head, and, a few steps and a creak later, John was gone out the door.

It was silent a moment, Lestrade moving a few steps closer while Sherlock turned back toward the interrogation room. “So,” the sergeant chirped, and Sherlock looked to find him smirking, “when’s the wedding?”

Sherlock’s face fell flat, and he narrowed his eyes in an icy glare before looking back to the window, prompting a chuckle from Lestrade.

“No, really, I wanna know. I mean, not about the wedding,” the man muttered, tipping his head at the amendment, “but- Well, I did go to all that trouble for your Christmas present. I think I deserve to know how it worked out.”

“Oh, you do, do you?” Sherlock mocked, but Lestrade only grinned.

“Yes,” he clipped with a nod, and Sherlock rolled his eyes. “Come on,” Lestrade coaxed, shifting close to Sherlock’s shoulder. “Ya gotta give me something.”

“Why?” Sherlock crabbed, moving back to face the sergeant. “Why do you care?”

Lestrade frowned, looking down at him, puzzled. “What do you mean, why would I care?” he asked softly, though there was a ripple of hurt through the words. “Sherlock, I- Of course, I care,” he insisted, quiet and earnest. “You- We’ve known each other a long time,” he continued, and Sherlock absolutely could not look at him now, “and I- Well, I want you to be...happy. Or, at least, as close as you get,” he murmured, and Sherlock chuckled, the jest easing the tension somewhat. Lestrade moved forward, pushing into the corner of Sherlock’s eye, and Sherlock turned a sidelong glance to find the sergeant smiling gently down at him. “I’m proud of you, kid,” he asserted, and Sherlock needed John here to explain the lump growing at the base of his throat. “You’ve come a long way. And John-”

“Hey,” a familiar voice said, coming through the speakers into the room as the back of a blond head appeared in the window in front of them.

“-is a dead man!” Lestrade finished in a snarl, diving backward toward the door.

“No, wait!” Sherlock halted, stretching out a palm to the furious sergeant, and the man paused, the both of them watching as John approached the startled Alice in the room beyond.
“I thought you might need this,” he said, shifting the snacks in his hands—a can of coke and a bag of pretzels. “You look a bit pale.”

Alice blinked between him and the food, confused, and then her eyes widened in understanding at the same moment in clicked in Sherlock’s brain.

“Oh my god,” he breathed over the exact same words breaking through the speakers from Alice, although in a much more frantic tone.

“What?” Lestrade asked, abandoning any effort to intervene as he came up to watch at Sherlock’s shoulder.

“Diabetic,” Sherlock whispered, head shaking in dazed disbelief as he watched John open the can of coke and pass it across to the girl. “She’s diabetic.”

Lestrade’s eyes widened, and he looked back in on the display before twisting back to Sherlock. “Did you—”

“No,” he answered, unable to even be angry, he was so awed. “No, I didn’t.” Of course, it all made sense now—the pallor, the shaking, the sweating, her excess blinking and difficulty concentrating through her story—but he hadn’t put it together, hadn’t even considered there was an alternative cause other than guilt. Doctor Watson, indeed, he thought, and the amount of air in the room abruptly plummeted.

“I’m usually much better about it,” Alice was saying with a sheepish smile as she swallowed down the coke. “I—I don’t know what—”

“You’ve had quite a shock,” John supplied gently, lowering his bag to floor as he settled into the chair opposite her, even his posture oozing comfort, and Alice nodded morosely down at the table. “When were you diagnosed?” he asked after she’d taken another sip, popping a pretzel into her mouth.

“Two years ago,” she answered, the tension in her shoulders easing. “I suppose I’m still getting used to it,” she added with a miserable shrug, and John nodded, every bit the sympathetic ear. Alice swallowed down her pretzel, and then looked at him, eyes narrowing curiously. “How did you know?”

John smiled—Sherlock could tell by the small duck of his head—and then leaned forward, settling his elbows on the table. “My aunt,” he replied. “She’s always really supportive.”

“I wanted to be a doctor,” he explained, hands rolling through the air in easy gesticulations. “She was always really supportive.”

“That’s nice,” Alice answered, smile warm as the color began to ease back into her skin. “So, you don’t want to be a doctor anymore?” she asked as she lifted the can back to her lips.

“No, I do,” John corrected, leaning back in the chair. “I wanted, and I want,” he added, and Alice giggled in spite of the fact that she was much too old for him—four years older, to be precise. It was practically illegal; Lestrade should be arresting her.
“Are you in school?” she asked, an obvious ploy for his age, and Sherlock clenched his jaw, jealous fury burning the air from his lungs.

“Not quite,” John answered, endearingly self-conscious.

Damn him.

“I’m in my last year, sixth form. I’ve been applying though. Got an interview with Bart’s next month,” he added, back straightening in pride, and even Sherlock couldn’t help the small smile that tugged at his lips.

“That true?” Lestrade asked, and Sherlock nearly jumped, having forgotten he was there with all the distracting, detestable flirting going on.

“Yes,” Sherlock replied, nodding as he fought to keep from beaming. “February 11th.”

Lestrade let out a low whistle. “Blimey,” he mused, shaking his head as the conversation ahead of them continued, Alice chatting amicably about her own experience at Bart’s now—a happy coincidence. “That’s not an easy gig to get.”

“No,” Sherlock answered, watching the back of John’s head as he rolled it back with a laugh. “No, it’s not.”

It then got disconcertingly quiet in the observation room, and Sherlock turned, his forehead creasing as he looked over Lestrade’s smug face.

“My god,” the sergeant murmured, smirking at him. “You couldn’t be more proud of him if you tried.”

Sherlock hoped the dim of the room helped hide his flush somewhat as he twisted briskly back to the window. “I have no idea what you’re talking about,” he answered loftily, but Lestrade just laughed.

“So, what are you doing here?” Alice was asking, casting a glance over the interrogation room. “I mean, if you’re still in school and everything.”

John chuckled. “It’s actually kind of a crazy story, um, you remember the guy who was in here earlier? The tall one with the coat and surly attitude?”

Lestrade snorted, necessitating a sharp glare, but Sherlock’s attention was quickly drawn back as Alice hummed in agreement.

“Well, he’s my roommate at college,” John explained, waving a hand through the air, “and he’s sort of a detective, like, on the side. Or maybe he’s a student on the side, I’m honestly not sure half the time.”

Lestrade snorted, necessitating a sharp glare, but Sherlock’s attention was quickly drawn back as Alice hummed in agreement.

“Those are all the ones I’ve written up,” he said, directing her to some unseen point on the screen. “There are more, of course, but some of them I...”
can’t write about. Security or something, I don’t know,” he mumbled dismissively, and Alice smiled. “And then here”—his finger shifted—“is where people can write in with their own cases—usually something involving theft or adultery. We’ve solved loads of those, but I don’t generally write about them. Sherlock can usually solve ‘em just by reading the client’s email, so it’s not really all that exciting. Although,” he said, straightening up a bit as he pointed in sudden recollection, “we did have one where a woman thought her husband was cheating on her, and it turned out he was the head of an international smuggling ring.”

Alice looked up from the screen at him, mouth agape and green eyes blinking owlishly. “How did you figure that out?” she breathed, appropriately impressed.

“Six hours in a dumpster,” John clipped, and Alice laughed. “And the color of the man’s tie.”

“His tie?” Alice parroted, face creasing in befuddlement.

John nodded, his face then turning thoughtful. “Or was it the knot of his tie? A stain on his tie? I don’t remember exactly, but the point is”—he lowered his head, the moment shifting along with the sincerity of his voice—“Sherlock is very, very good.”

Alice blinked her eyes away, looking back to the screen, her lips shifting uncertainly as they pressed together.

“Alice,” John said gently, moving to lean down at her side, and the woman looked up at him hesitantly through her lashes, “whatever it is, whatever you’re afraid of”—he placed a hand over her pale one—“you can tell us. We can help you. I promise.”

Alice looked down at John’s hand over hers, a deep breath shifting through her lungs, and then, ever so slowly, she nodded. “I—I’ve been getting these emails,” she began haltingly, and John moved his hand away, gesturing to his computer, and Alice gingerly shifted her chair closer to the table, settling her fingers over the keys.

Sherlock’s eyes snapped wide, and he plunged a hand into his pocket, ripping his phone from his coat.

“What? What is it?” Lestrade asked eagerly, moving to peer down at Sherlock’s screen.

“John’s laptop has a keystroke reader,” he hastily explained, tapping through the applications on his phone until he found the hidden file. “I emailed him a virus ages ago. Wanted to test it out.”

“You what?” Lestrade blurted, but Sherlock hissed at him, rattling his head.

“I told him,” he added sharply. “I’m not quite that ignorant of socially acceptable behavior.”

Lestrade gave him a doubtful look, but then leaned in further, watching Sherlock’s strokes across the screen. “What did he do? When you told him?”

“Opened a Word document and typed ‘Sherlock’s an ass’ for ten minutes,” Sherlock replied, and then jumped as Lestrade burst into loud laughter in his ear.

“Oh, I knew I liked him,” he sighed, and then looked between the phone and Sherlock expectantly.

“The virus tracks anything typed on that computer,” Sherlock explained, saving the rest of his glare for later, “and transmits it to my phone. I could put it on anything, really. Laptops, mobiles, GPSs. I could even—”
“Before you finish that sentence, I feel I should remind you I am an officer of the law,” Lestrade interjected, and they stared mutely at one another for a moment before Sherlock cleared his throat.

“When Alice signs into her email account, even though John is going to be a gentleman and move to the opposite side of the screen as she types her password”—he waved a hand at the window, where John was stepping back and turning his face to the ceiling—“it will be sent to my phone. That way, anything she doesn’t tell us, we can access, as well as whatever other information is stored in her email account—passwords to other sites, confirmations for hotels, plane tickets, anything like that.”

“Bloody hell,” Lestrade breathed, shaking his head. “You’re a regular James Bond!”

“Who?” Sherlock muttered quizzically, and Lestrade’s mouth dropped open before they were both drawn back to the interrogation room.

“At first, I thought it was just some kids playing a prank, you know?” Alice said, looking nervously between John and the screen as she angled it toward him, an invitation to come back around. “But then they got more and more…” She trailed off, expression twisting to a wince as she scanned over the content of the screen, her body subconsciously recoiling.

John’s eyes blinked wide, his lips parting as his head shifted back on his neck. “Jesus,” he murmered, looking more and more disturbed the longer his eyes roved across the screen. “Oh, god!” he sputtered, apparently having found his breaking point, and he stepped back, face turning away. “That’s- Jesus!”

“Yeah,” Alice agreed, looking rather sickly as she apparently exited out of the email, both of their postures relaxing. “There’s been a few weird gifts too, things left on my doorstep. I-I just-” Her voice broke, and she sucked in a breath, dropping her head. When she lifted it again, her eyes were shining. “My sister, she- We look a lot alike. If-I- he-”

“It’s not your fault,” John interrupted, hand settling soft on her shoulder. “Even if that is what happened, it’s not your fault.”

“I was so scared,” she cried, shaking her head down at the table. “I-I couldn’t tell anyone. I didn’t know what to do!”

“It’s alright,” John soothed, bedside manner firmly intact, but then Alice seemed to fold, her hands lifting to her face as she wept, and John, for the first time, looked uncomfortable, eyes reaching helplessly through the window to his audience. “I’ll, um, get you some tissues, okay?” he asked, flashing a pointed glance at the window, sending Lestrade diving to a cupboard across the room. “And then send the sergeant back in. If that’s alright?”

Alice nodded, whimpering faintly in agreement, but shot her head up as John neared the door. “Wait!” she called, and he paused, looking back. She grew shy then, head tilting as her mouth worked soundlessly. “I- Thank you,” she finally said, a strangled whisper, and then managed a watery smile.

John smiled back so warmly, Sherlock saw the stutter of his own heart play out across Alice’s still-four-years-older face. “You’re welcome,” he answered, nodding gently, and then turned back to the door, Sherlock and Lestrade reaching the exit of the observation room at the same moment.

They met in the corridor, John looking back as he closed the door before turning to their matching slack-jawed faces. He smirked, just a twitch at the corner of his mouth as he looked between them. “I think she’s ready to talk now,” he said evenly, a smug glint in his eyes, and Sherlock’s knees were not entirely bone anymore.
Lestrade chuckled breathily, clapping John on the shoulder as he passed by to the interrogation room, package of tissues in hand.

John turned, watching the sergeant go, and then looked back to Sherlock, whose tongue still seemed to be fixed to the roof of his mouth.

“I-” he stammered, and John just watched him, lifting an eyebrow in prompt when he did not continue. Sherlock swallowed hard. “You- That-”

A smirk was slowly growing on John’s face, his eyes sparkling more with every second of silence that passed between them, and Sherlock set his jaw against the mocking.

“Well, I could have flirted,” he snapped, and John’s jaw dropped.

“Flirted?” he spluttered in echo, falling into step behind Sherlock as the detective twisted on his heels and started walking anywhere but here. “Flirted! That was not flirting!”

“Please,” Sherlock snorted, head bobbing and voice lifting as he began his mimicry. “Here, have a coke. Oh, did I mention I’m gonna be a doctor? I have an interview at Bart’s.” He sniffed derisively, rattling his head. “Why didn’t you just drop in that you’re captain of the rugby team too while you were at it? She probably would’ve thrown in her social security number.”

“Oh my god!” John hissed, grabbing Sherlock’s arm and spinning him to gape delightedly up at his face. “You’re jealous!”

Sherlock hesitated just a millisecond too long, and John noticed, the corners of his open mouth beginning to lift. “What? No!” he squawked, and John looked like it was his birthday. “That’s ridiculous. You’re ridiculous,” he urged, nodding virulently.

“I don’t believe it!” John gushed, shaking his head. “You’re actually jealous! Of a client!”

“She’s not a client,” Sherlock growled, rather tipping his hand, and John beamed. “I’m not jealous!” he spat, moving forward again, but John kept pace at his side.

“Yes, you are.”

“No, I’m not.”

“A regular green-eyed monster.”

“No- What?”

“Sherlock, seriously.” John laid a hand on his arm, tugging him to a halt. “What is it? Why are you so upset about this?”

“I’m not-”

“Yeah, okay, but if we weren’t lying,” John interjected dismissively, unhindered by Sherlock’s glare. “What is it? The diabetic thing? Are you mad I figured that out?”

“No,” Sherlock grumbled irritably, because it did bother him, although not remotely the way John meant.

“Is it because I told her about my aunt? Because I would’ve told you, it just didn’t seem like the kind of thing-”
“No, I don’t care that your aunt’s diabetic,” Sherlock snapped, casting frantic glances around, the walls seeming to press in toward them as the air grew thinner.

“The Bart’s thing then?” John continued to guess, and Sherlock could hear his own heart in his ears. “Because I didn’t think that was a secret. I mean, you told Mrs. Hudson and Mycroft.”

“No, it’s not the Bart’s thing!” he exclaimed, voice pulled taut.

“Then what?” John pressed, and Sherlock was nearly hyperventilating now, sending potent wafts of John’s shampoo coursing through his nostrils and firmly not helping the situation. “Why are you-MMPH!”

Sherlock clapped a hand over John’s mouth, pushing him backward into the wall as he flung open a nearby door with his free hand, shoving John unceremoniously ahead of him inside what turned out to be a rather dusty file room, the small windowless box of concrete full of shelves stacked high with boxes.

“What the hell are you- Oof!” John’s breath left him in a rush as Sherlock threw him back against the nearest shelf, the metal rattling as boxes swayed precariously overhead. “Sherlock!” he blustered furiously.

“I’m not jealous,” Sherlock thought he was going to snarl, but it was closer to panting, and his mind was equally wrecked, a hazy tangle of fury and what people probably meant when they said ‘lust’ misting over his brain as he dove forward, giving rein to whatever feeling had been slowly pooling in his stomach ever since John had deduced the diabetes.

One hand came down hard on John’s shoulder, pinning him into the shelf with a quickly muffled gasp as the opposite hand grabbed him roughly around the jaw, wrenching his mouth up. There was no slow buildup—the kind of thing John was still fond of, gentle as he always was with Sherlock’s inexperience—but, where John was ever-patient, Sherlock was impetuous, and his tongue was wrapped around John’s before the blond even had time to reciprocate.

When he did, it was first in the form of a tremulous moan vibrating through his throat, and then he tilted his head, his tongue swirling back against Sherlock’s with dizzyingly perfect pressure. One hand fell on Sherlock’s waist, slipping beneath his coat to grip against the navy fabric beneath, and the other crept up his chest, drifting toward his shoulder, where it would no doubt flit off into Sherlock’s hair, twisting in and pulling him where he saw fit, but Sherlock wasn’t quite so willing to yield today.

He withdrew, catching John’s bottom lip between his teeth, and the shorter man gasped, gripping hard into Sherlock’s waist and shoulder as he instinctively snapped him forward against his body. Sherlock moved away from his mouth then, sliding his lips across John’s jaw, and a breath rattled from the boy’s mouth, shuddering through his body as it went.

“I’m not jealous,” Sherlock breathed, mouth grazing the words into the hollow beneath John’s ear, and John’s fingers clamped down hard enough to engrave fingerprints on his hip. “You just shouldn’t”—he traced his lips down John’s neck, pausing here and there to press open-mouthed against leaping arteries and muscles—“talk to anyone”—he scraped his teeth briefly across John’s collarbone, prompting a ragged heave of air—“or look at anyone”—John tilted his head up, a swallow moving beneath Sherlock’s mouth as he trailed it back up toward John’s chin—“or flirt with anyone”—he punctuated the snarl with a nip to the underside of John’s jaw—“ever again.”

He pressed back against John’s mouth, and John met him eagerly, tongue delving so far and so fast into Sherlock’s mouth, he, for a moment, lost his handle on the situation, his chest collapsing against
John’s as his hand slipped to the boy’s shoulder.

John, of course, took full advantage, arm wrapping around Sherlock’s waist as he snapped their hips together, a startled gasp whistling between their mouths as Sherlock realized just how much this supposed lust had taken over his body. John’s fingers were promptly in his hair, sending a shiver up Sherlock’s spine he didn’t think he could remotely be blamed for. “I’m sorry, Sherlock,” John panted between frantic kisses, “but, if this is the result, I’m afraid I’m gonna do that all the time.” He swiped his tongue over Sherlock’s bottom lip, sucking the moan from his mouth as he latched their lips together again, and Sherlock just gave up, control hardly the most important thing in the world, really.

Things couldn’t go too far in a dirty backroom of Scotland Yard, however—and they probably had to talk about a thing or two before that anyway—and it wasn’t long before John wound him down, easing the fervor almost imperceptibly as he gradually slowed their mouths and softened the swirls of his fingers in Sherlock’s hair. They were just breathing now, foreheads pressed together as Sherlock seemed to hang off of John, his hands gripped into the blond’s striped jumper while John practically held him up by the waist. John’s fingers were stroking up and down the back of Sherlock’s neck, circling around the knots of his spine as they traced their path.

“I’m sorry I flirted,” John said into the space between them, and Sherlock pulled away just far enough to be able to focus on his sheepish smile. “I didn’t mean to. I guess I just—”

“It wasn’t that,” Sherlock interrupted, folding back down to shake his head against John’s hair.

“What then?” John asked softly, lifting his chin, the beginnings of stubble grating against Sherlock’s jaw before their lips ghosted together again.

“I-I don’t know,” Sherlock stammered, swallowing as he refocused through the heat of John’s breath. “I suppose it was the flirting a bit, but it was mostly…everything,” he breathed, watching his fingers shifting nervously against the cotton of John’s jumper. “The flirting, the diabetes, the fact that you went in there at all. You just—” He stalled, hesitating over a sigh before he pulled away, properly meeting John’s curious eyes. “You undo me,” he whispered desperately, chest aching with the weight of the admission. “In every possible way.”

John blinked up at him, eyes twilight in the dim of the room, and then he smiled in the dawn. “Ya know,” he murmured, fingers curling playfully in Sherlock’s hair, “I think the Shakespeare’s gone to your head a bit too.”

Sherlock laughed as John gently pulled his head down, and nothing more was said until Lestrade called for the third time.
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

A portion of this (which will become obvious) is included in lieu of the wisdom teeth scene we discussed a while ago, which I think might be better as a one shot as opposed to squeezed in here.

Also, for any of you going to Sherlock Seattle in January, I'm gonna be there, and I'd love to meet up with some of you, so send me a message either here or at my Tumblr and we'll sort that out!

Sherlock lazily slid his bow over the strings, sighing as he let his eyes roam out the window to the right, the sheet music in front of him long-ago memorized.

It was late January, a faint dusting of snow frosted over the ground outside the foggy window, and Sherlock grimaced at the bare branches whipping in the wind, an ill omen for the rugby practice later that evening. Maybe he could get out of it if he shivered enough, but John had caught on to that trick last week and started bringing along an extra coat and mittens to rob Sherlock of the excuse. Where he got the mittens, Sherlock would probably never know, but he smirked rather smugly every time Sherlock was forced to put them on, so Sherlock was probably going to have to buy his own protective gear soon enough. Not mittens though. Gloves. With fingers. Like a grownup.

“Holmes!”

He blinked, snapping his head to the tall elderly man at the front of the room, Mr. Eberly’s brown eyes glaring through thick glasses.

“You missed your cue,” the man explained, bobbing his head down at the music stand in front of where Sherlock stood, and Sherlock blinked down at the bars, the notes swirling a moment as he focused.

“Oh,” he murmured, looking sidelong at his still fingers in perplexed betrayal. “Sorry, Professor, I-I must have lost my place,” he added, and- Wait.

Sorry!?

Mr. Eberly looked equally surprised, head tilting as he frowned across the room at him. “Are you alright, Holmes?” he asked, probably one of the only teachers who would care to, considering how much he valued Sherlock in his class, actual ability in a sea of infantile ineptitude.

Well, clearly not, if he was apologizing on top of missing cues in the first place, but Sherlock only nodded. “Fine, sir. Won’t happen again,” he assured, although he couldn’t guarantee it. Now that he thought about it, his head had been somewhere else all day, his mind palace a bit fuzzy around the edges, like the windows needed cleaning.

“That’s alright, I think we’re done anyway,” Mr. Eberly allowed, still eyeing him curiously as he gathered the music from his podium. “We’ll start with this piece tomorrow. Have a good afternoon, everyone!”

The room immediately disintegrated into chatter and shuffling—as well as a few more disgusting
noises from the brass section emptying their spit valves—but Sherlock was quick, his instrument packed and snapped in its case before the clarinets had even taken theirs apart. Darting out from his position at the end of the row, he pushed through the door, startling the boy leaning against the wall to his left.

“Bloody hell,” John wheezed, clutching at his chest with one hand as his other fumbled to keep a hold on his mobile. He then smiled, uncrossing his ankles and pushing off from the wall, slipping his phone into the pocket of the rugby jacket he had already changed into, along with his rugby shirt and navy track pants that no doubt hid the shorts and socks leading down to his boots. “That excited for practice, are you?” he asked teasingly, and Sherlock snorted as he fell into stride beside him, the two of them heading back toward the dorm.

It had started as a necessity, John coming to meet him after music because Lestrade had called about another strangling, but it had become regular practice after that, whether they had rugby or not. Today, however, they did have rugby, and Sherlock rumbled around in his wardrobe, pulling out his warmest jumper and trousers to change into as John waited outside the door.

“You could come in, you know,” Sherlock muttered, eternally irritated by John’s unnecessary propriety requiring him to shout through the door.

“Better not,” John replied, muffled by the wood, which rattled in the doorjamb as he leaned against it. “We might never get to practice.”

Sherlock stumbled putting on the second leg of his trousers, catching himself on the edge of the bed, and John must have heard the commotion, as he promptly burst into laughter. Grumbling to himself, Sherlock finished getting dressed and flung open the door, hopeful John would still be leaning against it. “We might never get to practice.”

John laughed, shaking his head. “You don’t have to come, ya know,” he said as they started down the last hill, the snow-stained stands coming into view below them. “I can turn on the lights and everything myself.”

Sherlock shrugged. “I know, but you might…mess it up or something,” he mumbled.

John laughed, a quick skeptical huff through his nose. “Yeah,” he answered with a soft smile, “sure.”

Sherlock looked away, hoping the flush of his cheeks would be blamed on the cold, but John’s growing grin suggested otherwise.

John pushed ahead of him through the door into the locker room, and, from there, Sherlock mostly just followed him around, watching as John flicked switches and tested radiators.
“This one’s still not working,” he said, pressing his hand to different sections of the heater. “Have to stop by the office and leave a message for Aaron again.”

“Aaron took a few weeks off to visit his mother,” Sherlock supplied from where he perched on the edge of one of the benches nearest where John was hunched over. “Though he told everyone it was a vacation with his girlfriend. Greg is the one on maintenance now.”

John nodded thoughtfully as he straightened, and then turned to Sherlock, his mouth quirking in amusement. “How come you can remember his name is Greg, but not that Greg’s name is Greg?”

Sherlock blinked at him, tilting his head. “What are you talking about? We only know the one Greg.”

John laughed, moving past Sherlock to check the section by the toilets, and Sherlock wandered after him, frowning in confusion at the back of his head. “Well, everything looks alright,” he announced after a moment, swatting his hands together. He then turned to Sherlock, a suspiciously bright smile on his face. “Wanna help me set up the cones for the drills?” he asked, and Sherlock rolled his eyes, groaning.

He did help, however, just like he always did, meticulously straightening the cones he was half certain John placed down crooked on purpose, and, as they neared the end of the process, other members of the team began trickling in, heading to the locker room with a wave. When they finished, they headed back over to the bench on the side of the pitch, John fiddling with the laces on his boots while Sherlock collapsed into a seat, his breathing labored with uncharacteristic exhaustion that rippled through his aching muscles.

“Are you alright?” John asked, moving to his side, his head tilting concernedly. “You look really pale.”

“No, I mean really pale. Come ‘ere,” he said, beckoning Sherlock to lean forward with a curl of his hand, and Sherlock, glaring, complied. John cupped his chin with gentle fingers, bending down to look closely into Sherlock’s eyes. Frowning, he pulled his hand away, turning it to place the backs of his fingers to Sherlock’s forehead. “You feel a bit warm,” he murmured, and Sherlock scoffed.

“Warm!?” he spluttered, tugging at the sides of his coat, trying to milk every last degree of warmth from the fabric as he shivered. “I’m freezing! Can’t we sue the school for this or something? Not providing those portable heaters? Or a roof?”

“How are you feeling though?” John stressed, crouching down in front of Sherlock’s knees as he continued to search his face intently. “Dizzy, light-headed? Headaches? Any muscle aches or nausea?”

Sherlock’s lips bobbed apart, and then he snapped them closed, swallowing hard. “No,” he snapped, and John’s eyes widened.

“Wow, that was terrible,” he muttered, eyebrows knitting together. “You must really be sick if your lies are that obvious.”

“Sick!?” Sherlock spouted, disgusted at the notion. “I am not sick!”

“Well, hopefully not for long,” John said firmly, his tone brokering no argument as he straightened, hands on his hips. “Go back to the dorm,” he ordered. “Lie down. Try to get some sleep. Take my blanket or whatever if you get cold, alright? As soon as I’m done here, I’ll come up and get you
something to eat.”

“But I’m not-”

“Sherlock.”

Sherlock closed his mouth, suddenly far too tired to even consider fighting the no-nonsense expression burning through John’s eyes. “Fine,” he grumbled, rising from the bench, but he must have stood up too quickly, his head spinning, and he staggered, John catching his arm.

“Jesus,” the boy hissed, steadying Sherlock with a hand to his back. “Do you need me to help you back? Or I can send someone. Mike or someone else you like.”

“I’m fairly sure Mike is the entire list,” Sherlock countered, and John smiled, looking almost a little relieved at Sherlock’s belligerence. “I’m fine,” he assured, moving out from John’s arm. “I can make it up a hill on my own.”

“Well, alright,” John hesitantly agreed, looking over him worriedly. “Just…text me when you get back, okay?”

“When I get back to the dorm from the rugby pitch?” Sherlock sniffed. “What, do you think I’ll be mugged?”

“No,” John bit back, folding his arms, “I think you’ll get tired or fall or something, be too stubborn to admit you couldn’t do it on your own, and they’ll be chiseling your body out of the ice in 70 years.”

Sherlock blinked at him. “70- What?”

“Nothing,” John sighed, waving a hand. “It’s a superhero thing. Just”—he stopped, eyes suddenly earnest as he drew close to Sherlock’s chest—“let me know when you get back? Please?”

Sherlock’s fight drained out of him, and he simply nodded, John smiling softly with relief. “Yeah, alright,” he murmured, and John tipped a grateful nod before he turned away at a shout from across the pitch.

“I’ll be back in a couple hours,” he said as he started off, still looking a bit wary, and Sherlock smiled, nodding in an attempt to reassure. John’s answering smile was hesitant, but there, and then he was gone, darting across the pitch toward the gathering group.

Sherlock watched him a moment, the beginnings of his orders breaking through the air with quick jabs and sweeps of his hands, and then he twisted in the dirt, moving back up through the stands toward the school.

He’d never tell John, but, by the time he got back to the dorm, he really was exhausted, barely shrugging out of his damp coat and firing off a text before collapsing onto the bed. His head pounded, throbbing anew with every shift of his neck and flickering of light across his pupils, and his limbs ached in their joints, uncoordinated as he struggled to slip beneath the duvet. He shivered, a hiss shaking through his chattering teeth, but he was too tired to even consider getting back up to get a jumper or John’s blanket, and instead buried his face in the pillow, groaning as his mobile beeped in the pocket of his jeans. Clumsily, he fished it out, squinting one of his eyes as he read John’s affirmative reply, reminding him again he’d be back right after practice. With a sigh, he tucked his phone under his pillow, closing his eyes as he allowed himself to be pulled away, comforted by the time ticking closer to John’s return.

*****
John didn’t even change out of his uniform, gathering up his things and rushing back up to Kingsley House with a wave over his shoulder and a call of “See you tomorrow!”. He was trailing mud and grass behind him as he rushed down the corridor, but he paid it no heed apart from taking extra care not to slide on the corners, and then he stopped outside the door, calming a little as he pushed it gently open.

“Sherlock?” he whispered, blinking into the dark of the room. “Sherlock?” he asked again, slipping his phone from his pocket, the light guiding him as he closed the door behind him. The faint blue glow landed on Sherlock’s bed, illuminating the lump within, and John trailed the light up the duvet to the mop of dark curls sprawled over the pillow. He smiled absentmindedly, watching Sherlock’s side rising and falling with his breathing as he backed silently out of the room, closing the door behind him.

As quiet as he could manage, he moved across the corridor, ducking into the lab. Placing his bag on the floor, he fished out the clothes he had brought down to the pitch with him, closing himself in the bathroom for a quick shower before pulling the clean clothing on and emerging, steam wafting out behind him. He left the dirtied uniform in the lab for now, along with his bag, and crossed back over to the dormitory, opening the door with his phone already held aloft. This time, however, Sherlock stirred with a faint murmur of confusion, and John smiled, drawing to the edge of the bed.

“Hey,” he whispered, perching on the side of the mattress as Sherlock turned his head blearily toward him, John tilting his mobile away so as not to shine directly on his face. “How ya feelin’?”

“John?” Sherlock murmured, and John’s face was most assuredly doing something ridiculous, but he took a moment so it wouldn’t appear in his voice.

“Mhmm,” he hummed, moving his fingers up to Sherlock’s forehead, which was creased with confusion as the man’s squinted eyes blinked blearily up at him.

Sherlock’s skin was flushed and clammy, his hair sticking a bit to his skin, and John pushed the curls aside before pulling his hand away, frowning.

“You’re really warm,” he said, concerned. “Do you have anything? Paracetamol? Beechams?”

Sherlock shook his head, swallowing thickly as he closed his eyes briefly to the ceiling. “’M not- not sick.”

John smiled, biting his lip to keep from laughing. “Okay,” he soothed, and Sherlock glared at him, a little uncertainly, as if not quite sure he should be offended. “I’m gonna get you something, alright? I’ll be right back.”

Sherlock muttered something unintelligible, but it sounded accepting, so John stood up, ducking back out into the corridor.

He text Mike, asking if he had any cold medicine, and they met in the common room, Mike passing over a packet of Beechams.

“So, he’s really sick, eh?” Mike asked as John turned the package over in his hand, reading the recommend dose.

“Looks like,” he muttered, looking up when Mike let out a low whistle.

“Geez,” he murmured, shaking his head, “what is that even like?”

John chuckled, shrugging. “I’ll let you know,” he said, lifting the package in his hand as he stepped
back toward the hall. “Cheers,” he bade, and Mike lifted a hand as he nodded, turning away as John began walking down the corridor.

He made a stop in the lab, grabbing a glass of water, and then pushed back into the dormitory, lowering to Sherlock’s side once again. “Here,” he said, beckoning Sherlock to sit up, and the man complied, albeit with rather more groaning than John thought necessary, “take this.” He popped out a couple of the gel capsules, holding them out in a palm, the water glass stretched out in the opposite hand.

Sherlock looked between his hands speculatively, and then narrowed his eyes up at John. “I’m not sick,” he seemed to be trying to snap, but it came out a bit piteous, and John couldn’t entirely keep his lips flat.

“Of course you’re not,” he said, and Sherlock’s eyes squinted even further. “This is just…an experiment. Science. Data. Spreadsheets.”

Sherlock sniffed derisively, and John chuckled, bobbing the medicine in his hand.

“Come on,” he coaxed, nudging Sherlock’s hand with the base of the water glass, “humor me.”

Sherlock glared at him a moment longer, and then rolled his eyes, swiping the pills and water from John’s grip.

“Thank you,” John chirped, and Sherlock snorted as he finished swallowing it down. “No, drink a bit more,” John said, bobbing his head at the glass as Sherlock made to hand it back. “You have to stay hydrated.”

“But I-” the brunette began to argue, but John lifted a hand, pushing the glass back toward his face, and Sherlock only sighed, taking a few more drags of liquid before John took it back, satisfied.

He moved the glass to the floor beside Sherlock’s bed, tucking the duvet in tighter around him as the man shivered. “Still cold?” he asked, and Sherlock nodded mutely, prompting John to cross to Sherlock’s wardrobe. The man didn’t have much in the way of warm clothing that would be remotely comfortable to sleep in, however, so John moved to his own drawers, pulling out a dark red hoodie, a rugby keepsake from his previous school, his surname beginning to peel around the edges of the white lettering across the back.

“Here,” he said, standing beside the bed as he handed the sweatshirt down to Sherlock, “put this on.”

Sherlock took it from him, struggling a bit with locating the sleeves as he pulled it over his head, and John helped him as subtly as possible, probably only getting away with it due to the man’s diminished capacity. Sherlock got rather hopelessly stuck in the opening of the neck though, his weak fingers tugging fruitlessly at the fabric, and John reached forward, giving it quick tug. Sherlock’s static-charged curls popping through the opening over his miserably glowering face.

John chuckled, brushing the man’s hair down as best he could. “Better?” he asked, and Sherlock, though thoroughly miserably, nodded. “Good,” John chirped, and then batted a hand at him, “now lie down. That medicine will kick in soon.”

Sherlock sighed, though it appeared to be a mostly token display of discontentment, as he did lie down, head bouncing on the pillow as he turned to face the wall, duvet tugged up in a fist below his chin.

John shook his head down at him, smiling, and then moved back to his drawers, grabbing pajamas before crossing to the bathroom and getting ready for bed. His blue pajama trousers were worn down
to fraying at the hem, and the old grey shirt had holes in the cuffs of the sleeves, but they were comfortable, and he happily hooked his thumbs through the worn openings, creeping back into the dormitory.

Sherlock was still awake, his breath hitching in a tell-tale way, and John frowned down at his figure in the bed, using the light of his phone once again.

“Still cold?” he asked, and the back of Sherlock’s head nodded. He looked over the room, contemplating, and then moved to the foot of his own bed, reaching across his desk. “Close your eyes,” he warned, and then flicked on the lamp, sitting his phone down as he grabbed at the bed frame.

“What’re you doing?” Sherlock murmured drowsily as John shuffled the bed across the floor, wincing every time the metal grated over the tile.

“Don’t worry about it,” John muttered, but Sherlock only turned further toward him, blinking into the light.

“Why are you-”

“Shh!” John hissed, scuttling back up to the head of the bed and yanking it as well, bringing his mattress flush with Sherlock’s. “Lie down.”

“No,” Sherlock countered, and John couldn’t help but snort, shaking his head as he climbed down the beds to turn off the lamp. “Why- John-“

“Just lie down, Sherlock,” he said, shifting his duvet over top of Sherlock’s as he huddled close to the boy’s back. “Go to sleep.”

“You-You can’t,” the brunette futilely contested as John slung an arm over his waist. “I’ll get you sick.”

“I thought you weren’t sick,” John teased, smiling into Sherlock’s curls as the boy huffed. “I’ll be fine,” John assured, tangling his legs with Sherlock’s trouser-clad ones. “If I’m gonna get it, I probably already have it. Are you still cold?”

Sherlock shook his head, pressing his spine lightly back against John’s chest. “No,” he mumbled sheepishly, and John sucked in his lips around a smirk.

“Okay,” he said, holding Sherlock to him as he ducked his head, breathing in the woodsly scent of the man’s dark hair. “Now go to sleep.”

Sherlock did not reply, only took a deep breath, and, gradually, his heartbeat slowed where it shook against John’s own.

*****

“Sherlock?”

He pinched his eyes tight, turning away from the voice.

“Sherlock, you have to get up. You haven’t eaten in over a day.”

Sherlock groaned, and a weight settled on the bed behind him as the intruder chuckled softly.

“Come on,” John goaded, and, begrudgingly, Sherlock turned his head, squinting out over his
shoulder. John was beaming down at him, holding out a plate he could not yet see the contents of, but his stomach lurched anyway.

He moaned, flopping his face back into the pillow, and John shuffled closer, tugging lightly at his shoulder.

“No, come on, you have to try,” he coaxed, and Sherlock allowed himself to be ushered up to sitting.

His head was throbbing even worse, his throat now sore and dry atop the continuing muscle aches, and he wasn’t sure he’d ever be able to fully open his eyes again, the light invading from around the edges of the drawn blinds already too much for him.

“Here,” John said, offering the plate. “It’s just toast. And I have some tea you should try to get down after.”

Sherlock plucked a triangle of the dry toast, nibbling on the edge with trepidation, but his stomach didn’t immediately revolt, and, though his taste buds did not appear to be properly functioning, he did find he was hungry, and managed to finish the piece before John bounced back down beside him, steaming mug in hand. “What time is it?” Sherlock rasped, taking the warm cup within his hands.

“‘Noon,’” John answered, and it was lucky Sherlock hadn’t taken a drink yet, as he would have choked on it.

“What!?” he spouted, and John pushed at his hands, encouraging the tea to his mouth.

“Don’t worry about it,” he assured, watching Sherlock steadily until he was forced to take a sip. “I talked to all your teachers. They were actually pretty shocked,” he said, shifting off the bed, which was still their two mattresses pressed together in a large white square. “Have you never been sick before or something?”

“It’s been a long time,” Sherlock admitted, lowering his cup to his lap, fiddling with the cuffs of John’s hoodie as he tugged them down over his fingers, “and never here at Langley.”

John hummed thoughtfully where he was rummaging through his drawers. “That would explain it. I thought Mr. Calvin was going to ask for a blood test or something.” He chuckled, and Sherlock smiled weakly up at him as he took another drink.

The liquid slipped down his throat, soothing it momentarily, but the stinging dryness quickly returned, and he coughed, lifting a fist to his mouth.

“I left tissues over there,” John said, pointing to the desk at Sherlock’s feet, which housed a box of tissues, a glass of water, and the packet of medication Sherlock dimly remembered John having the night before, “if you need them.”

“I don’t-“ Sherlock started, but quickly broke off into another fit of coughing, and John was promptly kneeling on the bed beside him, steadying the cup in his hand from spilling. He whimpered pitifully as the coughing subsided, his throat ragged and head growing sorer with every second he remained conscious, and John chuckled, gentle fingers carding through Sherlock’s hair as he pushed it from his forehead.

“You should try to go back to sleep,” John advised, blue eyes painfully tender as they roved over Sherlock’s surely quite miserable-looking face, “and then we can get you some soup when I get back from class. Call Mycroft or something.”
“Why would we need to call Mycroft?” Sherlock asked, drinking again.

John smiled brightly, tilting his head, and Sherlock nearly dropped the mug as his heart skittered. “We don’t need to,” John said, reaching up to tug one of the strings of his sweatshirt out from where it had wormed its way inside the collar to press against Sherlock’s neck, “I just thought it might make you feel better to bother him.”

Sherlock laughed, and then quickly coughed, John taking the cup from his fingers and placing it on the desk beside his water.

“I’ll be back in a bit,” he assured, sliding off the mattress and moving toward the door as Sherlock turned to follow the movement. “Text me if you need anything. Or Mike; he’s done with classes.” He stepped forward, slinging his bag over his shoulder. “And no cases!” he added, waggling a finger down at him, but he chuckled as Sherlock rolled his eyes. “Bye,” he bade, bending down to drop a kiss to the corner of Sherlock’s forehead, and Sherlock was still blinking at the door long after John had passed through it.

In spite of bothering Mycroft that evening for soup, going to bed early—his head cradled on John’s chest while the blond sat up reading, eternally patient as Sherlock coughed through pointing out the errors in the medical journal—and spending Friday also holed up in his room, Sherlock was still not well enough to accompany the team on the coach trip to the away game that night. At least, according to his attending physician, who was, at the moment, packing and patently ignoring him.

“I’m fine!” Sherlock urged for the umpteenth time, but it might as well have fallen on deaf ears for all John heeded it.

“Your cough is only getting worse, and your throat’s still sore,” John countered, not even sparing him a glance as he folded a t-shirt into his bag.


“Because you’re not talking as much,” he smirked, turning back to his clothes as Sherlock glared at him. As he moved to close the drawer, something shifted inside, heavy and grating, and Sherlock’s head snapped up as John’s body stiffened.

“What was that?” he asked, looking between John’s face and where his fingers were frozen on the front of the drawer.

John’s lips pressed closed, a swallow moving down his throat as he flicked a tentative glance to Sherlock. “John?” he pressed, and John held his eyes a moment longer before he sighed, opening the drawer back up and reaching a hand inside.

“It’s nothing,” he assured, fingers fishing toward the back, “I just-” He faded away, arm retracting to reveal a glinting black pistol.

Sherlock scanned over it, deductions coming in slow and hazy, but not so jumbled that John’s next words were a surprise.

“It was my dad’s,” he said, turning the weapon over in his hand. “I- Mum kept it. In the house. When I left at-at Christmas… I took it. I-I didn’t want- I didn’t wanna leave it with her.” He shook his head down at the gun cradled in his hands. “I wasn’t sure-“
Sherlock nodded, acknowledging he didn’t need to go any further, and John sighed shakily, relief coming across in his gaze before he turned back to the drawer, replacing the gun underneath his jumpers before snapping the wood closed.

“We’ll be back tomorrow afternoon,” John said, shaking off the conversation as he knelt down to zip his bag. “Eat the rest of that soup tonight, and don’t forget to drink plenty of water. There should be enough medicine to get you through, but you can text Molly if you need anything; she knows you’re gonna be here by yourself.”

“I don’t need a babysitter,” Sherlock snapped, and John chuckled, hoisting his bag up from the floor.

“She’s not a babysitter,” he said, smirking as he perched on the edge of the bed beside Sherlock, “and, yes, you do.”

Sherlock glowered at him, but John just laughed, hand coming up to tuck Sherlock’s hair behind his ears.

“Just promise you’ll call her if you need to?” he asked, and Sherlock was rather powerless to do anything but nod when John was in his hair like that.

He did make a bit of a show of it though, rolling his eyes with an exasperated sigh. “Fine,” he grumbled, and John beamed, hand trailing away down his neck as he stood.

“Good,” he said, steadying his bag on his shoulder as he moved to the door. “And, anything Lestrade calls about, it can wait.” He leaned his body back in around the wood, grinning across to Sherlock. “Doctor’s orders,” he added, flashing a wink, and Sherlock laughed as he left, shaking his head down at the bed as he listened to John’s retreating footsteps.

With a sigh, he fell back onto his pillow, blinking up at the ceiling, but sleep did not come, his mind roaming, anxious and unfocused without John there to steady it. He thought about going somewhere, his legs restless with the couple days’ inactivity, but where would he go without John; where would be worthwhile going without John?

Eventually, if only for something to do, he got up and wandered over to the lab, heating up his soup and slurping away at it as he flipped through the latest case file Lestrade had sent over—another strangulation victim by the name of Nathan Wells. His phone rang about halfway through the meal, and he immediately slammed the file shut and shot it across the table away from him, as if John would somehow sense the disobedience through the satellites, but it wasn’t John calling, and, too curious to turn it down, Sherlock answered.

“Yes?” he clipped, clearing his throat to keep the cough in check.

“Sherlock?” Lestrade’s voice came through, and Sherlock narrowed his eyes down at the tabletop.

“Were you expecting someone else?” he snapped, and Lestrade huffed a sigh.

“Well, sometimes it’s John,” the man countered, but quickly continued. “We found another one. Hannah Olson.”

“Strangled?” Sherlock asked, something like guilt settling in his stomach, but John didn’t have to know, and it was just a phone call.

Lestrade hummed affirmatively. “Up in Clapham. You have time to come in and take a look? It’s officially a serial now, and we’ve got an incident room set up.”
Sherlock bit his lip, foot tapping nervously against the tile, but he had eaten his soup—well, most of it, anyway—so surely he deserved a reward.

“Sherlock?”

“Yes, of course,” he replied, reminding himself there were lives on the line.

John liked lives. He would understand.

“Alright, I’ll come get you myself,” Lestrade said, crisp and official, though the recent discovery had clearly affected him, exhaustion and anxiety pulling at the edges of his voice. “I’m not far from there. See ya in ten,” he clipped, and the line went dead.

Sherlock swiped back to the home screen on his mobile, and then stared down at it, fingers tapping hesitantly on the side of the plastic case.

He could text John, tell him about the case, that it had been urgent. Surely, John would understand. John always understood.

His fingers hovered over the message icon, but shifted abruptly to the lock key, and he slipped the phone into his pocket as he darted back across the corridor to change.

After all, people did always say it was better to ask forgiveness than permission.

*****

John looked out the window, watching the country roll by, his phone clutched in his hand. He wanted to text Sherlock, wanted to see how he was doing, wanted to tell him about the conversation he’d overheard between the two teammates sitting behind him—“She said what!?!” “Yeah, man!” “That’s just not right.” “I know! How can someone not have seen Star Wars!?”—but he also didn’t want to wake him, so, instead, he sat, staring at his mobile and memorizing the words so he could report them later.

“You alright, mate?”

“Hmm?” John turned, meeting Mike’s gaze where the boy sat beside him. “Oh, yeah,” he answered, summoning a smile. “Just thinking.”

“About the game?” Mike answered, and John slipped his phone back into the pocket of his jacket.

“Yeah,” he chirped, perhaps a little too high, “the game. I’m just not sure we’ve practiced enough since break, ya know?”

Mike nodding, humming in reply as he turned his gaze to the back of the seat in front of him. “I dunno, we got a few good ones in. I think we’ll be fine.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right,” John replied, looking out the window again, but he could feel Mike staring at the back of his head, and slowly turned back. “What?” he asked of his friend’s concerned eyes, and Mike dropped his face to his lap, shaking his head softly.

“Nothing, I was just- How’s Sherlock?”

John’s stomach clenched, but he tried to keep the tension mostly out of his face. “Sherlock?” he echoed, blinking in orchestrated confusion. “Why would you-”

“He’s sick, isn’t he?” Mike added, and John’s terror eased out in a breath.
“Oh, yeah,” he replied, nodding. “Yeah, he is. He’s not so bad anymore, but it was awful Wednesday night. Thanks for the Beechams, by the way; it knocked him right out.”

“After practice?” Mike questioned, and John nodded.

“Yeah, he was a wreck. Kept mumbling in his sleep.”

“Really?” Mike tilted his head, brow creasing in curiosity. “About what? Physics?”

John chuckled, shaking his head. “No, Redbeard.”

“The pirate?”

“Yes and no,” John said, bobbing his head side-to-side. “I guess he had a dog when he was younger, and he named it after the pirate. I asked his brother about it after I figured out what he was saying.”

“Why would he be talking about his dog?” Mike asked, frowning, and John shrugged.

“Mycroft said Redbeard used to sleep with Sherlock when he was sick. I guess he thought he was there.”

“Why would he think that?”

John’s mouth popped open, eyes widening in sudden horror at the seatback in front of him. “I- Er-” He blinked, trying to swallow his panic, his fingers beginning to shake where they rested on his thigh, but then Mike was there, leaning in toward him.

“Woah, John, hey!” Mike muttered urgently, and John turned his head just enough to be able to meet his friend’s eyes out of the corners of his own. Mike cast a glance back over his shoulder, then lifted his head up slightly, looking to the seats ahead and behind them before bowing back down to John. “I-I didn’t mean to- You don’t have to tell me anything.”

John blinked, head snapping fully toward him in shock.

Mike dropped his face with a small sigh, taking in a breath as he sucked his lips over his teeth, and, when he lifted his eyes back to John’s, John was suddenly 12 years old again, crying in his back garden with his best friend’s arm slung around his shoulder. Mike had been the only one there then, the only one to tell him everything would be okay after his father left them, and he was just as sure and solid now, staring across at John with steady knowing.

There was nothing for John to do but nod, dropping his face to his lap as he twisted his fingers together. “I- I was gonna tell you-”

“I know,” Mike interrupted, smiling gently when John peeked back up at him, “but you didn’t have to. I- You’re my best friend, John.” He leaned a little closer, dropping his voice to a whisper between them. “I- There’s some things you can just…tell, and I- You and Sherlock-”

John fluttered his eyes away, watching his thumbs twisting into his cuffs.

“You deserve it.”

John blinked down at his lap, uncertain he’d heard right, but, when he looked to Mike, his friend’s soft nod confirmed it.

“I’ve never seen you happy, John,” Mike said, shaking his head. “I’ve seen you survive, and I’ve seen you get by, but I’ve never seen you happy.” He shrugged, smiling gently, and John had to look
away before the burn behind his eyes overwhelmed him. “And, with him...you are. And you’ve earned that, John.”

John looked up at his name, finding Mike’s own eyes dewy, and it almost completely undid him, his hand clenching into a fist as he struggled for control.

“No one deserves this more than you,” Mike finished, and then swallowed, dipping his head briefly to his lap, and John figured it was about time he said something.

“Thank you, Mike,” he croaked, and then cleared his throat. “Really, I- Thank you.”

Mike smiled, elbowing John lightly on the arm. “Don’t go getting all soppy on me now,” he muttered, and John laughed, and, just like that, the moment was broken, the conversation quickly moving to Mike’s terrible taste in music as they attempted to share his iPod.

****

Sherlock stared at the board in the incident room, frowning at the list of names.

Joanna Trager, Nathan Wells, and Hannah Olson stared back at him, their names displayed below their autopsy photos in chronological order. Three people with nothing in common other than the fact that they were strangled, and Sherlock huffed in exasperation, turning back to the boxes of fruitless facts they’d compiled for each victim.

There was something there, something tugging at the fringes of his flu-addled mind, but he couldn’t focus on it, couldn’t see through the haze of Paracetamol, and he shifted aimlessly through the files, hoping something would click into place.

“Coffee,” Lestrade announced as he strode back in, the others having long-since given up and gone home.

Sherlock accepted the cup with a nod and a grunt, and then they both turned back to the board, staring down the names and faces.

“Anything?” Lestrade asked for the seventh time, and Sherlock shook his head.

“No,” he grumbled, placing the cup on the table with a sharp click, the liquid still too hot to drink. “You’re sure there’s no connection? No common coffee shop or petrol station?”

Lestrade shook his head. “Nothing. These people have nothing in common. Hannah here”—he pointed to the middle-age brunette’s picture—“was a cashier at Boots. Nathan”—his finger shifted to the dark-complexioned young man—“was a banker. They didn’t exactly mingle.”

Sherlock snarled, stepping up to the board, eyes narrowing down at the timeline. “There has to be something. Here.” He pointed to the dates of the murders, turning back to Lestrade over his shoulder. “The second and third victims were murdered very close together, but there’s a gap between the first and second, double the time between the latter two.”

Lestrade frowned, following Sherlock’s finger to read down the list. “You’re saying there’s another victim?”

“It’s possible,” Sherlock said, shrugging as he pulled his hand back to his pocket. “Do you have any unsolved strangulations in the time between these two murders?”

“I don’t know,” Lestrade murmured, sitting his coffee down as he moved to the door. “Let me go
check. We haven’t let too many people in on this yet; it’s possible one slipped through the cracks.”

Sherlock nodded, watching Lestrade pass out into the corridor before turning back to the board, staring down the list of names. That prickling sensation returned again, a screaming he couldn’t decipher ringing out from his subconscious, and he picked up one of the dry erase markers, letting his hand loose on a blank section of the surface.

He wrote and erased several things, arrangements of dates and numbers that didn’t amount to anything, and then turned his attention to the names, writing them out again in his spare corner of space. As he wrote, something stirred in his stomach, a creeping sort of dread he couldn’t yet place, but he followed it, letting his wrist roll and twist as his eyes fought to keep up. He scratched out, erased with his sleeve, moved things here and there, and then, suddenly, as he leaned back to double check his spelling, he saw it, the big picture coming into horrible, terrifying focus. His mouth dropped open with a gasp, his hand beginning to shake, the marker quivering against the surface of the board, and then Lestrade rushed in, his footsteps falling like echoes of Sherlock’s heartbeat where it pounded in his ears.

“Found one,” the man said, hurrying to Sherlock’s side, not seeming to notice Sherlock’s distress as his eyes remained fixed on the pattern he had created in front of him. “Oliver Stewart. He was homeless, that’s why he didn’t flag at first. We assumed it was just a fight gone wrong, but if he’s connected to ours, then- Sherlock?” He stopped, the file closing in front of him as he moved up closer, but Sherlock still couldn’t look at him, could barely even hear him through the maelstrom of fear racing through his veins and scrambling his brain. “Sherlock, are you alright?”

Sherlock leaned forward, marker landing in the appropriate gaps in his list, adding in Oliver Stewart’s name, and then he stepped back, arm falling to his side as he heard Lestrade gasp beside him.

“Oh my god,” the man breathed, and Sherlock swallowed, the horror in Lestrade’s voice making the situation real in a way nothing else quite would have, because there, staring back at them in Sherlock’s own handwriting, was the only connection these people had, spelled out clearly in a rearrangement of their names.

Joanna
Olson
Hannah
Nathan
Wells
Trager
Stewart
Oliver

Joanna
Olson
Hannah
Nathan
Wells
Trager
Stewart
Oliver

“Sherlock-”
“I know,” Sherlock interjected, unable to hear it. “I know.”

Lestrade was silent a moment, and then moved closer to his side. “There’s two letters missing,” he said, and Sherlock flinched, his eyes closing. “There’s gonna be another victim…isn’t there?”

Sherlock nodded, or tried to, but his neck wouldn’t quite accommodate the movement beyond a quick spasm. “It would seem so,” he murmured, trying to step away, but his knees rattled out from under him the second he unlocked them, marker falling from his hand to the floor as he snapped his fingers to the edge of the table, clutching tight to hold himself aloft. “I’m fine,” he barked as Lestrade moved to grab his arm. “I’m fine,” he repeated, but this time it was breaking, his fortitude cracking, because he wasn’t fine, nothing was fine, and nothing would ever be fine again.

“Sherlock, what- What does it mean?”

Sherlock steadied himself, forcibly focusing on the details, the facts he could impart to hold the panic at bay. “Moriarty,” he said, and Lestrade’s eyes widened. “It’s Moriarty.”

“I- Are you sure?” Lestrade asked, brow furrowing. “I mean- You can’t know that for sure. This could- It could all be a coincidence.”

“A coincidence?” Sherlock snarled, rounding on the sergeant, his hands rattling in fists at his sides. “A coincidence!?” He spun, arm flying out in a burst of furious energy, and one of the boxes of files went flying, slamming against the wall in an explosion of folders and paper. “Look at it, Lestrade!” he shouted, jabbing a hand at the list of names. “That’s no coincidence! And of course it’s Moriarty, you know that! Even you aren’t that inept, who else could it be!?”

“Sherlock, calm down,” Lestrade urged, lifting his hands, but Sherlock was gone, breath heaving ragged through his lungs and pounding in his ears, and he lunged out an arm to the table, bracing himself as the world spun.

“Calm down?” he bleated. “Calm down!?” He then laughed, high and hysterical, and Lestrade looked genuinely afraid of him for perhaps the very first time. “How the hell am I supposed to calm down!?”

“Sherlock, you have to breathe.” Lestrade moved toward him, hands batting soothingly at the air, and Sherlock blinked at him, incredulous. “We can handle this. Set up a protection detail. Move you to a safe house, even.”

“No,” Sherlock replied, shaking his head, closing his eyes as he tried to focus, tried to think, because he couldn’t afford to panic right now, couldn’t afford to be blind. “No safe house. And no protection detail either. Your men are too obvious; he’d notice.” He forced his lungs to work, dragging air in and out with conscious effort as his mind began to clear. “I’ll-I’ll call Mycroft. He won’t think anything of that, think it’s just Mycroft being paranoid, sending extra people around.”

Lestrade blinked, moving around the edge of the table toward him. “Are you- Sherlock, are you talking about John?”

Sherlock lifted his head, frowning. “Of course I’m talking about John,” he snapped, letting anger rule for the moment.

Lestrade’s jaw dropped. “You mean you’re not gonna tell him!?”

Sherlock rattled his head, planting his palms on the table as he stared down at the metal surface. “No. Not now. Not right away.”
“Sherlock!”

“What good would it do!?” Sherlock raged, arms flinging out to his sides as he turned on Lestrade’s scolding expression. “He wouldn’t hide! He’d take it as a challenge, be even more stubborn than usual! And he has his interview with Barts in a few weeks. No, no,” he muttered, shaking his head back to the table again, “I can’t tell him. Not yet.”

“Sherlock,” Lestrade urged earnestly, and Sherlock turned his back to him, “you have to tell him. You can’t just let him go wandering around, not knowing there’s a madman—”

“I won’t!” Sherlock interjected, spinning back. “I told you, I’ll call Mycroft. I’ll take care of it.”

Lestrade stared at him, head shaking dazedly before his expression slowly turned to furious again. “Are you insane!” he shouted, and Sherlock flinched. “Sherlock, you can’t take care of something like this! You can’t possibly think you can—”

“I’LL TAKE CARE OF IT!”

Lestrade startled away from him, eyes wide, but Sherlock couldn’t stop, the words tearing painfully through his throat in a way that had nothing to do with his illness.

“I can fix this!” he screamed, voice shaking almost as much as his hands. “I can solve it! I can do that, me! Nothing is going to happen to him, nothing is ever going to happen to him! I started this!” His voice cracked, and he closed his eyes a moment, pushing back the burning, and then he pushed it all back, summoning up a shield of cold determination. “I’m going to finish it.” He levelled a firm look at Lestrade, daring him to contradict, but the man remained silent, his mouth closing.

“I’ll tell him,” Sherlock continued, letting some of his anger slide away as he turned his head to the side. “Eventually. Soon,” he added as Lestrade opened his mouth with an intake of breath. “I just—I need time. I need a plan. Please?” He looked up, knowing what he was asking, knowing what it would take, but he needed this, needed a chance. “Just…give me time? Please?”

Lestrade’s expression rippled with a battle fought within his mind, and then, finally, he nodded. “Okay,” he breathed, nodding as he ran a hand up the back of his neck. “Okay. But I’m coordinating with Mycroft,” he added firmly. “There’s no way you’re not having some kind of police detail. You said John’s at an away game now?”

Sherlock nodded. “He’s got someone with him. Mycroft always has a plant in the audience for the game, as well as someone staying at the hotel.”

Lestrade didn’t even look surprised, only nodded down at the ground. Finally, he lifted his head with a small sigh. “You should go home,” he advised, though Sherlock doubted he could refuse. “I’ll have someone drive you. And they’ll stay outside the night, just in case.”

Sherlock knew it wasn’t necessary, knew nothing would happen tonight, knew enough about Moriarty to know he was nowhere near done with setting the stage, but he also knew all these arguments would be futile, so he simply nodded. “Alright,” he replied, feeling the beginnings of the adrenaline crash tugging at his muscles. “Thank you,” he added, giving Lestrade a pointed look, and the man returned it, still torn even as he nodded. Sherlock turned away, walking toward the door, but Lestrade called him to a halt.

“You do understand what this means?” he asked, and Sherlock stopped in the doorway, his jaw tightening. “You know this isn’t really about John?” A few footsteps moved over the tile as Lestrade came to the edge of the table, his voice a bit closer at Sherlock’s back when he spoke again. “He
wants you, Sherlock,” Lestrade said, and Sherlock flinched, guilt rising hot in his throat, though that had surely not been Lestrade’s intention. “And this guy—Well, he doesn’t seem the type to back down. He’ll kill him, Sherlock,” he said, voice dropping with painful sincerity. “You know that. He’ll kill John.”

Sherlock swallowed, closing his eyes to the ground, and then, nails digging into his palms as his hands curled to fists in his pockets, he lifted his head, back stiff and stoic against Lestrade. “That would be tremendously ambitious of him,” he bit, cold and venomous, and then strode forward, leaving Lestrade and his promise behind.

The first thing he did when he rounded the corner was text John, the second thing was nearly cry with relief when he replied, and then he met the officer Lestrade had summoned to take him home, the two of them riding with silence as Sherlock tapped away at his phone, responding with mechanic ease to John’s stories about the game and after party.

John stopped texting at some point, presumably having gone to sleep, and, shortly after, they arrived at Langley, Sherlock stepping out of the car and away without a word. The officer lingered, however, the headlights passing in at least two circles before Sherlock reached the Kingsley House door, and he cast a glance back as he entered, shooting a glare that was likely lost on the man due to the distance. His steps grew heavier as he drew near the dorm room, exhaustion finally catching up with him, and he had nothing more planned than collapsing onto their now-double bed as he opened the door, flicking on the light before his stomach dropped out.

Their beds were back to their separate sides, made up impeccably once again, as if a maid service had come through, and there was a brief moment Sherlock panicked about what that would mean before his eyes alighted on the object placed on John’s bed, the situation suddenly so much worse than housekeeping gossip.

There, posed in the center of John’s bed, was a pair of trainers. They were old, a decade or so, but impeccably cared for, and Sherlock moved closer, staring down at them, his lip quivering before he set his jaw tight.

He had hoped, a frailty of human conscious he had allowed himself to succumb to just this once, but there was no mistaking it now, no misinterpretation he could orchestrate with denial, because there was only one thing Carl Powers’ trainers on John’s bed could mean, and Sherlock sank to the edge of his own bed, burying his head in his hands.

This was all his fault, his mistake for thinking he could ever be normal, to ever even make an attempt. He was cursed, he always had been, and now…now John was going to pay the price, a casualty of the forfeit of his diligence. But, no matter how hard he tried, no matter how afraid he would never admit he was, and no matter how selfish, he couldn’t bring himself to regret it. And he wasn’t giving it up.

Standing in a sweep of his coat, he stormed across the corridor, grabbing a pair of tongs and a large plastic bag before returning to the dorm, carefully lifting each trainer and placing it inside. He then sealed it up, moving back across the hall to store the evidence in the bottom drawer of his desk, the one mostly full of files John had deemed boring—and would therefore never look at—before returning to the room, slamming the door behind him. He hovered a moment, and then leapt forward, dragging the beds back together, a small act of defiance that nevertheless burned bright in his chest. After a quick sweep for bugs and cameras, he collapsed down onto his side of the combined mattress, not even realizing his hand was dialing until he heard the ringing.

“Hullo?”
Sherlock closed his eyes, head lolling back onto the pillow as he savored the sound of John’s sleepy voice. “Hey,” he croaked, and then cleared his throat, hoping any distortion would be written off to his illness as opposed to the tears beginning to burn at the corners of his eyes. “Did I wake you?”

“No,” John lied, and Sherlock smiled even as a tear leaked out and trailed down his temple to the pillow, and he blinked, trying to clear the rest of them. “Just a sec,” John murmured, and there was a shuffling of blankets, a rustling that seemed to indicate movement, and then the small click of a door, John likely having shut himself in the hotel bathroom. “What is it? Are you alright?”

Sherlock puffed a laugh, shaking his head even though John couldn’t see it, but he needed the time to swallow around the lump in his throat. “Nothing, I’m fine, I just-“ He faded away, the words that should follow foreign to him, but John, as always, understood, and chuckled softly.

“I miss you too,” he said, and Sherlock’s face crumpled, more tears pressed out as his eyes pinched shut.

“I didn’t say that,” he muttered, following the script, and John laughed, bringing a reluctant smile to Sherlock’s face.

“It was subtext,” John said, his shrug audible in a rustle across the line. “But, seriously, what’s up? You never call.”

“I- I call,” he countered, and John sniffed.

“No, you ‘prefer to text’,” he mocked, and Sherlock smiled, settling further into the bed, John’s voice already starting to calm him. “So, what is it? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” he clipped. “Just…couldn’t sleep. How was the game?”

“We won,” John said, a touch dismissive, his mission of uncovering Sherlock’s hidden agenda clearly not forgotten. “Mike took a pretty bad hit. I’ve been running back and forth to the ice machine since we got back.”

“You’re staying with Mike?” Sherlock asked, rubbing his face dry as he pulled the phone away and sniffed.

“Yeah. I think he’s asleep now though.”

It was silent a moment, but John’s intonation suggested he hadn’t been finished, so Sherlock simply waited.

“He knows,” John said, his voice growing quieter even as it pulled tight. “About-About us. Talked to me about it on the coach.”

“Oh?” Sherlock inquired, though he was unconcerned, Mike’s awareness of the shift in their relationship having already been obvious to him.

“Yeah, he- It was good,” John clipped. “He-He’s happy for us. I guess.”

“And that…bothers you?” Sherlock surmised, but John quickly contradicted it.

“No, no, it’s just- It was…unexpected.”

“Why?” Sherlock asked, rolling onto his side, phone held over his free ear. “Did you expect him to react negatively?”
“No, I just- I don’t know.” John sighed, and Sherlock imagined him stretching his fingers over the bridge of his nose, rubbing at his eyes. “Forget I said anything; I’m not making any sense. Hey, why are you still awake, anyway?”

“I’m in bed,” Sherlock offered, and John chuckled.

“Well, then you’re halfway there, I guess. You should go to sleep though. Tons of homework to make up this weekend.”

“Yes, I suppose I should,” Sherlock admitted with a sigh, but he made no move to say goodbye.

John didn’t either, instead chuckling soft and low in Sherlock’s ear. “No, you hang up first!” he mocked, his voice shrill and breathy, and Sherlock laughed even as he felt a physically impossible fissure spread across his heart.

“Goodnight, John,” he said, accidentally tender where he’d planned sarcasm, but the smile it brought to John’s face was audible in the reply.

“Goodnight, Sherlock,” he answered, breathtakingly fond, and then, with a final rustle of fabric and fingers, the line beeped twice, dead.

Sherlock lowered the phone to his chest, sucking in a breath as he closed his eyes. The air rattled past his lips when he released it, and he blinked up at the ceiling, trying to stall the tears, but they gnawed at the corners of his eyes, breaking their bonds and trickling free in cold trails down his face, and, all the while, he held the phone to his chest, pressing the plastic into the skin until he could feel his heart throbbing through it.
FINALLY! I know this took forever, but it's almost 20k, and a lot happens, so, hopefully, you can forgive the delay. Whether you can forgive me for some of the other stuff, however...

Anyway, as any of you who read my Johnloctober series know, I'm doing a 25 days of Johnlock like that as well, so I'm taking Christmas/holiday-themed prompts from all of you! In the interest of full-disclosure, I already have 47, but some of them end up doubling up, and I could always do more than 25 if a lot stuck out at me, so feel free to get your prompts in, either here or at my tumblr!

On to the teaser!

"Alright, alright," John muttered, picking up the hanger of the grey shirt and holding it in front of him. "Now," he clipped, flipping the ties over the front, "which one?"

Sherlock groaned, flopping back onto the bed, his brown hair bouncing as he splashed into the duvet.

"Hey!" John barked, glowering down at the boy. "I helped you with your two hundred and forty types of tobacco ash-"

"Two hundred and forty-three," Sherlock murmured up at the ceiling, and John's eyes slipped to slits.

"Whatever," he bit, and Sherlock lifted his head, raising a brow, "the point is, I helped you. Now"—he lifted the shirt, adjusting the ties to overhang either side of the buttons—"which one of these says 'I promise I won’t flunk out or kill anyone'?"

"What about this one?"

"You wanna add a third option to this fiasco?"

"Sherlock."

The brunette sighed, rolling his eyes in response to John’s narrowed ones as he sat cross-legged at the foot of John’s bed, the current two ensemble options spread out over the duvet in front of him.

It was the day of John’s interview at Bart’s, and he had hardly slept the night before, tossing and turning until he finally woke Sherlock up with whispered questions as to his state of consciousness. Sherlock had glared at him for a moment, and then softened, sighing around a murmur of going to make coffee. That had been at 5am, and now, after a long day of barely keeping himself from screaming during classes, it was 4pm, John’s 6:30 interview ticking closer and closer on the watch he couldn’t help but check every few seconds.

They had gone over possible interview questions over the past couple hours—for the ninth time, Sherlock had pointed out—and the dilemma now was what he should wear, wanting to strike a
balance between professional and personable. Or, at least, that’s what the articles he’d read suggested he do.

“What’s wrong with the grey one?” Sherlock asked, waving a hand down at the first shirt, the one John had planned to wear until he’d woken up this morning positive he was making a grave mistake. “Didn’t you say that was your lucky shirt or something?”

“Yeah, it always has been, but that’s the problem,” John bemoaned, adding the thin blue pinstripe one atop the slate grey and muted green button-downs already spread over his bed. “I wore it the day of rugby finals last year, when I took Jeanette Parker to the end of year ball in Year 11, and for my interview here. What if all the luck’s used up?”

“Well, that depends,” Sherlock said, leaning forward as he planted his elbows on his knees, chin perching on his hands as they folded. “How much did you use on Jeanette Parker?”

John’s mouth dropped, already anxious stomach rippling with renewed panic. “I- None,” he croaked, and a corner of Sherlock’s mouth twitched in a smirk.

“You’re a terrible liar,” he said evenly, lowering his hands to his lap as he smiled, “but I suppose it’s rather thoughtful that you tried. Well, considering you used up so much luck on Jeanette-”

“Oh, shut up,” John snapped as heat crept up his neck, Sherlock chuckling smugly at him as he ducked back into the wardrobe to look at ties. “Probably used more getting in here anyway,” he added with a shrug, peeking his head out around the door as he heard Sherlock shift on the bed.

“How do you mean?” he asked, head tilting as his brow furrowed.

“I dunno,” John replied,shrugging as he leaved through his limited options for neckwear, “it was kind of a longshot. And then I ended up with you for a roommate.” He turned to the brunette, flashing his most dazzling grin. “Doesn’t get much luckier than that.”

Sherlock blinked at him, and then his lips trembled in a smile he very valiantly fought to press flat, biting hard at his lip as he turned his face to the wall. “Don’t let Jeanette hear you say that,” he muttered, and John laughed, plucking a couple ties from the hanger as he moved to stand over the shirt options.

“Okay,” he sighed, looking between the button-downs, tongue sliding out over his lips as he thought.

“Oh, just wear the grey one!” Sherlock blustered, flipping at a sleeve. “That’s the one you wanted in the first place, and you know you’re going to go back to it eventually.”

“But-”

“John!”

“Alright, alright,” John muttered, picking up the hanger of the grey shirt and holding it in front of him. “Now,” he clipped, flipping the ties over the front, “which one?”

Sherlock groaned, flopping back onto the bed, his brown hair bouncing as he splashed into the duvet.

“Hey!” John barked, glowering down at the boy. “I helped you with your two hundred and forty types of tobacco ash-”

“Two hundred and forty-three,” Sherlock murmured up at the ceiling, and John’s eyes slipped to
slits.

“Whatever,” he bit, and Sherlock lifted his head, raising a brow, “the point is, I helped you. Now”—he lifted the shirt, adjusting the ties to overhang either side of the buttons—“which one of these says ‘I promise I won’t flunk out or kill anyone’?”

Sherlock huffed a small laugh, but did sit up, eyes shifting between the ties. “That one,” he said, pointing to the deep navy option, dappled with paler blue dots spaced in even rows across the fabric.

“Really?” John leaned over the hanger, swinging the tie toward the center. “I’d have thought the solid black would look more professional.”

“It would,” Sherlock replied with a shrug, “but it would also look like you were trying to make a good impression.”

John blinked. “You do remember what this is for, don’t you?” he asked, and Sherlock rolled his eyes.

“Of course, I remember,” he muttered, rattling his head, “it’s all you’ve talked about for weeks. The black one,” he continued, cutting off John’s rebuttal, “is far too obvious a choice, the sort of thing everyone would imagine was the right thing to wear in order to look the part of a capable candidate.”

John frowned down at the offending tie, slowly catching up. “As opposed to actually being a capable candidate,” he surmised, and Sherlock smiled as he nodded, a rare gesture of impressed approval that burned hot over John’s heart like a badge of honor.

“The blue is just as professional,” Sherlock continued with a flick of his fingers, “but far less studied. And, besides,” he added with a shrug, “it’s always good to have something to set you apart in their minds.”

John smiled, lowering the clothing to his sides. “What would I do without you?” he crooned, and Sherlock scoffed, shaking his head as he looked over the side of the bed.

“I dunno,” he murmured, and then his expression fell, mouth curving down as he blinked, a thoughtful wrinkle forming between his brows. “Probably be better off,” he said, looking up at John with a glass smile, and John frowned, puzzled.

“What?” he questioned, stepping forward, depositing the shirt and ties on the bed. “Why would you—”

A text message beeped through on his phone, buzzing against his desk, and he moved toward it, casting a troubled glance down at Sherlock as he passed, grey eyes carefully averted from his. Swiping across the screen, he opened the message, smiling faintly in spite of the lingering wriggling in his stomach.

“My mum,” he said, bobbing his head back to Sherlock, who had turned to watch his face as he read. “Wishing me luck on the interview. Mycroft’s janitor lets her use his phone for texts sometimes in-between her allowed phone time.”

Sherlock nodded, no doubt having already known, and John sighed down at the screen, pinching at the bridge of his nose. “What?” Sherlock asked, and John turned to him, ready to get back to him being the one getting answers, but there was something in Sherlock’s eyes that stalled his tongue, a hard stubbornness that told him he wasn’t getting anywhere with that right now.

He closed his mouth a moment, looking back to the screen as he pushed down his frustration. “I’m
just worried,” he muttered, shrugging as he set the phone back down on the wood. “She’s been in there over a month.”

“She can stay as long as she needs,” Sherlock supplied, but John shook his head, turning to sit back on the edge of the desk, his arms crossing.

“No, that’s not what I mean,” he said, and Sherlock waited, head tilting up at him. John lifted a hand, grinding his fingers into his temple a moment before he spoke. “What if- What if she never gets better?” he asked, blinking across at Sherlock’s desk. “What if, no matter how long she stays there, she’s never ready to leave? What if she falls off the wagon as soon as she gets out? What if-”

“John,” Sherlock interjected, fingers resting warm on his elbow, and John stopped, neck snapping toward him. Sherlock smiled, his hand slipping away. “It’ll be fine,” he assured, and, somehow, just the way it always did, it made John feel better hearing it from Sherlock Holmes, even though, by rights, even he had no way of knowing. “If your mother is half as stubborn as you are, she’ll be out within the month,” he added, and John smiled, looking down at his feet.

“Yes,” he said, nodding. “Yeah, I suppose you’re right. About my mum, I mean,” he amended, bobbing his head toward the detective. “I’m not stubborn.”

“He said stubbornly,” Sherlock murmured, beaming with impish innocence as John sneered at him.

Just then, Sherlock’s phone rang, and he scrambled in the pockets of his uniform trousers, wrenching the mobile out and holding it aloft in front of his face. An indiscernible expression rolled across his features, but John could at least interpret the sudden shift in his color, his face paling even further as he stared fixedly at the name.

“Lestrade,” the detective said stiffly, leaping up to standing. He looked at John, eyes hard and jaw tight. “I can–” he began, pointing toward the door, but John shook his head, lifting a hand in dismissal as he passed him.

“No, it’s fine,” he assured, swallowing down the suspicion rising bitter in his throat. “I have to get changed anyway.” He attempted a frail smile, a paltry effort Sherlock didn’t even bother returning, and snatched his clothes up off his bed, moving out into the corridor, the sharp bark of Sherlock’s greeting passing through the door just before he clicked it closed.

The temptation was there, but passed quickly, Sherlock no doubt noticing immediately if John attempted to linger, so he crossed to the lab, shutting that door behind him before leaning against it. His head thunked heavily against the wood, his eyes closing in time with the impact, and, for a long moment, he simply breathed, fingers forming a fist in the fabric of his shirt as he tried to quell the nausea in his stomach.

Something was wrong, very wrong, the sort of wrong you can feel creeping over your bones like frost, and, just the same, the buildup was slow, John not noticing it was there until it was far too late to ward it off. Even now, though it was obvious, John couldn’t pin down how he knew, no moment of epiphany in which anything untoward had happened, but, regardless, he did still know something was wrong with Sherlock Holmes.

He was the same, arguably—just as belligerent and bullheaded as ever—but it was the wrong kind of same, as if the boy had reverted to his factory settings. Not that there had been anything wrong with Sherlock to begin with, but he had softened since, become less cold, less withdrawn. At least, John had thought he had, but the nights Sherlock spent locked up in his lab muttering vague explanations and returned ‘goodnight’s would attest to the contrary.
John sighed, shaking his head as he pushed off the door, stepping into the bathroom as he tugged his jumper over his head.

At first, he had blamed himself, questioning everything from his handwriting to his morning breath, but, in the end, all his theories were rebuffed, Sherlock not the type to let a grievance go unspoken if it were against another person. No, it was this case, John was sure of it.

Sherlock was staring at the pictures of the victims night and day, going over every millimeter of them with a magnifying glass until his eyes were washed red, and then he would snarl, sliding the instrument across his desk and railing against the limitations of his body. John would nothing short of manhandle him into bed then, gripping tightly to the detective’s waist as he held the ever-thinning body against his, but, without fail, Sherlock would be gone in the morning, back in his lab hissing down the phone at Lestrade.

John was considering starting some sort of journal just so he could prove the sergeant talked to his boyfriend more than he did these days, but that wasn’t Greg’s fault, Sherlock constantly texting questions he angled away from John’s eyes before looking crestfallen at the reply. John had asked him more times than he could count what was going on, what Lestrade had said, but Sherlock would just mumble something about another dead end and skitter away, shutting the door between them. It wasn’t as if John hadn’t known Sherlock was foolhardy in his focus, but this was a whole new level, and, frankly, it was dangerous. John had his suspicions the case itself might be dangerous—more of Mycroft’s men than normal milling around being painfully obvious—but that was nothing new, nothing they couldn’t handle. Not that there even was a ‘they’, Sherlock evidently determined to do everything by himself.

John’s heart sank, his fingers slowing over the knot of his tie as he adjusted it.

He was no Sherlock Holmes, not by any stretch of the imagination, but he wasn’t stupid. He could help, but not so long as Sherlock refused to need it. Or him.

The bathroom door banged open, slamming hard against the doorstop and startling John back against the wall.

“What the-!” he spouted, but got no further, Sherlock rushing in with a blur of dark hair and wild eyes as he crashed into John, pinning him hard to the plaster before smashing their lips together. John responded instinctively, one hand moving to Sherlock’s waist before he’d even registered what was going on, and his stomach swept up in a flutter, somewhat unaccustomed to the affection.

Thinking back on it now, he couldn’t remember the last time they’d kissed, and especially the last time Sherlock had initiated it. John had been expecting that, of course—becoming invisible just par for the course whenever a new case popped up—and it hadn’t exactly bothered him, but now, his hand lifting to Sherlock’s neck as he none too gingerly parted the man’s lips with his tongue, he realized how much he’d missed it. And yet…

As in everything lately, something was just a little off, just slightly askew from normal. Sherlock pushed back just a bit too hard, too urgent, twining his tongue with John’s as his hands fisted into the fabric of John’s shirt where it skimmed his ribs. He shifted forward, hip bone digging into John’s abdomen as their chests grazed with every traded breath, and John lifted his hands to Sherlock’s sides, knowing he had to act fast or he’d no longer be able to.

“Sherlock,” he panted, pushing lightly against the brunette, a nudge of a suggestion, but Sherlock ignored him, hand snapping up to lift John’s chin again.

His fingers slipped down John’s neck, hooking lightly into his collar as he swept his tongue over
John’s bottom lip before slinking back inside, and John gasped, mind temporarily spinning away from its purpose. Sherlock’s hand moved down his chest, following slowly along the planes of his buttons, and there was a part of John, a voice screaming from the spiking heat in his stomach that was every kind of okay with this, but he blinked, focusing the louder, logical portion that reminded him they were in the bathroom of their dormitory, that he had an interview in a couple hours, and that Sherlock was clearly in no condition to be taking these sorts of steps in their relationship.

“Sherlock, stop,” he tried again, breaking their lips apart as he pushed at the man, but, once again, Sherlock ignored him, his hand sliding further and further down until his palm skimmed John’s belt buckle. “Sherlock!” John cried, planting his hands and shoving hard at the brunette’s shoulders, rattling him back far enough for John to escape to the side, nearly toppling over the ledge of the bathtub as he retreated. “Stop! What are you-” He stopped, anger faltering as he finally got a clear look at the boy’s face.

Sherlock’s lips were flushed, his chest undulating with ragged breaths, but, for all the emotion scrambled in his eyes, nothing resembling desire was included. His eyes were sharp, the edges pulled taut with tension, and he looked—as best John could describe it—afraid, panicked desperation written clearly in the searching flicks of his gaze over John’s face.

John frowned, prying into Sherlock’s eyes as he stepped tentatively forward. “Where are you right now?” he asked in a breath, and Sherlock recoiled, more a shift in the air than any movement of his body.

He blinked, pain momentarily creasing his brow, and then his jaw set, expression bolting down. “Sorry,” he muttered, eyes dropping away from John’s to the wall. “I-I shouldn’t have- We should go.”

“No, wait!” John called, lunging forward to grab the man by the wrist, and, though Sherlock did halt, his face remained turned toward the door. “What’s the matter with you lately? You’ve been all over the place!”

“I don’t know what you-”

“Like hell!” John promptly cut off, and Sherlock closed his mouth, eyes blinking aimlessly out at the lab beyond. “You know exactly what I mean! Look, Sherlock, I know this case is bothering you, but-”

“Bothering me?” Sherlock snapped, yanking his arm out from John’s hand as he spun to glare at him. “It’s a hell of a lot more than bothering me! Five people are dead, and I-”

“Five?” John interjected, frowning as he thought. “I thought- Did they-”

“Yes,” Sherlock answered stiffly, eyes blinking down at the floor as a muscle in his jaw twitched. “This morning. Anna Nichols.”

John’s heart hitched, his eyes dropping ashamedly to Sherlock’s chest. “I- Is that why Lestrade called?” he asked, lifting his gaze to Sherlock’s stray one. “Do they have something?”

“No,” Sherlock snarled, shaking his head at the mirror, “nothing. Weeks and nobody has anything!” He spun, kicking the side of his shoe hard against the doorframe, startling John a moment before he leapt forward.

“Sherlock,” he urged, hands stretched out toward the detective, but not quite touching, afraid to prompt even further lashing out, “it’ll be alright. You’ll figure it out, I know you will. Maybe- Maybe
you just need a break.”

“A break?” Sherlock scoffed, turning his face to John with a bitter twist of a smile, but John just nodded, stepping closer.

“Yeah, just…work on something else for a while,” he suggested with a small shrug. “Clear your head a bit. Maybe, if you take a step back—”

“Take a step- Are you mad!?” Sherlock blustered, shaking his head at John, furious with incredulity. “I can’t afford to take a break; this is my job! People will die if I can’t solve it! I can see how that might be a difficult concept to grasp for someone whose biggest problem is which tie to wear, but some of us have real responsibilities!”

John staggered back a step, Sherlock’s words slicing through the air like a twin jab to the stomach and slap across the face. His eyes dropped away, catching the bare beginnings of the shift to horrified on Sherlock’s face before he looked down at his tie, swallowing down his climbing nausea. “Right,” he murmured, fingers twisting self-consciously at the point of the dotted fabric before falling back to his side. “Well,” he clipped, blinking away the angry sting of betrayal itching at the corners of his eyes, “I’ll just let you get back to it, then.” He pushed past Sherlock, the man’s face crumpling into a wince as he opened his mouth, but John barreled on, heading toward the door. “Sorry to waste your valuable time with my petty problems.”

“John-” Sherlock plead, footsteps flapping after him, but John left him unheeded, smashing open the door into the dormitory.

“I suppose you’ll wanna stay here,” he snapped, snatching up his coat off the back of his desk chair, gathering up the hat and gloves from the surface, “and I wouldn’t want to inconvenience you any further. If you could still call one of your cabs, though, that’d be good. Ya know, if it’s not too much of a bother.”

“John,” Sherlock said at his back, but John continued to ignore him, wriggling his fingers into his gloves. “John, I’m not- I didn’t mean it. You know I don’t think that.”

“Funny how it came out of your mouth, then,” John bit, breaking his own self-commanded silence as he tugged violently at the zipper of his coat, and Sherlock’s sigh hissed through the air as a shuffle of fabric drew up to his shoulder.

“John,” the man said softly, and John flinched his ear away from the sound, “I’m sorry, I- You’re right.”

John peered over his shoulder, turning his head just enough to bring the blurry image of Sherlock’s shaking head into his peripheral vision.

“This case, I- I probably do need a break.” He shrugged, eyes on his feet as they shuffled across the tile. “It’s just,” he hissed irritably, and John twisted to face him, softening in spite of himself, “I hate not knowing. I hate not being able to figure it out.”

“You will figure it out,” John assured, smiling frailly, and Sherlock’s skeptical eyes met his through dark lashes. “Just…look at something else for a while. Sleep. Eat,” he added, and Sherlock puffed a weak laugh, matching John’s tremulous smile. “You have to take better care of yourself, Sherlock,” he chided, stepping forward to press lightly on the boy’s chin, lifting his eyes. He stretched up his thumb, tracing around a corner of Sherlock’s mouth. “You won’t be able to help anyone if you run yourself into the ground.”
Sherlock sighed, nodding, his head turning slightly to press further into John’s fingertips. “I know,” he admitted quietly. “I- Lestrade said he had some cold cases I could take a look at. Maybe- Maybe I’ll pick those up while you’re at your interview. Focus on them for a while.”

John smiled, sliding up Sherlock’s jaw to brush a tendril of hair behind his ear. “I think that’s a great idea,” he said, and then brought his hand back to his side. “Of course, he could probably just drop them off,” he muttered, shrugging as he adjusted the cuff of his glove, “if you wanted to stay here. Me and my tie will be just fine going-”

“I know, I know,” Sherlock groaned, grinding the heels of his hands against his eyes, “I’ve been awful. I just-”

John cleared his throat, and Sherlock paused, biting at his lip a moment before he nodded, eyes focused somewhere around John’s chest.

“It’s no excuse,” Sherlock surmised. “I know, and I’m not-I’m not trying- I’m sorry.” He looked up warily through his lashes, fingers twisting together in front of him. “I don’t know why- Your ties aren’t petty,” he said with a soft shake of his head, “and this interview is important. I-I didn’t mean to-”

“I know,” John interrupted, smiling gently, and Sherlock blinked up at him, hesitantly hopeful. “It’s okay,” he added, shrugging, and Sherlock smiled, a sad quirk of his mouth.

“You really are a terrible liar,” he murmured, and John puffed an unamused laugh.

“Well, alright, it’s not okay,” he allowed, bobbing his head, “but it will be. You’ll just have to make it up to me.”

Sherlock’s head snapped up, eyes growing wary as they scanned over John’s growing smile. “How?” he asked, and John beamed.

“I dunno,” he chirped, shrugging as he brushed past Sherlock, fishing the boy’s coat out of his wardrobe before handing it back, “but I’m sure I’ll think of something. On an entirely unrelated note, you wouldn’t happen to have any baby pictures lying around, would you?”

Sherlock froze halfway through popping his collar, face paling as his eyes flew wide. “No,” he croaked, and John laughed.

“See, your mouth says no, but the fear in your eyes says yes,” he taunted, smirking as Sherlock swallowed. “Come on,” he cajoled, nodding toward the door, “I wanna get there early. I had a dream last night that the building kept moving and we had to chase it all over London.”

“We?” Sherlock inquired, flipping his scarf around his neck as he followed John out into the corridor. “I was with you?”

“How?” he asked, and John beamed.

“Where else would you be?” John replied automatically, locking the door, and then turned, flashing Sherlock a smile that quickly fell to confusion at the boy’s stunned expression. “What?” he asked, and Sherlock blinked, rattling his head.

“I- Nothing, I just-” He paused, mouth closing into a gentle smile. “You’re gonna be great,” he said, and John blinked, stunned even himself by the wave of calm that rushed over him at the reassurance.

“I know,” John mumbled, dropping his eyes to his jacket zipper as he aimlessly fiddled with it, and Sherlock chuckled, reaching out to pull John’s hands away, turning them over in his own.
“You are,” he urged, rattling John’s arms to prompt him to look up. “It’ll be fine,” he added with a smile and a nod, and then something shifted, a sincerity John couldn’t explain creeping into his eyes as the corners of his mouth twiched lower. “It’ll all be fine.”

John blinked, frowning curiously, but, just as he opened his mouth, Sherlock dropped his hands, stepping forward as he started off down the corridor.

“The cab should be here by now,” he said, and John turned, jogging a couple steps to catch up. “Gotta get going if we’re gonna have to hunt down the university.”

“I knew I shouldn’t have told you,” John muttered, shaking his head, but Sherlock just laughed, charging out into the snow as they made their way toward the school gates.

“Keep up, John!” he beckoned, and John glared up from where he was right next to him, thank you very much. “The game is on!”

John rolled his eyes, but did quicken his pace, feet moving as fast as he dared on the slick slush as they tore toward the waiting cab.

*****

Sherlock leaned against the exterior of the administrative building, watching time tick way on the screen of his mobile.

John’s interview had started 43 minutes ago, plenty of time for Sherlock to go to the Yard, pick up the cold cases Lestrade had mentioned, and stop to grab a couple takeaway cups from John’s favorite hot chocolate spot—not that he would admit to being a connoisseur of such a thing—before returning to wait at Bart’s. Of course, that wasn’t what he had done, instead sitting in the coffee shop for half an hour before getting the drinks and heading back, and guilt already wriggled in his stomach, tentacles of slimy shame that crawled up his throat and strangled his breath.

Lestrade hadn’t mentioned any cold cases, not since over a year ago when he had given Sherlock a box to get him off his back. They were still sitting in Sherlock’s lab, stored away in one of the metal shelving units used for his equipment, where he would pull them out from in a few days, claiming that Lestrade had wanted to add a few files before delivering the box to him. He would then scatter the files and pictures around, talk a bit about the different cases, ask John’s opinion here and there, and, hopefully, with the addition of a bit more sleeping and eating, John would have no more cause to worry Sherlock was obsessing over the strangulations. He would still be obsessing over them, of course, any interest in the cold cases only a placating pantomime, because there was only one case for Sherlock Holmes, now and until it was solved.

He had to keep John safe, and, unfortunately, that meant keeping him in the dark, at least for the time being.

Sherlock shifted against the rough stone of the building, his coat scraping as it snagged, and he twitched his fingers anxiously around the cup in his hand, looking once again to the door John would pop out of any second.

It wasn’t often Sherlock needed to be introspective, that he needed to stop and examine his motivations. When he lied, he lied, decisively and unashamedly, but this… It felt ugly, like a sickness growing inside him, creeping stealthily over his internal organs, and it hurt now, a palpable ache or stab every time another deception rolled off his tongue. A dozen times a day, he wanted to tell him, to blurt out the truth and beg forgiveness he had never required from anyone else, but it never felt like the right time, and Sherlock was beginning to wonder for whose sake he was hiding it anymore:
John’s or his own. Sure, John had this interview, and his mother, and rugby, and the English project he was worried about, but Sherlock knew he could handle it, knew he would want to know regardless. No, this wasn’t about John anymore, if indeed it ever had been. It was Sherlock who was afraid, afraid to reveal a lie already gone too far, afraid to say the truth aloud and make it real, afraid…afraid of the last straw.

He sighed, leaning his head against the cold rock, his breath misting up above him in the chill, a fog temporarily clouding the stars.

Logically, he knew John had never given him any reason to doubt him. There was no sense in Sherlock worrying that he would turn tail and run if he found out about Moriarty, deciding Sherlock wasn’t worth the risk after all, but, in spite of all the evidence he mentally amassed, he couldn’t shake the feeling that had plucked at him since their very first meeting, that oppressive weight of impending doom that lingered in his chest.

Nothing ever stayed good in Sherlock’s life for long—nothing stayed at all, full stop—and he couldn’t help but wonder, listen closely for that inevitable other shoe to drop. It wasn’t fair of him, and he knew it, to think so little of John, but it wasn’t really John, it was him. He wasn’t worthy, and if, in the end, he turned out to be just a pit stop on the path of John’s life, the tacky tourist trap giant ball of yarn or transportation museum where John stretched his legs before moving on to bigger and better things, well, he’d count himself lucky to even get that close. And, as he’d tried to tell John countless times, he really would be better off without Sherlock. Everyone else seemed to come to that conclusion, anyway.

The door to his right swung open, and Sherlock startled up off the wall, standing straight as he scolded his heart for picking up as John appeared. It hadn’t been his proudest moment, cornering John in the bathroom earlier, and, sure, it was mostly because he had just heard about Anna Nichols’ murder from Lestrade, the final piece of the puzzle he had managed to half-convince himself would never come, but there was still no denying that John cleaned up well. Very well. Far too well, Sherlock should probably get him inside before somebody noticed.

John scanned to his right first, hands nervously sliding into his pockets, and then he turned, eyes alighting on Sherlock a second before his shoulders relaxed. A corner of his mouth quirked up as he approached, and Sherlock smiled back, holding the cocoa out toward him.

“How’d it go?” he asked, and John huffed a scoff through his nose, taking a swig from the lid.

He then paused, a frown creasing over his brow as he pulled the cup away, holding it aloft in front of his face. “Is this hot chocolate?” he asked, bobbing the cup in the air. “From that one place?”

“That one place?” Sherlock parroted, raising a brow, and John rolled his eyes. “Yes,” Sherlock answered, chuckling as John took another sip, “didn’t you see the logo on the cup?”

John shook his head, shrugging as he swallowed.

“So, you just…drank it?” Sherlock questioned, head waving in bemusement. “Without knowing what it was?”

“Well, yeah,” John murmured, licking a lingering drop of cocoa off his lip. “Not like you’re gonna poison me. Although,” he added in a miserable mutter, “I’m not sure I’d mind much at the moment.”

“What did they ask?” Sherlock inquired as they started walking, heading back up toward the main street.
“Oh, the usual stuff,” John said, feet scuffing along the pavement. “Why Bart’s, what I think I could contribute to the academic environment or whatever, why medicine.”

Sherlock nodded thoughtfully, sipping at his own coffee.

“I-asked about scholarships,” the blond muttered, and Sherlock turned to find him tapping anxiously on the side of his cup. “I wasn’t sure if I should, ya know, in case they didn’t think I could pay for it, but…well, I can’t, so—”

“They wouldn’t think that,” Sherlock interrupted, shaking his head, and John snapped his face up, eyes expectantly hopeful. “They’d see it as you planning ahead, being self-sufficient. It’ll help more than anything,” he explained, and John smiled softly to himself, dropping his head back to the steam rising from his cup. “What did they say at the end?” he asked, and John shrugged.

“They wouldn’t think that,” Sherlock interrupted, shaking his head, and John snapped his face up, eyes expectantly hopeful. “They’d see it as you planning ahead, being self-sufficient. It’ll help more than anything,” he explained, and John smiled softly to himself, dropping his head back to the steam rising from his cup. “What did they say at the end?” he asked, and John shrugged.

“What did they say exactly? The whole end of the interview, what happened?”

“Um, well,” John mused, looking thoughtfully out at the street ahead, “she said something about that being all, and then we stood up and I thanked her for her time—threw in some sycophantic nonsense about it being a pleasure,” he muttered, and Sherlock chuckled, “and then she said the usual ‘of course, no problem’ bit, and then…” He paused, a wrinkle forming between his brows, shadowed by a streetlamp as they walked beneath the yellow light. “She said ‘I’m sure you’ll be hearing from us very soon’,” he concluded, staring ahead a moment longer before nodding to himself, as if confirming his own accuracy, and then looked up, expression turning confused at Sherlock’s grin. “What?” he pressed, smiling perplexedly as Sherlock started to laugh. “What? Why are you laughing? Sherlock!”

“John,” Sherlock spluttered, shaking his head down at him as he laughed, “isn’t it obvious? You got in!”

“John,” Sherlock spluttered, shaking his head down at him as he laughed, “isn’t it obvious? You got in!”

John blinked, mouth trembling shut around a smile he tried to fight. “You don’t know that,” he mumbled down at his drink.

“Of course I do,” Sherlock chirped, grinning broadly as he scanned the street for a cab. “I know everything.”

“No, you don’t,” John chuckled, shaking his head. “You’re just guessing. I might’ve completely mucked it up.”

“I never guess,” Sherlock said, calling a cab with a wave of his hand, and John laughed as the black car approached, “and you didn’t muck it up. Come on,” he bade, nodding toward the car as it jerked to a stop, “I believe some sort of celebration is customary. Maybe that horrible burger place you like because you so desperately want to be American.”

John laughed, drawing up beside Sherlock as he opened the door, and then scoffed, rolling his eyes. “Whatever, man,” he said in the worst American accent Sherlock had ever heard, and Sherlock could barely give the cabbie the address through his laughter.

They were silent for a time, John alternating between drinking and tapping at his cup as he gazed out the window, and Sherlock just watched him, charting the soft curve of his smile as the lights shifted colors in his eyes.

“You really think I got in?” he finally asked, looking down at the black carpeted floor as he bit
lightly over his lip.

Sherlock smiled, stretching his elbow across the seat to nudge lightly at John’s arm. “Of course you did,” he assured, and John twitched his head to peer across at him through his lashes. “And, ya know, if you didn’t,” Sherlock teased, shrugging as he leaned back in his seat, “I can always build the school a new library or something. Then they’d pretty much have to-”

“Shut up,” John scolded, swinging an arm out to swat at him, but he was grinning now, hand falling down to Sherlock’s leg before tangling with his pale fingers. “Hey,” he muttered suddenly, turning to frown down Sherlock’s body, “weren’t you supposed to go to the Yard? Get those files?”

Sherlock’s stomach lurched, his throat thickening, and he swallowed, forcing a path for his required words. “Lestrade wanted to have another look through the files first,” he lied, sick at himself for the ease of it, “make sure there weren’t any more he wanted to add. He’s gonna send someone up to Langley with them sometime this week.”

John nodded, not the slightest bit suspicious, and Sherlock wanted to scream. “Okay, well, still,” John clipped, giving Sherlock a firm look. “We had a deal. No more- of that case,” he said, shooting a quick glance at the cabbie, who probably wouldn’t have reacted too kindly to the general description of ‘strangulations’ they had been using for the case. “And you have to eat. And sleep! I’m pretty sure you’ve just been waiting until I fall asleep and then sneaking out again.”

Sherlock dropped his face, chuckling even though John was entirely correct. The topic of sleeping arrangements now brought up, however, ushered earlier events back to Sherlock’s mind, and he swallowed, twisting at John’s fingers between his, figuring he should offer some kind of explanation, even if it couldn’t be entirely the truth. “Er, John?” he murmured, the blurry figure of the blond turning to him through his lashes. “About- About earlier, I- I didn’t mean to…to make you uncomfortable or-or anything.”

“You didn’t,” John said softly, shaking his head as he tightened his hold on Sherlock’s hand. “I just- God, this is awkward! Okay.” He turned, angling his body as he pulled Sherlock’s hand atop his thigh, taking it in both of his. “I- There’s not a lot I have to tell you, Sherlock,” he said, tingling over Sherlock’s hand with a grazing touch. “You probably already know what my…history is,” he muttered, dropping his voice, and the only thing that kept Sherlock from taking a dive out the car door and hoping for the best was knowing they had to have this conversation eventually, the only alternative to dying of sexual frustration, “but- Well, you never talk about-about you.”

Sherlock swallowed, hand twitching within John’s, and the blond smiled up at him, soft with reassurance.

“You don’t have to,” he said, shaking his head, “I don’t want to push you into anything, but- Well, that’s it, really.” He turned Sherlock’s palm up, stroking over the lines with the pads of his fingers. “I don’t want to push you into anything, the conversation or- or anything else,” he added with a shrug, his neck nearly crimson. “So, you didn’t really make me uncomfortable, I just- I’m uncomfortable thinking that you might not be comfortable, because we haven’t really talked about what that means for you. Ya know?” He looked up questioningly at Sherlock, blue eyes glittering with anxious vulnerability, and, for a moment, Sherlock could not speak, could not think, because John Watson was the absolute best thing to ever grace this mad, dark world, and Sherlock was the worst for lying to him.

Finally, he nodded, dropping his eyes to their hands, John’s fingers dark against the luminescent pallor of his palm. “Yeah, I- That makes sense,” he mumbled, and John huffed a small laugh, flipping Sherlock’s hand back over to interlace their fingers.
“Look, don’t worry about it, okay?” he urged, adding a reassuring squeeze. “I didn’t mean to pressure you. We’ve got all the time in the world.” He smiled, an achingly tender thing that Sherlock did his best to return, but, as John looked back out the window, Sherlock turned his eyes to their tangled fingers, stomach sinking along with his gaze as he wished so badly he could believe John was right.

*****

“Of course he likes you.”

“How do you know?”

“Nobody needs that much help with maths.”

“I dunno, he is pretty bad at it.”

“Maybe he’s faking. Ask John, he’s on the team with him.”

“What?” John asked, blinking up from his Shakespeare to find Molly and Mary staring at him.

“Is Kendall bad at maths?” Molly asked innocently, Mary giving her a sidelong glare.

“Kendall?” John echoed, frowning as he lowered the book to his lap. “As in Kendall Price?”

Molly nodded, and John shrugged, holding his page with a finger as he closed the volume, settling further down into the common room armchair.

“Not particularly, I don’t think,” he replied, and Molly turned a smug smile on a blushing Mary. “At least, he’s never mentioned it. Why?”

“Because,” Molly drawled, raising her eyebrows at the blonde girl, “he’s been spending quite a lot of time getting tutoring from Mary.”

“Really,” John chirped, smirking smugly at the woman, who narrowed her blue eyes at him. “Mary and Kendall sitting in a tree K-I-S-S- OW!” A copy of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* rocketed across the low table between them, hitting John hard in the side of the head. “You’re lucky that’s a paperback,” he muttered, rubbing at his skull, and Mary stuck out her tongue at him.

“They have another tutoring session this afternoon at Lindsey’s,” Molly continued animatedly, practically bouncing in her seat, and John smiled, her excitement contagious. “He’s totally gonna ask you out. Why else would he want to meet up today?”


Molly blinked at him, lips popping apart, and even Mary looked startled, head snapping up as her blush abruptly faded.

“Seriously?” the blonde sputtered, raising a brow, and John’s fingers twisted self-consciously into the cuffs of his uniform jumper. “You didn’t notice an upswing in flowers and candy floating around?”

John scanned around the room, finding that, indeed, there were rather a lot of people holding flowers or gathered around to read and squeal over a greeting card.

“And that singing telegram that interrupted English?” Mary continued, eyes wide with incredulity. “They’ve been all over the school today.”
“I-I thought it was some charity thing,” John mumbled, shrugging, and Mary and Molly rolled their eyes.

“It is,” Mary dismissed, flicking a hand through the air, “the student council does it as a fundraiser, but that’s not the point. John,” she said, dropping her head as she leaned forward, “it’s Valentine’s Day.”

John blinked, befuddled by her severe expression. “Okay?” he slurred, quirking a brow, and Mary huffed, rattling her head in frustration.

“You mean, you didn’t do anything?” she hissed, and John tilted his head at her.

“No,” he replied, and Molly’s mouth dropped open. “What?” he spluttered, but the girls just shook their heads at him, reeking of disappointment.

“Honestly, John,” Mary tutted, rolling her eyes to the ceiling, “you should’ve done something! I mean, it’s-” She paused, looking out over her shoulders before leaning across toward him, her voice lowering to a whisper. “It’s your first Valentine’s Day as a couple,” she said, and John tried to stamp down a blush. “It’s kind of important.”

John sniffed, chuckling as he shook his head. “Pretty sure Sherlock would kill me if I sent him a singing telegram, and, besides,” he muttered, shrugging, “we just…don’t do that sorta stuff. We don’t,” he added as Mary quirked a skeptical brow. “He probably doesn’t even know it’s today either.”

As if summoned by the mention, Sherlock rounded the corner, back from a trek to the cafeteria with the cardboard carrier of everyone’s beverages, a voyage he always volunteered for in order to escape practice.

“Well,” Mary clipped, lifting her chin at John, “we’ll just see about that. Sherlock?”

Sherlock stopped just behind her chair, hand hovering over the drink he had been about to pass down, a wary expression passing over his face as he looked questioningly to John, who just shrugged.

“Do you know what today is?” she asked, and Sherlock blinked, dark brow climbing toward his tousled curls, where bits of snow still clung from the trek outside.

“Um…Friday?” he replied, and John snorted, Molly leaning across to swat him in the shoulder.

“Oh, for the love of- You really don’t know it’s Valentine’s Day!?” Mary spouted, exasperated, and Sherlock startled, eyes widening at her ferocity.

“I-” he stammered, and then his face furrowed once more with thought. “Is that why everyone’s such a sappy mess?”
John exploded into laughter, knees curling up as he rolled back in the chair, clutching at his sides.

“Fine,” Mary muttered bitterly, taking the drink Sherlock passed to her before following his progress over to Molly, “I take it back. You’re perfect for each other. Just live out the rest of your cynical lives together telling small children there’s no Santa Claus.”

John just chuckled, taking the tea Sherlock passed down to him as he perched on the arm of John’s chair, but the detective shook his head, frowning as he blew down into the lid of his takeaway cup.

“John’s not cynical,” he challenged, slurping at what was probably coffee even though John had told him a hundred times to switch to tea. “He’s actually disgustingly idealistic.”

“You always know just what to say,” John crooned up at him, and Sherlock sneered.

“It’s a gift,” he clipped, turning back to Mary as John smiled into his drink. “I think it’s more probable we both simply have no patience for holidays manufactured by our capitalistic society to prey upon people’s naïve sentimentality.”

John, mouth full, snapped his fingers and pointed up to Sherlock to second the point, causing Sherlock to grin while Mary groaned.

“You two are sick,” she spat, looking between them with a grimace. “Seriously, I might have to cancel on Kendall later because I’ll still be throwing up.”

“Oh, he asked you out, then?” Sherlock inquired, and the entire group gaped up at him. He looked between each of them in turn, brow steadily creasing. “What?” he asked, lowering his cup to rest on his thigh. “He’s been trying to work up to it for weeks. Is this really not obvious to you people?”

John smiled fondly up at him, but the girls only continued to gape, and Sherlock sniffed derisively, blinking in incredulity as he drew his cup back up to his lips.

“Dear god, what is it like in your funny little brains?” he muttered, shaking his head. “It must be so boring!”

John laughed, swaying to nudge Sherlock’s side with his shoulder, and the brunette smiled down at him, peering over the rim of his mug.

There was the sound of a mobile pinging, and Mary lunged for it, digging the phone out of her purse. “It’s Kendall,” she said, tucking her hair behind her ears as she looked down at the screen, and the remaining three all exchanged raised-eyebrow glances. “He wants to meet now instead of 4. Says he got the time the coach leaves wrong?”

“What?” John spluttered, leaning forward, but Mary pulled the screen back from his eyes with a glare. “I told them a hundred times—”

“Seven.”

“Hyperbole, Sherlock, we’ve talked about this,” John snapped over his shoulder, and the brunette bit his lip around a smile as he lifted his cup to hide it. “I told them the coach left at 4:30 sharp. What time did he think it was?”

“He didn’t say,” Mary replied, shrugging down at the screen as she replied.

“Well, is anyone else confused?” John pressed, and Mary looked up at him, eyes flashing with waning patience.
“I read you the message,” she snipped, and there was a small tug at the back of John’s jumper, a warning from Sherlock he promptly obliged, leaning back from the girl. “It didn’t say anything about anyone else. I should- Can we reschedule this?” she asked, finger spinning in a vague circle around the group. “Saturday, maybe? When you guys get back?”

John nodded, swallowing down a mouthful of tea. “Yeah, sure,” he replied. “We should get back around noon. Wanna meet here at, like, 1?” he suggested, and the group nodded.

“Great!” Mary chirped, bouncing up, reaching over to snatch her projectile paperback from the floor by John’s chair. “I’ll see you guys later then!”

“Yep,” John murmured, sucking at his tea, “wouldn’t wanna keep Kendall waiting.”

Mary stopped, twirling on her heels to threaten down at him with a sharp finger. “You can’t say a thing to him!” she commanded, glaring shifting to include Sherlock too. “And you neither! I was your friend first, so, rugby teammate or no, this stays between us, alright?”

“Of course,” John said sincerely, thinking it best not to argue with her at the moment.

Mary’s eyes narrowed to slits, shifting skeptically between them. “And no teasing him either!” she added, and John’s stomach swirled at that, that promise a bit more difficult to make.

“Who, us?” he bleated, waving a hand between him and Sherlock. “We would never!”

Molly giggled, and Mary just glared, eyes turning to Sherlock. “Sherlock?” she asked, and the brunette chuckled, nodding as John looked up at him.

“We won’t tease him,” he swore, and then switched his drink to his left hand, lifting three fingers of his right aside his face. “Scouts’ honor,” he added, dipping his head, and Mary, after one last scan between them, turned on her heels and stalked out of the room.

“Were you really a boy scout?” John asked after he was sure she was out of hearing distance, twisting up to the detective.

“No,” Sherlock snorted, and John laughed, Molly’s higher one intertwining with it as she stood.

“Well, I guess I’ll head out too,” she sighed, brushing down the folds of her skirt. “Good luck with the game,” she bade, waving back at them, and they mumbled something vaguely grateful as they flicked their hands in reply.

John turned, eyes scanning over Sherlock’s face as he lifted his cup beneath his chin with both hands, slow smile blooming on his face.

“What?” Sherlock asked, eyes narrowing as they searched between John’s, and John just shrugged, smile broadening. Sherlock’s face fell flat, cup lowering to his lap. “You’re imagining me in one of those horrendous hats, aren’t you?”

“Yep,” John chirped, laughing as Sherlock rolled his eyes. He then sighed, sliding to the front of his chair as he shifted his cup to his right hand. “Well, I should try and track down the team,” he groaned, rising to his feet as he tugged at the hem of his jumper, “make sure nobody else is confused about what time we leave.”

“It’s 5, right?” Sherlock questioned, tilting his head, and John’s mouth dropped.

“No!” he spluttered, rattling his head. “4:30! Four-fucking-thirty, why is everyone-” He stopped,
fury dropping to a glare as he realized Sherlock was laughing. “Ass,” he grumbled, glowering down at the man, but Sherlock just grinned.

“Four-fucking-thirty,” he echoed amusedly, chuckling up at John’s scowl. He then stood, shuffling past the coffee table as they headed toward the corridor. “I think Mike and Devon are in the Baker common room,” he offered as they rounded the corner, hovering out of view.

“Alright,” John mused, nodding out the window at the snow he’d momentarily have to trek through. “What’re you gonna do?”

Sherlock shrugged, fiddling with the knot of his royal blue tie, a recent reversion back to proper uniform that they were both pretending hadn’t started after John had mentioned the color making his eyes look bluer. “Try and finish the Pickett case,” he replied, the first file they’d plucked from the box Lestrade had sent over yesterday. “Have to do a bit more research on the solubility of arsenic at various temperatures.”

John tilted his head, raising a brow. “Should I worry?” he asked, and Sherlock chuckled, shaking his head.

“No,” he assured, smiling impishly, “I promise I’ll only use the containers marked ‘Science’.”

John laughed, nodding back, happy his forcibly-implemented system was being put to good use after an unpleasant almost-explosion with the morning coffee. “I’ll be back to help you after I find everybody,” he said, tossing a glance over his shoulder to check the corridor behind him.

“It’s not really that difficult, you don’t have to-”

John swirled back, snapping his hand up to snatch at Sherlock’s tie, tugging the boy down to his mouth with a jerk of the blue fabric. The corridor probably wouldn’t be clear for long, so John made quick work of it, mouth shifting in a quick, rough press against Sherlock’s before he pulled away, swiping his tongue across the brunette’s bottom lip as he went, and Sherlock made a strangled whine of a sound that shook clear through John’s spine. “Yeah,” he breathed, tidying the knot of the tie before releasing it, smiling up at Sherlock’s dazedly blinking eyes, “you should definitely keep the tie.”

Sherlock’s brows twitched in confusion, and then he laughed, stretching back up straight as he scrubbed a hand over the back of his flushing neck. “Yeah, I, um… Yeah,” he mumbled, and John chuckled, smug pride sparking through his veins.

“I’ll see ya in a bit,” he promised, half turning back down the corridor, and Sherlock, mildly delayed, nodded.

“Right,” he croaked, and then cleared his throat, but the small creak in his voice was enough to keep John smiling like a crazy person all through his errand.

He was still smiling as he rounded the corner into their corridor just under an hour later, arm outstretched toward the laboratory door, when the door to their dormitory swept open, startling him across to the opposite side of the hall.

The man that appeared looked no older than John himself, but he was wearing a crisp, tailored jacket that lent him at least five years. It was a hideous green color—not quite green, not quite brown—but it still came in only second place to his hair, dark brown and slicked like something out of a ‘50s American sitcom. The dark denim and brown loafers, however, John could find no fault with. He appeared surprised by John’s presence for only a second before his face split into a wide grin, over
friendly in that distinctly car salesman kind of way.

“Hiya!” The man stretched a hand back to close the door as he moved to meet John in the corridor. “Sorry, is this your room? Must’ve got turned around. I’m looking for someone. Sherlock Holmes?”

The residual stunned effect of the man’s emergence faded as quickly as if he had flicked a switch. “Why are you looking for him?” he asked, folding his arms as he straightened. The man was taller than him—almost everyone was, really—but that had never stopped John before, and he took one look at the man’s manicured nails and fresh, chubby face and figured it wouldn’t take much to subdue him, if it came to that.

The man’s smile puckered a bit. “I’m a friend,” he said stiffly, and John only just managed not to snort. “I graduated from here last year. Are you new? I don’t remember you.”

“Transferred this year,” John replied, curt with the obliged information. “Sherlock’s my roommate,” he added, shifting just a little further down the corridor to place himself directly in front of the laboratory door, which Green Jacket didn’t seem to paying any mind to, clearly unaware of its purpose.

Green Jacket’s salesman simper finally collapsed. “Roommate?” he scoffed, barking a laugh, throwing his head back in a way clearly more for show than genuine amusement. “Rough luck, mate. How long you been stuck with him, then, a week? Two? Bet you didn’t fancy that assignment. How many did he go through before you?”

John’s shoulder lifted as his arms crossed tighter over his chest. “None,” he just shy of snarled. “I’ve been here since term started.”

The man blinked, mouth stuttering open, but John didn’t give him the chance to reply.

“Sorry, who are you, exactly? Sherlock didn’t mention anyone would be stopping by.”

Something flashed in the man’s eyes, as if finally understanding his attempts at charm were going to go unheeded. “Yes, well, there are a lot of things Sherlock doesn’t mention,” he drawled, lip curling over his teeth. “Like me, it seems. I’m Sebastian Wilkes. I was Sherlock’s roommate for a while last year,” he said, and John hated himself for betraying his surprise, but it was obvious he had as Sebastian’s grin grew. “Oh, he didn’t say? I suppose it’s not quite polite, though, is it? Talking about the old with the new.” Sebastian continuing grinning, but there was no humor in his eyes, and John was torn between pounding his head into the wall or staying polite for the sake of information, because surely Sebastian couldn’t mean…

It wasn’t worth it, John decided, fingers tightening into his biceps. He could ask Sherlock later. After Sebastian Wilkes’ blood was on his knuckles. “Look, I don’t know—” he started, stepping forward, arms uncurling to point a hand out at the slimy-haired boy, but the laboratory door flinging open cut them off.

“John?” Sherlock inquired, brow creasing down at him. “Why are you—” he started, and then stopped, eyes flicking to the intruder.

Sebastian Wilkes smiled at him, and John shifted slightly between them, shoulder overlapping Sherlock’s body in the doorway. “Sherlock!” he beamed, arms stretching wide, but he made no move to come forward, and Sherlock made no move to either.

If anything, the brunette locked into place, eyes widening for a moment before they narrowed sharply, posture stiffening as his fingers curled.
“Victor told me you were over here at Kingsley now. It’s been a long time. I thought you’d call,” Sebastian said, pouting, and it almost looked genuine except for the glinting in his eyes.

“I can’t imagine why you would,” Sherlock snapped, folding his arms, sleeves rolled up to his elbows, “considering I believe my parting words to you were ‘If I ever see you again, dental records won’t even be of any use in identifying your body’.”

John coughed over a snort.

Sherlock flashed him down a brief upward twitch of his lips.

Sebastian tugged at the lapels of his jacket, glaring between them both. He then laughed, a high, stilted thing that sounded like he was going to pull out a knife and slit your throat in a second. “Oh, you always did have quite the mouth on you.”

John was going to throw up, an ugly prickling thing twisting around in his stomach.

“What do you want, Seb?” Sherlock bit, rolling his eyes and turning back into the lab, but John noticed the faint tremor in his clenched fist as he followed after him. “I’m busy.”

“So I see,” the man crooned, stepping inside uninvited, but his eyes lingered over John rather than the lab. “I was in the neighborhood. Thought we could catch up.”

“I believe my previous parting sentiments speak for themselves.” Sherlock’s voice was strained, his fingers stiff as he grabbed a pipette, sitting down in the chair and turning his back to Sebastian.

Sebastian laughed, and John physically shuddered, knuckles cracking as his hands twisted into fists. Sherlock didn’t miss it, of course, and met John’s eyes just barely over his shoulder, shaking his head in an almost imperceptible quiver.

John tightened a glare at him for a blink, making no promises.

“Oh, come now, Sherlock, we had some good times!” Sebastian moved no closer, and yet John could feel his words creeping over him, like clammy hands pushing him aside and grappling at Sherlock. “We had so much in common!”

“And now no longer do.” Sherlock whipped out of his chair in a fluid turn John would have mocked him for rehearsing under different circumstances, but now the air was charged, and Sherlock’s eyes were sparking like lightning about to strike. “I think it’s time you left, Sebastian. And it would be advised for you to not return.”

Sebastian swallowed, proving himself the coward John had thought him to be, and then let out an airy, nervous laugh as he retreated backward, his face contorting with fear-laced fury. “You’ll call. You always did. Once an addict, always an addict,” he spat.

John’s insides hollowed out, the shock and rage vanishing in an instant to leave only black calm.

Inexplicably, as if he thought it was the less dangerous option, Sebastian then turned to John. “He needs it, you know,” he sneered, but his eyes kept flicking warily to Sherlock even as he tried to glare. “It’s only a matter of time, you’ll see. He’s only good for anything when he’s high!”

“Not anymore,” John said at the same moment Sherlock said, “Not with him,” but John was far too angry right now to figure out what that meant.
Seb looked between them, eyes turning skeptical, and then the thin smile returned, a pitiful veil against the terror. “Did he tell you about the car?” he continued, triumph in his gaze as Sherlock cringed faintly. “Or the library? OH, or the bleachers! That one’s a good one, isn’t it, Sherlock?”

“John-” Sherlock’s faint intervention came to him as if through water, and he flicked his eyes to the detective to find him looking at him like a bomb that’s countdown was running out, and there was no minimum safe distance. Whatever he saw in John’s face, his eyes widened, almost fearful, and it was the strangest expression Sherlock had ever directed at him.

Sebastian, however, didn’t seem to catch the hints, and continued smirking as John turned to him, pulling up a bright grin.

“Fascinating,” he hissed, and Seb’s confidence finally wavered as John ambled toward him, seemingly unconcerned. “Really, great stuff, but, if you don’t mind”—John lifted a hand toward him, as if to ask for permission he didn’t wait for—“I have a story for you. When I was 9, my father took me into the garden and told me it was about time I learned how to defend myself like a ‘proper soldier’” He curled his fingers around the words as he said them, smile holding fast while Sebastian’s collapsed. “He was ex-army, you see. Special Ops. One of those ‘The enemy is everywhere!’ types, ya know?” He dropped his head like he and Sebastian were sharing a grand secret, and the man paled. “So, three days later, I could fire a gun, had my own set of knives, a fairly impressive hand-to-hand repertoire—if I do say so myself—and a rather detailed diagram on how to snap someone’s neck.”

Sebastian swallowed hard.

John kept grinning, now barely feet from the cowering man. “The moral of the story, Seb,” he popped off his lips, “is that, if you don’t turn around right now and never come back, I can guarantee you won’t walk right for a week. And not in the fun way,” he added, shaking his head in false commiseration.

Sebastian was actually shorter than John now, he was leaning so far back, hands scrabbling behind him as he searched for the doorjamb.

John brightened suddenly, halting his advance and standing up straight, a giddy grin on his face that sent Sebastian into a spasm of wincing. “So,” he chirped, clapping his hands, and the man jumped, “any questions? Comments?”

Sebastian simply stared at him, frozen, his mouth quivering where it sat ajar.

“No?” He tilted his head, looking side to side, and caught Sherlock’s eyes again, wide and grey and transfixed. “Well then, I think we’re done here! I trust you remember the way out? You can forget the way in; you won’t need it again.”

Sebastian stared at him a moment longer, mouth slowly closing. He cast a glance to where John knew Sherlock stood behind him, apparently looking to him now for a reprieve, but there was no sound, no movement. Finally, he straightened, tugging at the lapels of his suit jacket. A haughty spark lit his eyes, his lips parting, but John raised an eyebrow, silencing him once more. With a last tense glance between the two students, he turned, his shoes slapping against the tile as he made his way down the corridor, until the only sounds in the lab were the distant voices filtering through the windows from outside.

“John?”

His back tightened at the word, and then he uncoiled, a sigh rushing through his nose as he hung his
head, neck and spine suddenly aching from the tension. Lifting a hand, he pressed his thumb and forefinger against his eyes, pinching up the bridge of his nose as he tried to push down the headache he could feel building just behind his brows. He was so tired, and they still had to pack for the rugby game, and, *fuck*, what Sebastian had said…

“John?” Sherlock’s voice was closer now, soft at John’s shoulder. “Are you alright?”

“I’m fine,” John replied, and he hadn’t meant to snarl. He sighed again, but still could not turn around. “I’m fine,” he repeated, the absolute exhaustion he felt sinking into the tone.

There was a soft rustle of fabric, Sherlock shifting somehow. “It wasn’t true.”

“Sherlock, don’t,” John entreated, curling his shoulder in as a blockade, but the detective skirted around it, coming up to his side where John could see him.

“I have to,” he said, eyes a bit tortured, but expression determined. “Otherwise, it will be awkward, and you’ll avoid eye contact for days until you *finally* work up the gumption to ask, and by then you’ll have built it up in your head to be something horrible, and-”

“Alright, alright, just…” He paused, biting at his lip, an anticipatory wriggle of dread in his stomach as he, in spite of himself, *did* avoid Sherlock’s gaze. “Make it quick.”

Sherlock nodded briskly, but there was an edge of pity in the tilt of his head. At least this was going to be a mess for both of them. “We-We were roommates,” he started, hands shaking a little as made a gesture of allowance. “And we were- There was-” He licked his lips, bit over the moistened spot, and then swallowed hard. “I’m sorry, I don’t know how to do this delicately,” he muttered in a desperate rush. “I don’t know what phrasing you will be most receptive to.”

“Just-Just say it,” John said, bracing himself as if for a blow, struggling to keep his eyes from pressing shut as his fingers clenched and unclenched against his thigh.

Sherlock gave him a brief look of entreaty, a plea for understanding, and then his face went its more typical clinical, and that somehow made it easier for John to bear as well. “We weren’t roommates for long,” he began, only the evasiveness of his gaze giving lie to his stoicism. “And not here, in case you were wondering. Over at Baker. I was using constantly back then; I don’t think I could have borne his company otherwise. Nor…anything else, for that matter,” he added with a quick flash of a glance toward John.

John blinked, ignoring the hurt and pain and twisted jealousy portion of his emotions and focusing in on the righteous fury. “He-He- While you were *high*?” His knuckles cracked into fists. “Sherlock, that- That’s *assault*!” He couldn’t say ‘rape’. He just couldn’t. Not when it was Sherlock and he hadn’t killed Sebastian when he had the chance.

“He never touched me,” Sherlock assured, eyes firm as they held John’s. “None of them did. That wasn’t- I didn’t let them.”

John’s heart was racing, beating so hard against his ribs, it hurt, but he forced himself quiet, watched patiently as Sherlock worked up to continuing.

“I-I was…curious. Not *curious,*” he added as John failed to suppress a wince. “Not in the way you think. I was curious *academically.* I-I didn’t understand. I couldn’t fathom what would drive people to such ridiculous lengths. I mean, it was just hormones, scientifically speaking. Surely another person being involved didn’t change anything. So, I- Well…”

“You experimented,” John said, and the irony of the word being *literal* in this context didn’t escape
him, but he was almost... well, relieved. Sherlock hadn’t liked Sebastian, hadn’t liked any of them. But who was ‘any of them’? He felt sick again.

Sherlock seemed to notice the spiral of emotions, and gave him a rather quizzical look before it switched to mildly chagrined. “Well, yes. I picked a rather random sample, male and female”—what the hell shape was John’s stomach trying to make!?—“and, naturally, there were parameters. Nobody ever touched me. Although, as it turns out, people don’t generally mind if you insist on it being one-sided.”

John tried to chuckle, but mostly just grunted, and Sherlock gave him a weak smile, the kind he got from nurses when he was a child and they assured him his shots were almost done.

“There was no kissing;” he hissed, evidently repulsed, “no oral contact of any kind”. He added a pointed glance here, as if to check John understood the multiple meanings, and even the small nod John gave in response made his stomach heave, vision swimming. The last of his explanation pushed out in a rush, as if he only had one more breath left in which to impart it. “And nothing penetrative. It was all exclusively manual, and most encounters happened entirely clothed. When you’re high, it never takes much. For them, I mean. I never…” He stopped, blinking rapidly, whatever words he had planned evidently escaping.

John’s entire body was numb. Even the thumping of his own heart was somehow dimmed, faint ripples of vibrations running through the heavy extensions of his limbs. “You never...?” he pressed, the hanging sentence bothering him in some faint, niggling way he couldn’t quite get his brain to focus on right now, like the feeling when you know you’ve forgotten something important but can’t for all the world remember what.

Sherlock swallowed, hands twitching as he looked down at them. “Not with another person, no,” he said, and it was so quiet, John’s humming ears barely registered it.

He nodded, and his head felt strangely disconnected, as if it were just lolling around on his neck. “Okay,” he breathed, only a hint of a squeak breaking through. “Okay.” He swallowed, still nodding, and then attempted to take a step back, but his knees failed and he wobbled before regaining his balance.

“John!?”

“Fine, I’m—I’m fine,” he murmured back, batting off Sherlock’s hand, and then he braced his hands on his hips, breathing in firm inhales and exhales as his nausea gradually dwindled.

“You’re upset,” Sherlock said, and John had to chuckle at that, but it was a shrill and strangled sound. “You’re angry and confused, and perhaps a bit disgusted.”

“Sherlock,” John pleaded, trying to hold a hand up, trying to put some distance between them because he needed to breathe, dammit!

“I can see all that John, I can always see it.” Sherlock couldn’t be stopped, was barreling on, words rushed and choked, and John’s discomfort quickly quieted, his focus redirected to concern as he looked up into pained grey eyes. “But I can’t see why!” he exploded suddenly, gesturing wildly out to his sides. “I don’t know why you’re angry! I can’t see it!”

“Sherlock,” John said softly, arms reaching out toward him, “I’m not angry. I’m not- Not at you. It’s not about you.”

“Is it the virgin thing?” he blurted, and John blinked, stunned, his body reeling where he had frozen.
“Should I have told you? I probably should have told you; you’ll be all worried now.”

“Sherlock,” John tried again, regaining his higher brain functions, but the detective twisted away from his reaching grip and began to pace, hands waving erratically.

“Unless you want to stop this altogether, which makes sense, I suppose;” he muttered, and John gaped, not sure how that many any sense at all.

“What? No, I-”

“And, of course, I won’t come to the game tonight,” Sherlock muttered, manic and oblivious to John’s protestations, “because you’re probably supposed to be sharing a room with me and it’s too late to switch. And it’s not like the team really needs a Consulting Coach—ridiculous title, now that I hear it aloud.”

“SHERLOCK!”

The detective jumped, as if, even though he had been talking to John, he had also forgotten he was there. The alarm gave way to a new expression, however, something broken and desperate that struck John so deep, he thought he might now believe in souls.

“I’m not- I’m not stopping this,” he said firmly, taking a few steps closer, but making no move to reach out.

Sherlock was practically vibrating, and John could almost imagine he could hear the note ringing off him, high and clear like his beloved violin.

“Not for anything, and certainly not because of this,” he continued, waving a hand at the door Sebastian had left through, and the promise fell so naturally from his lips, it took him a moment to realize why Sherlock looked surprised.

Sherlock stared at him like he was speaking another language, blinking at him wide and awed.

“I don’t care about…any of that,” he assured. “If I’m angry or confused or-or disgusted by anything, it’s not you, alright? It’s never you.”

Sherlock didn’t speak, didn’t look like he was even capable of it. He simply watched John, blinking slowly as the tension in his body gradually unwound. “You’re-” he began, and then paused, looking down to where his fingers tugged and twisted at the side seam of his trousers. “You’re not… leaving?”

John blinked, and then smiled, stepping cautiously closer. “No,” he said solemnly, and Sherlock smiled, a small, tentative thing. “Well, actually,” John said, lifting his hand to check his watch, “we’re both supposed to be leaving in about half an hour for that game you’re definitely still coming to.”

Sherlock chuckled, but nodded, looking at John through his lashes. “Alright,” he said, posture finally beginning to relax, “I just have to pack a few more things.”

“Yeah, me too,” John sighed, heading back across to the dormitory, and then stopped, hand freezing on the doorknob.

“What?” Sherlock asked, stopping at his shoulder, and John frowned up at him.

“Sebastian,” he said, swallowing down the anger that flared acrid up his throat. “I saw him coming
out of our dorm when I got here.”

Sherlock blinked, face furrowing with confusion as he looked up at the wooden door. “Why would he-” he began, and then stopped, lips dropping apart as his eyes widened. He skittered back across the hall, a faint tremor running through his hands as he paled.

“Sherlock?” John questioned, concerned as he turned back toward him. “Sherlock, what is it?”

“Victor,” the brunette quaked, leaning against the laboratory door as he stared fixedly at the dorm number. “He-He said Victor told him I lived here.”

John frowned, shaking his head at him I prompt.

“If-If he talked to Victor- If he saw him, and-and he was in our dorm…” He trailed away, a swallow moving down his throat as his grey eyes skittered helplessly between John and the door. “He-He said I’d call,” he continued softly, lips quivering over the words. “Before, I-I always- He always had-” Sherlock faltered, face pinching as his hands clenched, but John had heard enough, eyes widening as a leaden weight tugged at his stomach.

“Drugs?” he breathed, and, with a flinch, Sherlock nodded. “You think he- In there?” John pointed back at the dorm, and, again, Sherlock nodded at the floor. “But…why? Why would he-”

“I don’t know!” Sherlock cried, quivering hand running through his hair, and John startled back. “I don’t know, I-”

“Okay,” John soothed, lifting his hands out toward the brunette, who looked right on the edge of hyperventilating. “It’s okay, I- I’ll go look, alright?” he offered, waving a hand back at the door, and Sherlock finally met his eyes, nodding tremulously as he wrapped his arms tightly around himself. “Okay,” John eased, lowering his arms. “Do you have any idea where he would’ve hidden it.”

“I-” Sherlock stammered, staring once again at the door, mouth twitching over soundless syllables, and then he dropped his face with a sigh, shaking his head at the floor. “I can’t,” he whispered, blinking back up, and John’s heart stuttered at the faint glistening caught in the grey eyes. “John, I- I’m sorry, I- Don’t ask me,” he said, a lump moving down his throat. “You-You can’t ask me, I- I’ll-”

“You’ll lie,” John concluded with a solemn nod, and Sherlock let out a broken gasp, head lolling down on his neck.

“I’m sorry,” he panted, fingers digging hard into his biceps. “I’m sorry, I- I can’t-”

“It’s okay,” John assured, crossing the corridor to place his hands over Sherlock’s trembling arms, and it was okay, because if there was one thing John understood, it was the indelible hold addiction clasped onto its victims. “You told me,” he comforted, lifting a hand to cup gently at the side of Sherlock’s jaw. “You could’ve just not mentioned it, but you did. That counts for something, alright?” he urged, sweeping a thumb over Sherlock’s cheekbone, and, after a moment and a ragged breath, Sherlock nodded, eyes closing as he leaned his head back against the door, breathing slow and deep. John pulled his hand away, stepping back to the door. “I’ll be right back,” he promised, and, after a nod of acknowledgement from Sherlock, he opened the door, closing it behind him as he searched over the dorm.

It looked the same as it had when he’d left, the beds thankfully separated—something they usually did when leaving the dorm in the morning, just in case the cleaning service decided to drop in unannounced—so John began his search in the obvious places, checking under the beds and within
the linens before moving onto drawers.

Sherlock’s desk was cleared, along with his wardrobe, and, as he was rifling through the sock index, skull watching him from the dresser with its unsettling voids of eyes, his fingers found something hard and cool, and he frowned, swiping across the surface once more before beginning to rip through the drawer.

There, nestled between the blacks and navies of Sherlock’s footwear, was what must pass for a drug toolkit, and John’s fists clenched so hard, they cracked. There was a rubber tourniquet shoved neatly between the rows, a still-wrapped syringe placed beside it, and, at the bottom, a small clear vial that glistened in the overhead light, liquid sloshing prismatic within.

With a rough swallow, John reached in, steadying his hand with a single slow breath before withdrawing the paraphernalia. He tucked the vial and syringe into his pocket, but there wasn’t much he could do about the tourniquet, so he wrapped it up as tightly as he could in his palm before opening the door back to the corridor.

Sherlock was sitting on the floor, knees up and splayed apart in front of him as he hung his head in his hands between them, but his neck snapped up as John appeared, eyes damp and exhausted. His expression pinched in thought a moment as he looked over John’s face, and then he blinked, turning his face pointedly away as he set his jaw.

Wordlessly, John moved past him, crossing into the lab before closing that door behind him as well. He acted quickly, wrapping the tourniquet and syringe in newspaper and toilet tissue respectively before throwing them in the hazardous waste bin in the lab. He then darted into the bathroom, pouring out the contents of the vial into the toilet before flushing it, and grabbed a plastic bag from one of the shelves. He placed the glass inside, sealed the bag, and then sat it on the floor, lining his shoe up and slamming down, the vial shattering within the plastic. Picking that up, he threw it in the bin in the bathroom, unrolling and shredding a bit of toilet paper to scatter overtop before, after one last final check, returning to Sherlock in the corridor.

The detective hadn’t moved, still pooled against the wall on the floor, but, this time, he didn’t look up when John approached, and John knelt down in front of him, placing a hand softly on one of his knees.

“Hey,” he whispered, shaking the limb lightly, and Sherlock tipped his head just enough to peer out at John from the shadow of his curls. John smiled, brushing them aside as he grazed his fingers along the edge of Sherlock’s forehead. “It’s not your fault,” he insisted, and Sherlock sniffed, face turning aside.

“I- I thought I was better,” he murmured, blinking down the hall. “I thought- I thought I could handle it.”

“You did,” John urged, but Sherlock only scoffed.

“No, I didn’t,” he countered with a toneless laugh. “I was useless, I- I needed you to do it for me!”

“So?” John replied, shaking his head, and Sherlock lifted a brow at him. “Sherlock, it’s no small thing, asking for help,” he said, dropping his eyes to watch the progress of his thumb grazing over Sherlock’s knee. “My mum- My mum never did it. Not when it mattered, not when I needed her to.”

Sherlock was quiet, expression soft at the edge of John’s vision.

“I- There’s no shame in that,” he continued, shaking his head as he tipped his chin back up, mouth
quirking up in a frail smile. “You don’t have to be a superhero all the time,” he said, and Sherlock let out a startled puff of laughter. John’s smile brightened a bit, and he stood, holding a hand down to the man. “Come on,” he beckoned, curling his fingers, “we’ve got a coach to catch.”

Sherlock blinked at him, growing more and more puzzled with every shift of his eyes between John’s hand and face. “I- You still want me to come?” he asked, and John tilted his head. “Yes,” he said, bemused. “After all,” he added, reaching down to take Sherlock’s hand himself, heaving the man to standing, “where would we be without our Consulting Coach?”

Sherlock chuckled, shaking his head, color mercifully beginning to creep back into his face. “It doesn’t bear thinking about,” he replied, and John laughed, turning back to the dorm, hesitating a moment at the doorknob before Sherlock nodded.

They both pointedly ignored the mess of Sherlock’s drawers, stepping mutely over the socks strewn across the space between their beds.

“So,” John clipped, clapping his hands together, an audible signal of the topic change, “how much more packing do you need to do.”

“Er,” Sherlock murmured, peering out from around the door of his wardrobe, a guilty grimace on the half of his face John could see. “All of it?” he squeaked, and, after a moment of simply staring, John sighed, shaking his head fondly as he pulled the suitcase from beneath Sherlock’s bed.

*****

Sherlock sat on the corner of the hotel bed, staring aimlessly out the window as he listened to the whir of John’s electric toothbrush humming out from the bathroom door behind him.

They’d won the game, a narrow victory that had demanded every ounce of their focus, and, somewhere in-between the screaming and freezing, Sherlock had quite forgotten the darker events of the day, his mind simply not having the opportunity to dwell on it. John had helped, of course, going the proverbial extra mile every chance he could to keep Sherlock’s mind elsewhere, but now, though he was only in the next room, Sherlock couldn’t keep it at bay.

He’d almost forgotten about Sebastian Wilkes, had practically deleted him entirely apart from the portions of their shared existence that might prove informative in some future context, and then, out of the seemingly clear blue sky, he drops down on Sherlock’s doorstep. Sherlock wasn’t buying it, not for a second. It was no coincidence that Seb had talked to Victor, and Sherlock was beginning to have his suspicions about who might have Victor in their pocket. It was far too convenient, Seb popping up right in the thick of his work on the Moriarty case, and then, of course, the nail in the coffin: the drugs.

It was a ploy, clearly—whether by Moriarty to distract him, or by Victor to bring him back in—but that wasn’t the part that bothered Sherlock, wasn’t the reason he could feel his stomach slowly being eaten away inside him.

He’d wanted it, blindly, desperately, and, though there was certainly a lingering need that played into it, that wasn’t why Sherlock hadn’t been able to handle disposing of them himself, why he had regretted mentioning it to John at all the second the words had come out of his mouth. He was faster with the drugs, better, smarter. He could think through all the clutter, see connections in minutes that would normally have taken him hours, and, for this case, for John’s case…well, every minute counted. And maybe, just for a little while, just until he solved it…
Sherlock hung his head, pinching at the bridge of his nose with a sigh, and then turned, footsteps flapping across the carpet toward him.

“Tired?” John incorrectly assumed, pale blue pajama trousers grazing the floor as he picked at a hole in his white t-shirt.

Sherlock shrugged, turning back to him on the bed, his staple bedtime uniform of John’s rugby hoodie and grey cotton trousers sliding over the white duvet as he went. “Not really,” he replied, and John smiled, perching on the edge of the double bed.

He stretched out a foot, spreading it across the gap between the two beds in the room and pushing at the mattress of the other. “We should mess this one up,” he said, pinching at the duvet with his toes. “Make it look like somebody slept there.”

“For who, the maids?” Sherlock muttered, and John chuckled.

“Coach sometimes pops up in the mornings, you know that,” he replied, looking back at Sherlock over his shoulder, and then laughed as Sherlock rolled his eyes, sighing theatrically while shuffling across the mattress.

“What do we even do?” he asked, peeling down the unused duvet. “Untuck all the corners or-OOF!” Something swatted him across the side of the head, and he staggered to the left, lifting a hand to his ear. Looking up, he saw John smirking at him, pillow in hand, and his mouth dropped open in affront, prompting a smirk from the blond. “Did you just-”

“Yep,” John chirped, tightening his grip on the pillowcase, “and I’m about to do it again.”

“No,” Sherlock drawled, backing away as John stepped forward. “No, you’re not, I- AH!” He leapt aside, scrabbling up the spare mattress as John took another swing at him. “Stop! John, stop! I’m unarmed!” he cried, trying his best to parry John’s blows as he balanced precariously on his knees.

“Sounds like a personal problem to me,” John retorted, and Sherlock laughed, temporarily distracted enough to allow John to land a swing on his side, toppling him down onto the bed. John clambered onto the mattress, hovering over Sherlock as he moved to bring the pillow down on him again, but Sherlock snapped his arm up, grabbing one of the pillows from the head of the bed and dragging it between them like a shield.

“This is ridiculous!” he shouted from around the edge of his pillow, John’s barraging from all sides. “You are 18 years old!”

“Sorry, I can’t hear you over all my winning!” John countered, and, with a snarl, Sherlock quickly thrust his pillow up, overbalancing John and sending him swaying back with a small yip of surprise.

In a tangle of limbs, Sherlock flew up, swatting at John’s head, but John caught the pillow midflight, tugging it out of Sherlock’s hands and sending him toppling down onto his back. The bed shifted beneath him, John’s knees falling to either side of one of his legs, and then the world went dark, John holding a pillow lightly over his face.

“Shh,” the blond’s voice said from overhead, “just breathe. It’ll all be over soon.”

Sherlock laughed, hand reaching around to find John’s wrist, and the man pulled the pillow away, Sherlock blinking his grin into focus. “You’re an idiot,” he muttered, shaking his head with a soft smile.

John beamed at him. “And you’re dead,” he countered, tipping his head with a quirk of a brow. “I
have it on fairly good authority that corpses don’t talk.”

Sherlock laughed at the memory, John chuckling along above him. “Fair enough,” he replied, nudging at one of John’s legs with his knee, “but I’m not sure what else I’m supposed to do. Lie here with my tongue lolling out?”

“I’m pretty sure corpses don’t do that either,” John answered, setting his pillow aside. “I think,” he drawled, planting his palms into the mattress just above Sherlock’s shoulders as he hovered over him with a smirk, “you should just sit there quietly and wait to be resuscitated.”

Sherlock blinked at him, mouth popping open, and then burst into laughter as John waggled his brows. “Seriously?” he gasped, the mirth downright painful as it pushed at his ribs. “Oh my god, I am ashamed to know you right now. Honestly, that is the worst line I have ever—”

John dropped down in a blur, lips just barely brushing against Sherlock’s before he pulled back up again, Sherlock’s vision swimming as he tried to refocus. The blond said something, his lips moving, but Sherlock had only been staring at them, not really listening, and, when he blinked up, John was smirking at him.

“What?” he mumbled, shamefully breathy, and John chuckled, dipping back down to his mouth again.

He didn’t leave this time, shifting from his palms to his elbows as he lay just over Sherlock, touching, but not quite pressing down. He kissed him gently at first, light touches that danced unpredictably over Sherlock lips, and then, so unbidden, it might as well have been someone else, Sherlock whined in frustration, and John, though giggling, obliged, tongue sweeping over Sherlock’s as he pushed rough against his lips.

There were lots of things Sherlock didn’t know, but one thing he had no doubt of was that he would never get used to kissing John Watson. He was just so good at it, not that Sherlock had anything to compare it to, but it felt like something special, something he ought to appreciate being able to be the other half of. He liked to think he wasn’t bad at it either, learning along the way as he had, but there were some things he just hadn’t mastered yet, some things he wasn’t sure he could ever make John feel the way he did.

Like when John slipped off his mouth to press his lips to Sherlock’s jaw, lightly at first, just a graze that sent a shudder rippling through his body, and then suddenly urgent, trailing a path down his neck before pooling at his collarbone, teeth scraping over the hard surface he never sucked on quite hard enough to leave a mark that lasted longer than a few minutes. Sherlock sometimes wished he would, wished he knew how to ask him to, but, in a move that should no longer be unexpected, John seemed to know, and latched onto the skin at the base of his neck, the pressure almost painful as Sherlock gasped, hand snapping to John’s shoulder as he dug his fingers in.

He panted as John released him, tongue soothing a stripe over the flushed skin, and Sherlock wanted so desperately to see it, to carve the image of John’s brand into his mind, and just the thought that it was there, a prickling sensation on his skin in the shape of John’s mouth, sent a spike of arousal rocketing through his gut. He’d always been jealous, always been possessive, always been the one to control, and, if anyone had told him he’d be dizzy with lust over being on the receiving end, he’d have told them they were crazy. Nevertheless, he couldn’t deny the tremors in his fingers, the pounding of his heart, and, as John traced back up, lips brushing chapped against Sherlock’s ear, his hips jerked involuntarily, making it impossible to hide just how deeply affected he was.

John’s breath hitched, a shiver running through him as he moved up, forehead brushing with Sherlock’s as they panted over one another’s faces. “Sherlock,” he rasped, deep and guttural and
cruel, “I- I don’t- We should go to sleep.”

For a second, it stung, a twinge of rejection flitting sharp and cold across his chest, but he beat it back, reminding himself that John didn’t mean it that way, wasn’t doing it for that reason, and, tentatively, he pressed against the set limit.

“I-” he whispered, hand slipping around from John’s shoulder to twist nervously at the collar of his shirt, “I don’t… want to.”

John’s eyes widened, a steadying breath trembling out of him as he blinked away, focused decidedly down past Sherlock’s ear. “Sherlock, you- What happened today-?”

“I thought you said it didn’t matter,” Sherlock interjected, and he must have exposed a bit more of his panic than he’d intended, because John snapped his eyes to him, urgent with sincerity.

“It doesn’t,” he swore, shaking his head, “but- I don’t want you to feel- I don’t wanna be like that.” He lifted his chin, expression torn as blue met Sherlock’s grey. “I don’t wanna push you into anything; make you do something you’re not comfortable with.”

“I’m comfortable with you,” Sherlock countered, and John something like flinched, turning his face away. “John, I- It’s not like that.” He shook his head, sliding his fingers from John’s collar to his chin, pushing at it just lightly in a prompt to turn. “It- Before- I never wanted to,” he continued, fingers trembling a bit as they settled on the side of John’s neck, “but I wasn’t- Nobody pushed me.” He smiled faintly, a half-quirk of his mouth. “And you should know better than anyone that I never do anything I don’t want to do.”

John laughed, a faint hiss of amusement, and then his mouth twisted back to solemn. “You do when I ask,” he replied, and Sherlock tipped his head, acquiescing to that particular point.

“Sometimes, but you’re not asking,” he reminded, sliding the pads of his fingers up into the hair at the nape of John’s neck. “I am.”

John closed his eyes, forehead creased with indecision as a sigh rattled past his lips. “I- I don’t-” he murmured, shaking his head, and, for a moment, Sherlock’s stomach plummeted clear through the floor, “I don’t know what I’m doing.” He looked down at Sherlock, expression open and afraid, and it was nothing like Sherlock had ever seen on his face, normally so steadfast and certain.

He smiled, a little thrilled at being able to be the one to reassure for once. “Neither do I,” he half-chuckled, shrugging against the duvet, and then pushed at John’s neck, stalling the man as he moved to turn away, “but I- Please?”

John winced, eyes pursing shut as his teeth bit out over his bottom lip. “Sherlock-”

“John,” Sherlock countered with a snap, and the boy’s eyes turned to him, scanning thoroughly over his face.

The crumbling resolve was practically visible in his eyes, the blue almost tonally shifting brighter, but there was a sudden flash of ferocity through his gaze, and he shifted his weight to one arm, the other hand lifting between them. “You tell me,” he ordered, finger pointing sternly down at the brunette. “If you- Even for a second.”

“I’ll tell you,” Sherlock swore, nodding earnestly and trying not to betray his anxiety, lest it be misinterpreted.
John narrowed his eyes at him, skeptical. “Promise?” he asked, and then moved his hand, bending in all the fingers but his pinky.

Sherlock blinked down at the tan hand between them, and then lifted his face, raising an unamused brow. “Really?” he deadpanned, but John just waggled his little finger. He sighed, rolling his eyes as he lifted his arm. “Fine,” he muttered, curling his pinky around John’s as their hands bobbed in the air, “I promise. Even though that gesture does in no way enhance the validity—”

John threw his hand aside, sending Sherlock’s arm flopping back to the mattress as he lifted his now free hand to Sherlock’s neck, tipping his chin up to fall back onto his mouth. He was less careful now, chest pressing down over Sherlock’s as he stretched down the collar of his own rugby sweatshirt, and his legs shifted, moving from straddling one of Sherlock’s knees to resting in between them.

Sherlock suddenly forgot everything he’d managed to learn over the past few months, his mouth blindly following along with John’s as his hand lifted into blond hair, gripping tightly to the straw strands. John bit at his lip in response, and Sherlock’s head swam, his body once again spiraling out of his control as his hips lifted to brush with John’s.

Twin gasps huffed out of their mouths, John pulling away a moment as Sherlock’s cock strained against his pajamas to brush at John’s abdomen, and Sherlock was just about to apologize, face flaming, when John blew out a breath over his face, positively smashing back against his mouth. He didn’t even bother trying now, waist grinding down against Sherlock’s groin, and actual stars sparked behind Sherlock’s eyelids as his neck snapped back, pulling his lips from John’s.

He tried to speak, tried to do something a bit more coherent than pant and cling to John’s hair, but nothing further seemed possible at the moment, especially as John’s mouth returned to his neck, biting lightly at the juncture of his chin. It had never been like this, just like nothing else with John had ever had a parallel, and Sherlock was momentarily frightened, afraid he was really going to pass out instead of just feeling like it, but then John’s hand began trailing slowly down Sherlock’s chest, sliding through the fabric of his sweatshirt, and there was no more room to be afraid, every thought suddenly shifting to impatient need. He’d only ever admit it to himself, but he trembled when John reached the waistband of his trousers, hovering there a moment, as if uncertain, and then, painfully slowly, he turned his hand, sweeping a thumb down over the cotton-cloaked head of Sherlock’s cock.

The mitochondria is the powerhouse of the cell, and they all went fucking nuclear, Sherlock stunned when he didn’t actually explode. It was almost like nausea, the sudden lurch in his stomach, but not so much like it that he wasn’t very eager to repeat the sensation, but John didn’t move, and, when Sherlock’s brain was back to communicating with his body, his lifted his neck from where it had craned back against the mattress, blinking up at John’s face.

John looked stunned, mouth agape as he stared down at Sherlock, eyes wild and roaming between his, and Sherlock frowned, readying to ask what was wrong when John spoke. “Fuck,” he breathed, barely a whisper in the darkened room, but it dropped like a bomb going off, like a dam breaking, like a giving in and letting go, and Sherlock gasped as he watched John’s eyes go black, stomach trilling like the slow arc over the first crest of a rollercoaster.

John dove back to his lips, simultaneously slipping further down to palm Sherlock’s erection through his trousers, and Sherlock was going to die, he was sure of it, practically sobbing against John’s mouth as he incoherently tried to kiss him back.

He was a mess, a disaster, a live-action apocalypse, and then, inconceivably, he got worse, a shiver rattling up from his toes to gasp out of his mouth as John’s warm fingers slipped beneath the fabric,
thumb moving in a slow swipe down the raised ridge. “John!” he gasped, and it was embarrassing, really, how lost he was, how thoroughly and utterly wrecked, and, in spite of how much he wanted it to, how much he knew he should be able to, it was clear he wouldn’t be able to draw this out much longer. The hand that was free from John’s hair was already gripping tightly into the duvet, fingernails quite possibly slicing half-moon slits the cleaning staff would have no questions as to the cause of, and, as John wrapped his hand around the base of Sherlock’s cock, sliding up with agonizing slowness, he barely strangled a scream.

John slipped his tongue in around Sherlock’s, splitting his focus as he summoned the coherency to respond, but it didn’t stop the moan that ground out of him, vibrating between their lips as John fingers swept over the tip, dragging the liquid down the shaft as he established a slow rhythm.

Sherlock was babbling, a steady stream of muffled syllables that sounded mostly like a broken record of John’s name as the man hovered above him, panting himself against Sherlock’s mouth, and, in spite of his apparent insatiable need to talk, Sherlock couldn’t stop kissing him, tipping his chin up to John’s lips every second he had the presence of mind to.

John’s rhythm gradually sped up, his grip tightening just slightly, and Sherlock choked, a garbled shout bursting from his throat as his fingernails clawed at John’s scalp, but John didn’t seem to mind, growling as he ducked his head to bite hard at Sherlock’s earlobe.

“John!” Sherlock panted, suddenly on the brink and terrified of falling. “John, I- I-”

John brushed at Sherlock’s jaw with the bridge of his nose as he moved his head back up. “It’s okay,” he whispered, sounding just as destroyed, and then dropped his chin, placing a suddenly tender kiss to the corner of Sherlock’s mouth. “It’s okay,” he repeated, words brushing against Sherlock’s bottom lip, and Sherlock broke, shattered, pieces of him flying out like shrapnel as he came.

Liquid fire rolled over his body, burning him from the blood out, and he could hear screaming even though he wasn’t sure he was actually making any sound. His neck rolled back, mouth stretched wide as his jaw worked, trying to suck in air his lungs weren’t ready for, and he registered dimly that John was saying something, something impossible, something about beautiful, and then, like dropping back into his body, it was over, sound rushing back into his ears as he heard his own heaving breaths. His hand slipped from John’s hair, no feeling left in his arms, and he could barely keep his eyes open, blinking dazedly up at the blurry visage of John’s face.

The foggy figure appeared to smile, the world darkening as he bent down, kissing Sherlock gently on the mouth, and then he slipped off the bed, mumbling something about being right back.

Sherlock nodded without understanding, his mind somewhere else entirely, still stuck to the cloud he hadn’t yet come down from, and his head lolled to the side, eyes drawn to the red digits of the clock. He registered dimly that he was dry, his trousers pulled back up and sweatshirt pulled down to meet the waistband, and wondered when that had happened, how that had happened, and then spotted John’s rumpled t-shirt on the floor between the beds, biting his lip to hold back a giggle of amusement. It shouldn’t be funny, really, but it was somehow, the fact that he had apparently entirely missed the entire defrocking—usually his favorite part of rooming with John—and wiping up, and he suddenly realized that everything was funny, a bubble of elation surrounding his heart as he tried to stamp down a grin. Eyes finally focusing on the clock, he blinked, double-checking the time, and then couldn’t help himself, laughing as John reentered the room.

He was shirtless—which was fantastic—and rumpled and flushed—also not bad—and looking at Sherlock like he was a little bit of a lunatic—par for the course, really—as he approached the foot of the bed, brow rising. “What?” he asked, frowning, and Sherlock waved a hand at the clock.

John’s face fell to horrified, prompting Sherlock into another fit of laughter. “No,” he said, eyes widening as they landed on the clock. “That’s- That clock is slow.”

Sherlock shook his head. “No, it’s not,” he chuckled, and John sighed, dropping his head in resignation as he climbed up the mattress to flop down next to Sherlock.

“Well,” he muttered, bobbing his head to the side, “I suppose we’ll remember Valentine’s Day now, at any rate.”

Sherlock laughed, nodding, and then broke off into a yawn, eyelids blinking sluggishly as his head drooped back down to the bed.

John sat up, reaching behind him to grab a pillow, and then nudged at Sherlock’s shoulder. “Hey,” he prompted, tugging at the fabric of Sherlock’s sweatshirt, “move over. You’ll fall off the edge over there.”

“Will not,” Sherlock mumbled, but obliged, John chuckling as he slipped a pillow under Sherlock’s head, but Sherlock ignored it, exhaustion emboldening him as he shuffled across the mattress to press his ear over John’s bare shoulder.

John stilled a moment, startled, and then relaxed, a soft huff of laughter hissing through Sherlock’s curls as he turned, lifting a hand to card through the hair.

Something pricked at Sherlock’s mind as he stretched his legs, tangling both of his around the closest of John’s, and then it snapped into place, his eyes blinking open, lashes dancing against John’s skin. “I- You-” he mumbled, and John shifted beneath him, face peering down curiously. “You didn’t-” He moved a hand down John’s chest, sliding toward the blue drawstring, but John deftly snatched his fingers up, interlacing them as he shifted Sherlock’s hand over his heart.

“No,” he said, shaking his head against Sherlock’s hair. “Don’t, I- Not tonight. Let’s just go to sleep, alright?”

Sherlock lifted his face, blinking curiously at what he could see of John’s face as he peered up past the boy’s chin. “But-”

“Go to sleep, Sherlock,” John interjected, not unkind, but not up for discussion either, and, with a sigh, Sherlock tucked his head back into John’s chest, counting the beats of his heart until John brushed a kiss against his hair and distracted him.

*****

“That was the longest coach ride I have ever had!”

“It was an hour and a half,” Sherlock replied, smiling as John glared at him.

“You weren’t sitting next to Kevin,” the blond snapped, and Sherlock ducked his smile to the snowy ground as they ambled their way back toward Kingsley House.

“He wanted to talk tactics,” Sherlock shrugged. “What was I supposed to do? It’s not like I could refuse to move.”

“Why not?” John asked, and Sherlock quirked a brow at him.
“Why couldn’t I, your completely platonic roommate, refuse to move from my spot next to you, captain of the rugby team, on a bus full of your teammates?” he returned rhetorically, and John smiled awkwardly, dropping his face to the ground.

“Yeah, I suppose it might have looked a little weird,” he murmured, and then slowed, his heels kicking at the snow. “Do you- Does it bother you?” he questioned, shooting up a sidelong glance. “Hiding it? I mean, I- If it did, we-”

“There’s nothing for it, John,” Sherlock interjected sharply, slipping his hands into his pockets, and then pushed up a soft smile, John snapping him a concerned look. “I mean, of course I don’t like it,” he admitted, bobbing his shoulders, “but it’s the only way. Otherwise, they’d, at best, make you move out.”

“Me?” John sputtered, frowning. “Why me?”

“Well, because my lab is right there,” Sherlock explained, though it ought to have been obvious, “and that room is rather isolated. Keeps me far, far away from the normal people they don’t want me mingling with.”


“Don’t do that,” he muttered, and Sherlock quirked a brow.

“Don’t do that,” he echoed, prompting a twitch of John’s jaw.

“Sherlock, I’m serious,” the blond snapped, but Sherlock only quickened his steps, pulling ahead.

“Sherlock, I’m serious!”

“Stop it!”

“Stop it!”

“Don’t copycat me, Sherlock, you know-”

“Don’t copycat me, Sherlock, you know it freaks me out,” Sherlock concluded, finishing the sentence a second before John would’ve, grinning triumphantly as he turned to look back at the boy, but, instead of a glare, he was met with a face full of snow. Spluttering, he wiped off the ice crystals, shaking them free of his scarf, and then snapped his eyes up to John, livid.

The blond was smirking at him, another snowball already in hand as he tossed it up and down in threat, and Sherlock froze, drawing out the stalemate. John’s mouth twitched just a fraction, but it was clearly Sherlock’s cue, and he turned on his heels, bolting away.

The snowball clipped him in the side, and he shouted, darting this way and that to dodge the projectiles. “John!” he barked, racing for the door. “Stop! AH!” One of the snowballs hit him in the shoulder, exploding in a shower of ice that stung at the back of his neck, trickling cold down under his scarf. “John!” he cried, weaving behind a tree. “Cut it out! You know I can’t throw!” And, shamefully, it was true, Sherlock able to calculate everything from the force needed to the effect of wind resistance, but he could never manage to execute, always falling far left or right of his mark.
John, however, had no such a problem, and a mist of snow showered over Sherlock’s face as a snowball collided with the tree trunk behind his head. “You should’ve thought of that before you got smart with me!” the boy retorted, voice much closer than anticipated, and Sherlock turned to make a break for it to find the man blocking his path. He tipped his head, grinning at Sherlock, a loose pile of snow held in his gloved hand, and Sherlock’s eyes flickered between the weapon and John’s face, a swallow moving down his throat. “Do you yield?” John asked smugly, rattling the snow in his hand, and Sherlock’s mouth dropped open in affront.

“Yield?” he sputtered. “You started it! How can I yield when I never did anything?”

“Fine,” John chirped, shrugging. “Beg for mercy, then.”


“First time for everything,” he quipped, and Sherlock’s mouth snapped shut.

He looked between John’s eyes a moment, and then sighed, a pantomime of resignation before he darted around the blond, swatting at a tree branch as he passed.

A cascade of snow fell down on John’s head, a spectacularly indignant yelp bursting from him as Sherlock tore toward the door, and, though nearly slipping on the ice for laughter, he made it, pulling the glass door shut behind him just as John’s retaliatory snowball hit with a heavy thunk.

Sherlock, graceless in victory, stuck his tongue out through a clear spot in the window, laughing when John flipped him off, and then stepped aside, waiting for the boy in the corridor.

“Cheater,” John snarled as he entered, still swatting snow out of his hair. “I demand a rematch.”

“I’ll take it under advisement,” Sherlock replied, and John snorted, the two of them trailing water and ice as they made their way down to the dorm.

“Well, I’m soaked,” John muttered as they entered, stretching his dripping arms out to his sides. “What time is it?”

“12:45,” Sherlock answered, and John nodded.

“I’ve got time to change, then,” he said, opening his drawers and pulling out fresh jeans and a jumper, “before we meet the girls for practice.”

“Oh, right, I-” Sherlock started, but John cut him off, lifting a finger.

“No,” he snapped, and Sherlock shrunk back. “No excuses. You’re not tired, you’re not hungry because I made you eat breakfast, and you’re not coming down with yellow fever.”

“Okay, that was a legitimate concern,” Sherlock countered with a firm nod. “I had all the symptoms.”

“Yeah, well, so did I,” John scoffed, closing his drawer, “after listening to you whine for two hours. I’ll be right back. Be ready.” He waggled a finger at Sherlock, who opened his mouth, ready to make a Mrs. Hudson parallel when John cut him off. “And don’t pretend you lost your book again,” he added, moving across the corridor. “We both know it’s been propping up the wobbly corner of your desk for weeks.” He flashed a grin over his shoulder, mocking Sherlock’s scowl, and then closed the laboratory door between them, the click of the bathroom lock drifting out a moment later.

Sherlock sniffed, turning to walk across the room, bending back around the edge of his desk to
snatch the book up. There was a dent in the paperback cover he was sure Mr. Tyson wouldn’t appreciate, but it had been his own copy, so there wasn’t much the man could do about it. Feeling a little spitefully delighted by that fact, he tossed the book onto his bed, moving back to the wardrobe as he began shuffling out of his coat. He stretched his arm out, shaking off a bit of snow as he wriggled out of the sleeve, and then bumped something on his dresser, a rogue elbow bending back too far. He turned, watching as his skull toppled down off the surface toward his bed, but he was too late to catch it, the bone landing on the duvet with a soft thump, and then, suddenly, Sherlock froze.

His coat fell limply off his shoulders, pooling in a grey half-moon around his ankles as he stared down at the bed, blood thumping in his ears, because there, nestled in the soft folds of the blanket John claimed he hogged, was a single glittering vial, liquid rolling hypnotically within the glass. A rubber tourniquet protruded from the base of the skull, where the items had apparently been hidden, and, still inside, Sherlock could see the outline of what appeared to be a syringe, still wrapped in its sanitary plastic.

Sherlock swallowed, fingers clenching and unclenching from fists at his sides.

He should do something, say something, run screaming across the hall and tell John, because, though he might have regretted telling the truth before, he really did think he had. He’d never expected Sebastian would leave more than one, never would’ve considered it, but, now that it was here, siren song singing deliverance in his ears, it felt like a second chance, a twisted opportunity he knew he should pass, but couldn’t. And, really, it was only a precaution, a last resort, just in case the worst should happen.

Just in case.

There was a sound from across the hall, the telltale squeak of the bathroom door, and, flustered with panic, Sherlock scrambled to grab up the items, shaking them loose from the skull as he leapt to his desk. Wrenching open the bottom drawer, he shoved some papers aside, pulling up the false bottom created solely for this purpose, and throwing the trio inside before resetting the scene and slamming the drawer shut.

“Much better!” John sighed happily, swinging open the door, hair still slightly darkened with damp as he tossed the wet clothes into his hamper. He then turned to Sherlock, smiling brightly. “Ready?” he chirped, looking between his eyes. “You alright?” he asked, stepping forward, and Sherlock willed himself to appear impassive. “You’re not really coming down with yellow fever, are ya?” John joked, looking between his eyes. “Because I’ll feel pretty shitty if you do.”

“No, I- I’m fine,” Sherlock replied, smiling as he nodded, another lie tallied in his tangled web, and John smiled, his faith like a knife.

“Alright,” he muttered, turning away as he moved to his own desk, pushing aside a crisps bag and collecting his book, “well, try to stay that way. Mary’s probably gonna wanna talk about her date.”

“Okay,” Sherlock answered, realizing a second too late that that was the wrong response, and John turned back to him, frowning concernedly.

“Are you sure you’re alright?” he pressed, and Sherlock finally settled his mask firmly into place.

“Positive,” he said, stepping forward as he gathered up his book. “There’s nothing I would rather do than hear about Mary’s romantic escapades.”

John laughed, throwing his head back as he led Sherlock out into the corridor. “Don’t let her hear
you say that,” he muttered, locking the door. “She might take it a little too literally.”

Sherlock grimaced in disgust, and John laughed again, nudging him fondly on the arm as they walked, and, as Sherlock watched him, cheeks still reddened from the snow, fluorescent lights flickering off the water still caught in his hair, he knew John would never forgive him, knew it just as certainly as he knew he didn’t care, because there was nothing, nothing he would not do for John Watson.

Even if that meant he had to lose him.
Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

MERRY CHRISTMAS EVERYONE! I hope you like the chapter, but, most of all, have a wonderful holiday!

As I've said, I'm going to be at Sherlock Seattle in a couple weeks, and I'd love to meet up with some of you, so send me a message either here or at my Tumblr, and we'll sort that out!

“Move up a bit. No, further. Is that what you're going to be wearing?”

“My uniform?” John muttered, plucking at the grey jumper over his chest as he met Mary’s disparaging eyes. “Um, yeah, probably.”

Mary huffed, rolling her eyes as if his adherence to the dress code had ruined her whole week, and John turned, quirking a puzzled brow at Sherlock.

The brunette only shrugged, however, tucked along the edge of the room, long legs crossed in front of him as he ostensibly read over his lines, but John was fairly sure he saw his fingers moving as he text behind the barricade of the paperback.

“At least loosen the tie or something,” Mary muttered, suddenly right in front of him and tugging at the royal blue fabric. “You’re supposed to be convincing me to run away with you, not selling used cars.”

John’s mouth dropped open as there was a snort to his right, but, when he looked up to glare, Sherlock was back to dutifully reading his book. Cool fingers brushed his collarbone, and he started, looking down to find Mary unbuttoning the two visible buttons over the collar of his jumper. “What the hell are you-”

“Relax, I’m just making you a little less Hardy Boys,” she muttered, flipping at his collar before standing back, tilting her head and frowning up at his hair. “Can we do something about this?” she asked, flicking at the blond strands at the edge of his forehead. “Some product or something? Sherlock, you must have something,” she said, turning over her shoulder, and Sherlock blinked his eyes up to her, looking between them perplexedly.

“Sorry?” he murmured, and Mary sighed.

“Do you have anything we could use on John’s hair?” she repeated, turning back to John to push up at the front of his cut. “Something to make it a little less…”

“Golly, an egg cream right now would be boss?” the brunette interjected when Mary faded off, and she pointed at him, evidently agreeing while John’s jaw hit the floor. Sherlock nodded, eyes roving over John’s hairline before returning to Mary. “Yeah, I can do that,” he replied, and then returned to his book, ignoring John’s outraged gaping.

“I can hear you, ya know!” John spouted, glaring between his unwanted fashion consultants, both of whom blinked at him in equally mild politeness. “I’m standing right here! Being objectified!” he
snapped, and Mary snorted.

“Yeah, I can’t imagine how hard that is for you,” she muttered, rolling her eyes, and John fell silent, clenching his jaw as he glared. “Now, turn around,” she ordered, twisting her finger in the air. “One of your pairs of trousers fits you much better than the others, and I wanna make sure you’re wearing the right ones for the performance.”

“What!” John spluttered, backing away from her, head shaking incredulously before he snapped his face to Sherlock. “How are you just sitting there?” he demanded, waving an arm across to the boy, but Sherlock only tilted his head, frowning at him, expression the same eerie impassivity it had been all through practice.

“Quite comfortably,” he answered airily, and John’s brow creased as he tried to see past the steel shutters of his eyes.

“Alright, well, I think that’s enough rehearsal,” Mary sighed, drawing their attention back just as Molly reappeared through the door of the empty classroom. “The presentation isn’t until next week anyway, so we can work on the blocking over the weekend.”

“Blocking?” John parroted, raising his brows. “We’re performing a scene in front of the class, not putting on Oliver Twist.”

“Please, sir, I want some more,” Molly whined, leaning against the wall beside Sherlock, who chuckled.

John narrowed his eyes at both of them before turning back to Mary, who rattled her head at him in chiding.

“It’s important, John,” she snapped, not for the first time over the past couple weeks, the deadline for their project coming closer as March dawned on them. “We’re presenting this in front of the entire class.”

“That’s, what? 25 people?”

“27,” Sherlock, helpful for the first time all rehearsal, piped up, eyes never leaving his phone-in-book ruse.

“Yeah,” John said, waving a hand at him. “That’s not a lot of people.”

“But they’re being given rubrics,” Mary reminded him yet again, and, also again, he rolled his eyes. “They have to grade us.”

“Nobody actually takes those things seriously,” John countered. “They’ll just go down the line and check all the ‘Excellent’ boxes.”

“I never do that,” Mary replied, and John frowned at her. “What?” she clipped. “We’re supposed to evaluate them, so I evaluate them.”

John simply stared at her a moment, blinking blandly. “You’re that person who reminds the teacher we had homework, aren’t you?” he finally murmured, and Mary glared at him while Molly and Sherlock chuckled.

“We’ll meet back up tomorrow,” Mary snipped, turning his eyes away from John, and he rolled his at the back of her head. “You guys don’t have a game, do you?” she asked, picking up her bag and slinging it over her shoulder.
“Next week,” John replied, and she nodded.

“Alright then. Noon alright for everyone?” she asked, casting a glance around, and Molly nodded, but Sherlock just looked to John.

“Can we make it 11?” he requested. “We have practice at 1.”

“Yeah, sure,” Mary said, shrugging, Molly nodding along. “See you guys then.” She left the room, Molly following behind her with a wave, and John watched them go before twisting to Sherlock.

“Okay, what is it?” he asked, folding his arms, and Sherlock paused halfway through slipping his book into John’s bag, quirking a brow up at him. “What’s wrong?” he pressed, drawing closer, taking his backpack from Sherlock when the boy stood up and passed it to him. “You had a…face all through practice.”

“I should hope I always have a face,” Sherlock muttered, leading the way out the door, hands in his pockets, and John narrowed his eyes at the back of his neck.

“You know what I mean,” he hissed, drawing nearer as a group of laughing students passed them. “You looked, I dunno…off.”

“I don’t feel off.”

“Sherlock.”

“What do you want me to say?” He turned his eyes over his shoulder as he shrugged, his flashing eyes belying the nonchalance. “Clearly, you have a particular response in mind, so why don’t you just tell me what it is, and I’ll say it?”

John blinked at him, taken aback, his steps slowing a moment, and then he strode quickly to catch up as they neared their corridor. “What the hell is-”

Sherlock pushed inside their dormitory, leaving John talking to an empty corridor, and he huffed, jaw clenching as he followed, stomping in after him.

“Okay, seriously,” he sighed, lowering his bag to the floor, “why are you-” He broke off in a shout, shoes skittering on the floor as he fought for balance, catching the door on his way, and it slammed shut with a thunderous bang as his back collided with the wood. He opened his mouth to voice some retort, likely with an expletive or two, but it was suddenly occupied, Sherlock’s lips closing over his as his tongue swirled past John’s teeth. John’s stomach leapt, his body still unaccustomed to how thoroughly Sherlock had mastered the art of the make out, and then he moaned, lifting one hand to Sherlock’s hair while the other wrapped around his waist, tugging him tight to his chest.

Sherlock was already struggling at his tie, twisting fruitlessly at the knot, and then gave up with a snarl, dropping his hands to John’s hips to untuck his shirt.

John chuckled, twisting his mouth away from Sherlock’s. “We really need to work on you using your words,” he panted, smirking as Sherlock scoffed.

“What am I supposed to say?” he snapped, brow furrowed as he fumbled with John’s belt buckle. “I’m irrationally jealous that you’re Mary’s pretend Shakespearean boyfriend?”


“Fuck you,” he spat, and John froze, eyes widening, Sherlock mimicking the gesture a moment later.
“I-I don’t know why I-”

“Did you just-”

“No,” Sherlock blurted, and John laughed, taking Sherlock’s hands off his belt as he wrapped them in his own. “It’s your fault!” he snapped, putting up a token struggle to dislodge his wrists from John’s hold. “You curse like a sailor! On leave!”

“Oh my god,” John wheezed, lifting one of his hands to wipe his thumb under his eye, Sherlock’s hand carried limply along with it. “That was adorable!”

“Profanity is adorable?” Sherlock muttered, quirking a brow, but he didn’t look entirely displeased.

“From you,” John said, and Sherlock shook his head, a small smile twitching at the corner of his mouth. “With the accent. And the cheekbones.”

“What do my zygomatic bones have to do with-”

“Stop, you’re ruining it,” John interjected, grinning at the offense furrowing Sherlock’s brow, and then tugged him back in with a pull on his hands, releasing them to catch the boy once again around the waist as he crashed their lips together, and Sherlock apparently let it go, finger coming up to hook into the collar of John’s jumper.

It had been three weeks since Valentine’s Day—which was the only way John would ever refer to that evening, everything else far too awkward—and, for all the time they’d taken crawling along in their relationship, they had no problem sprinting now. Oddly enough, it was Sherlock who seemed most eager, tackling each new step with the same shrewd focus normally reserved for his cases, but John wouldn’t say he minded. That’s not quite the way he would word it, at any rate, but it was no secret that he was struggling with things more than Sherlock was, although not on his own part. He was worried about Sherlock, worried about pushing him, about applying pressure in some unconscious way, and he knew it was driving Sherlock mad, the man actually offering to sign an affidavit if it would mean John would let him finally reciprocate a hand job, and that was just far too embarrassing for John to say no to. That was as far as they’d gone, however, but John knew it was only a matter of time, Sherlock never one to be content where there were still variables to explore, and, true to form, the boy wasn’t wasting any time, shuffling down John’s boxers and uniform trousers to take his cock in his palm.

John’s head hit the door with a thunk as he gasped, blinking blearily up at the ceiling, and Sherlock smiled in his peripheral vision, ducking his lips to John’s jaw as he swept his thumb over the leaking slit in a practiced move.

He sucked at the corner of John’s jaw, the hollow just beneath his ear that always made his vision swim, and then snaked his fingers down the underside of John’s cock to the balls, following along the ridge.

“Heh!” John breathed, voice shaking, so dazed, it took him a moment to realize Sherlock was no longer in front of him, knelt nearly level with his abdomen. “Woah, hey!” he spluttered, trying to shift his hips away as he scrabbled at Sherlock’s shoulders to pull him up, but Sherlock only grabbed one of his wrists, leaning back to tip his head up at John with a patronizing tilt of his head.

“John, you really have to stop,” he said, remarkably in control of himself considering John’s cock was bobbing in front of his face. “I’m a virgin, not some fragile damsel in distress.”

John swallowed, his mouth drying out as Sherlock’s words brushed warm air over his skin. “Yeah,
“John,” Sherlock interrupted, and the moment was suddenly the softer side of intimate, John’s lust momentarily flagging as he met Sherlock’s steady gaze, “I promised, remember?” He blinked, a small smile twitching a corner of his mouth. “I’ll tell you.”

John opened his mouth, ready to argue the point, but then something shifted in Sherlock’s face, twisting John’s stomach.

“I mean, unless you- If you don’t want to- I-I don’t-” he stammered, and John shook his head, unable to disappoint him, to make him think for even a second that John was anywhere close to rejecting him, because he very much did want to, and, really, if Sherlock wasn’t worried, what right did he have?

“No, I- It’s- I don’t mind,” he muttered, and Sherlock blinked just once in surprise before quirking a smug brow.

“You don’t mind?” he echoed, one hand coming up to rest lightly on the outside of John’s thigh, but even that made John dizzy.

“I- I mean, I- It’s- I don’t-”

“You’re awfully articulate today,” the brunette mocked, and John steadied himself with a breath, clenching his fists as he dropped his chin to glare.

“You know what- FUCK!”

Sherlock had probably done it on purpose—that beautiful evil genius—or maybe it was just the luckiest moment of John’s life, but, either way, when his eyes hit Sherlock’s face, it was to see the boy slip John’s cock past his lips, sucking just lightly at the tip as he swept his tongue in a firm circle.

John’s mouth opened in a silent gasp, skull quite possibly splintering the wood, he threw it back against the door so hard, and his nails dug into his palm as he clenched his fists. “Fuck!” he panted, lips quivering as Sherlock lowered further down his length, tongue swirling along the ridge his fingers had previously occupied. “Holy shit buggering fuck!”

Sherlock sucked hard on the upstroke, his lips popping as John’s cock fell free, only to be captured by Sherlock’s hand, sliding up and down the spit-slick skin. “Like a sailor,” he murmured, and John couldn’t even be mad, every other emotion and sense shut down so he could focus solely on the drag of Sherlock’s hand over his skin, which meant he jumped rather significantly when Sherlock’s tongue reappeared, sliding down between his balls as he tilted John’s cock upward.

John had never been in this situation before, of course, but he was still fairly sure Sherlock was very good at this. Knowing him, it was a fair assumption he’d done extensive research on the subject, which was simultaneously incredibly sweet and incredibly sexy, but the second option took over a bit as Sherlock once again slipped John’s cock into his mouth, lowering down until his lips met his hand closed around the base.

He kept the hand there, bobbing his mouth up and down to meet it, and John’s knees shook, his spine pressing heavier into the door for support.

He bit his lip around another stream of curses, but then Sherlock sucked particularly hard, dragging his lips up and swirling over the head before plunging back down again, and he broke, letting out a cry before succumbing to a steady stream of profanities he couldn’t even keep track of. A tight heat began to grow in his abdomen, spiking down to twitch through his cock at certain sweeps and
strokes of Sherlock’s mouth, and he blinked up at the ceiling, trying to focus his mind as he stretched his hand blindly out.

“Sherlock,” he gasped, finding the boy’s head and tangling his fingers lightly into the curls. “Sherlock, I-I’m not-”

Sherlock hummed, and, if it were agreeable or otherwise, John couldn’t say, the vibration of the sound sending his mind skittering back into a haze of white heat, and he just barely pulled himself back from the edge.

“Sherlock,” he repeated, managing a slightly firmer warning now, gripping into the boy’s hair to further the point.

Seemingly in response, Sherlock hooked his free hand around the back of John’s thigh, holding him in place just as he slid his other hand up and down John’s cock, moving along with his mouth, and John cried out, grabbing a fistful of Sherlock’s curls with a force he’d have to remember to apologize for later.

“God!” he groaned, the syllables dragging from his throat, and he could feel the heat in his stomach boiling, solar flares reaching out to lap down his thighs. “Fuck, Sherlock! Oh god, Sherlock, fuck!” His neck snapped back, free hand flinging back to grip onto the door handle as he came, uncertain his legs were even there to hold him up anymore.

Sherlock had gotten very good with his hands, but John had never felt anything like this, Sherlock’s tongue laving in lazy swirls as he held John in his mouth, suction tight and hot and perfect, and John dropped his chin when he had the presence of mind to, unable to breathe as he watched Sherlock slowly draw back. The boy’s lips were flushed and wet, leaving John’s cock with a sticky pop, and Sherlock licked over them briefly before drawing his tongue back into his mouth, a swallow moving down his throat that hit John in the chest like a lorry. He blinked up, eyes dark and heavy-lidded, and John didn’t even know he’d moved his hand until he saw it there, sliding from Sherlock’s hair to cup his jaw. The brunette blinked up at him, puzzled, and, for a second, the words nearly crested over his tongue, but he bit them back, instead bending down to grab a fistful of Sherlock’s collar and hoist him roughly to standing.

It probably meant something very strange about him psychologically that the taste of himself in Sherlock’s mouth was hands down the most erotic thing he had ever experienced, but he didn’t have the time to analyze that right now, hitching Sherlock up with a tight arm around the waist as he manhandled him further into the room. Lifting a knee to brace himself on the mattress, he toppled Sherlock back onto their combined beds, most of his weight held aloft on the knee and a hand, and pressed a palm down atop the bulge in Sherlock’s trousers, the man bucking up against him with a shout.

“John,” he pleaded, fingers gripping tight into the sheets as his lips trembled open in a breathless gasp, and, Christ, John loved him, loved him all the way to terrified, but his mouth still wasn’t ready for the words, so he settled for flicking open the button of Sherlock’s trousers, peeling away the zipper and boxers, and sliding his hand firmly down the length of his cock. Sherlock was already practically sobbing, the pitch of his soft whimpers and groans telling John just how close he already was, and John didn’t draw it out, his head already swimming with exhaustion after his own undoing. John was fond of so many aspects of sex with Sherlock Holmes, but his favorite thing, the thing that set every nerve singing on his body like he was climaxing all over again, was the moment just before Sherlock came, when the man would devolve into breathless muttering that always spun its way down to a steady stream of John’s name before he fell silent, grinding his hair into the mattress as he arched his back, mouth stretched wide in a soundless scream.
John’s second favorite thing was how utterly useless Sherlock was afterwards, mumbling and making the odd affirmative hum or grunt of disapproval as John moved away, cleaning and removing whatever clothing they’d soiled. He was fairly sure his jumper had been clean before he’d tackled Sherlock onto the bed, but it wasn’t now, and he peeled it off, dropping it next to Sherlock’s before turning back to the bed.

Sherlock, wearing only his socks and grey boxers, his pale skin nearly blending into the surrounding sheets, was curled up on his side, face buried in John’s pillow, and John chuckled, perching on the edge of the bed as he reached across to pull the duvet over him. Sherlock hummed, twisting his head and opening a single eye up at John, and then reached out, tugging lightly at his wrist in encouragement.

John smiled, shaking his head fondly as he slipped beneath the blanket, still clothed properly below the waist, and then laughed as Sherlock slotted in at his side, tangling both his legs around John’s closer one. “Cold?” John presumed, and Sherlock hummed, nodding against his bare shoulder.

They were silent for a time, John staring up at the ceiling while Sherlock breathed over his skin, and he was just about to check if the boy was asleep when Sherlock suddenly spoke.

“Tell me something,” he said, blinking as John twisted his face toward him, puzzled.

“Like what?” he asked, and Sherlock shrugged.

“I dunno,” he answered, lifting his head, and John dutifully moved his arm, stretching it out for Sherlock to pillow his cheek on the bicep, “something I don’t know.”

“There are things you don’t know!?” John said with mock disbelief, mouth stretching wide as his eyes popped, but he quickly broke into a smile as Sherlock sneered, jabbing him lightly in the ribs. John chuckled, shaking his head to the ceiling, and then shrugged, trying to primarily shift his right shoulder instead of the one Sherlock was attached to. “There isn’t much you don’t know,” he admitted, blinking up at the plaster as he racked his brain. “I’m afraid of snakes,” he offered, but Sherlock shook his head.

“I knew that,” he replied, and John turned to him with a flat look.

“You’re not helping,” he muttered, and Sherlock tucked a smile against his skin.

“Sorry,” the brunette mumbled, and John couldn’t help but smile, shaking his head up at the ceiling as he continued to think.

“I broke my arm when I was six,” he tried again, and it appeared to be a hit, Sherlock’s brow furrowed curiously when John turned to him. “Well, fractured, technically,” he added, tipping his head. “Fell out of a window at my aunt’s house.”

“You what!?” Sherlock blustered, and John winced at the proximity of the shout.

“It was only the second story,” he argued, Sherlock’s eyes narrowing in disapproval. “And I landed on a hedge.”

“That doesn’t make it better,” he snapped, frowning as he dropped his gaze. “How’d you fall out of a window?”

“Trying to climb onto the roof,” John answered, Sherlock’s question formed in the curve of his eyebrow. “Mum and Aunt Claire were fighting,” he explained, voice fading to a murmur, and Sherlock looked away, his eyes drifting across John’s chest.
“Did it hurt?” he asked eventually, finger tracing in tingling patterns over the skin of John’s shoulder that rested just in front of his face, and John smiled, turning toward him.

“When I fell from heaven?” he teased, and Sherlock stilled, lifting an unamused gaze. John chuckled at his own joke, and then shook his head. “I don’t remember, really,” he said, twisting his arm to wrap it around Sherlock’s back, the boy twitching slightly as John accidentally tickled over his ribs before settling. “It probably did. All I really remember is how itchy the cast was.”

“Did you do the pencil thing?” Sherlock asked, miming a scratching motion on his forearm as he pulled it free of the duvet, and then frowned as John laughed. “What?” he muttered, blinking across at him. “People do that.”

“I know they do, dear,” he replied, lifting a hand to tap at Sherlock’s head, grinning at the boy’s glower, although the slight reddening of his cheeks did somewhat dampen the rage.

Sherlock opened his mouth, likely to retort, but it quickly turned into a yawn, and John chuckled, returning his arm to wrap around Sherlock’s back as he pulled him in closer.

“Go to sleep,” he said softly, bending his neck to brush the words to Sherlock’s forehead, the skin trembling with the man’s grumble.

“It’s 6 o’clock,” he snapped back, but quickly yawned again, and John just smiled into his curls.

“Yeah, but we had to talk in Shakespeare all afternoon,” he said, and Sherlock groaned.

“Don’t remind me,” he muttered miserably, and John just laughed, grazing a kiss to the corner of his forehead. “You’re still saying that line wrong, you know.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Mary’s never going to forgive you if you get it wrong on the day.”

“Probably not.”

“We should come up with some sort of mnemonic device. An acronym or a song or-”

“Sherlock?”

“Hmm?”

“Go to sleep.”

“…Okay. Tomorrow though.”

“Of course, dear.”

“You’re absurd.”

“Of course, dear.”

“Stop talking, I’m trying to sleep.”

“…”

“John?”
…”

“Idiot.”

*****

We need to talk

Sherlock stared at the message, locked his phone screen and placed it beside him on the bed, and then picked it up again, swiping the words back into view.

We need to talk

He bit his lip, looking out across the corridor, the lab door open, John changing for practice in the room just beyond.

Irene had sent him the same message three times so far that week, and he’d ignored it every time, deleting it from his inbox and his mind. He’d thought she would take the hint, or at least get bored, but it didn’t appear he would get so lucky, and, with the weekend coming up, he didn’t want to risk her coming here, what she had to say likely not the kind of thing he wanted John hearing.

It was awful how easy it was lying to John, how seamlessly he settled into day after day of hitched smiles and gentle laughs, radiating nonchalance while his mind was perpetually racing, spinning over everything he knew, and, moreover, everything he didn’t.

Lestrade was probably one more 3am text message short of killing him himself, Moriarty be damned, but Sherlock could hardly help it, having to share every potential lead the second it came to him. When he reached the point of having them break down the components of the glue on the ends of the laces of Carl Powers’ trainers, however, even he had to admit he was getting desperate, and the hidden contents of his desk were growing more and more tempting every day, seeming every bit the light at the end of this ever-darkening tunnel.

“Sherlock?”

He started, turning to find John standing over him in his rugby uniform, something Sherlock couldn’t dwell on for too long if either of them were going to get to their destinations tonight.

John frowned, tilting his head down at him. “You alright?” he asked, looking between Sherlock and the window, which he had been staring out of.

Sherlock pulled up a smile, nodding as he lifted his phone, waggling it in the air beside his shoulder. “Lestrade called,” he lied again, affecting regret. “He has a lead on those strangulations.”

“From last month?” John asked, and Sherlock nodded, fighting to keep his fingers from twisting the phone anxiously in his lap. “What kind of lead?”

“He’s not sure,” Sherlock answered, shrugging as he glanced down at the phone, as if reading it, but the screen was blank, the background picture John had set staring up at him—the two of them with the Lego Darth Vader from Christmas—and he swallowed down the lump in his throat. “Wants me to take a look at a few things,” he continued, turning the phone face-down into the sheets.

“Now?” John questioned, disappointed, and Sherlock made his face express commiseration.

“Preferably,” he said, twitching half a grimace.
John smiled, a little sadly, and Sherlock’s insides somehow even further withered. “Well, it’s only a practice,” the blond shrugged. “We can probably handle that without our mascot,” he added with a smirk, and Sherlock, as was expected, glared. “How long you gonna be?” he asked, and, taking that as permission, Sherlock stood, shrugging as he passed toward his wardrobe.

“Hard to say,” he mused, pulling his coat free from a hanger. “Lestrade didn’t want to go into too many details over the phone.”

“Hmm,” John hummed, entirely oblivious, and it still hurt, even after all this time, to know he was perpetually breaking that unquestioning trust. “Well, I suppose finding a mole in the department would make him a little paranoid,” he said, quirking a shoulder as he moved across the room.

Sherlock dropped his mobile into his pocket, readying to go, and then stopped, frowning down at the blond, who had halted directly in front of him. “What?” he muttered, and John chuckled, reaching up to tug at the collar of his coat.

He popped it up, brushing his hands down the lapels, and then dropped his tan hands back to his sides, smiling over his handiwork. “There,” he clipped with a nod. “Now you’re ready.”

Sherlock smiled, his heart breaking not even an adequate analogy anymore, the feeling more akin to every rib splintering up through his skin.

John just smiled back, stretching up on his toes to tap a brief kiss to Sherlock’s mouth, one of his few sentimental gestures. “Text me?” he asked, grinning brightly as Sherlock nodded. “And don’t be too late,” he said over his shoulder as he snatched up his bag, opening the door and stepping out into the corridor, “or I’ll have to call Mycroft to scramble the jets. Or whatever it is he does.”

Sherlock chuckled, shaking his head down at his shoes. “That won’t be necessary,” he pledged, and John smiled.

“Well,” he bade, flicking a brief wave, which Sherlock returned, his arm falling back to his side the second John disappeared from the doorway.

He stood, listening to his trainers squeak down the corridor, and then waited a bit longer, sure to leave enough time for John to be out of sight of Kingsley, and then strode down the hall himself, fishing his mobile out of his pocket.

I’m on my way

SH

He waited, holding the phone in his hand until the response came in, chiming just as he pushed out the main door.

About time

Sherlock dropped the mobile back into his pocket, dread twining in a knot in his throat, and it only grew over the course of his trip, a spike of panic shooting through his heart with every blond man the cab passed on the pavement, his paranoid mind sure John would somehow end up in London and catch him in the lie.

That didn’t happen, of course, but, as he rang the doorbell of Irene’s brothel, it was clear the proverbial jig was up with somebody.

Irene swung open the door, dressed uncharacteristically—in that she was dressed at all—in blue jeans and a white jumper, and, the second her eyes alighted on Sherlock, passing over the empty air
on either side of him, her face snapped into a scowl. “You haven’t told him,” she said, and Sherlock considered feigning ignorance for all of half a second before he realized it was a lost cause, Irene’s eyes glinting with knowing.

He shook his head, dropping his face, relieved in some strange way to admit to someone he was a horrible person, and Irene sighed, sweeping open the door and letting him inside.

They were silent as they walked up the steps, the brothel strangely quiet around them, and Irene waved him into their usual room, closing the wooden door behind her as she followed.

For a moment, she simply stared at him, blinking through the dim, and then sighed, shaking her head at the ground as she ambled forward. “Sherlock, what are you doing?” she asked, and, of all the people he’d expected to be tender, Irene was the last on the list. Nevertheless, her eyes were soft as she looked at him, her brow furrowed in sympathy. “You know he’s in danger. What good could possibly come from hiding it?”

“What do you know?” he asked stiffly, jaw set as he met her eyes, and she closed her lips, looking at him with silent sadness before dropping her gaze and ambling forward.

“Not much,” she admitted, shrugging as she walked across the carpet. “Just what Moran said when he was back in here the other day. Sherlock, you have to-”

“What did he say?” Sherlock interjected, and, though Irene’s eyes flashed, she did not press.

“Said he was tired of chasing after a couple of kids,” she answered, and Sherlock turned away, stepping toward the window, pale blue moonlight streaming in between the curtains. “That he didn’t see why he couldn’t just ice the short one and get it over with.”

Sherlock flinched, his hand twitching, and the soft impacts of Irene’s boots stepped over the carpet toward him.

“Sherlock,” she said softly at his shoulder, but he did not turn, continuing to ignore her even as she laid a gentle hand on his arm. “Sherlock, he-he said something about Victor,” she murmured, and Sherlock, try as he might, couldn’t keep his breathing steady. “Tell me- Tell me you’re not-”

“I’m not,” he said, jolting his arm away as he twisted his back to her.

Silence for a moment, the stillness vibrating with tension that quickened his already pounding heartbeat.

“But you want to,” Irene whispered, and he winced, a swallow grating down his strangled throat, “don’t you?”

He didn’t respond, couldn’t have even if he’d had anything to say, and Irene sighed, her footfalls vibrating closer once again.

“Christ, Sherlock,” she breathed, coming up to his side, her head shaking up at him in his peripheral vision. “You are the dumbest genius I have ever-”

“What am I supposed to do!?” Sherlock exploded, weeks of pent-up frustration boiling over at the wrong person, and Irene’s eyes flew wide, a hand lifting in front of her as she staggered back. “Every second I waste, Moriarty’s getting closer! I don’t know anything about him, Irene; I have no idea what his plan is!”

“And you think this is the answer?” the woman shouted back at him, thrusting her furious face back
into his. “Undoing everything you worked for? Sherlock, I remember how you were back then, and, trust me, you weren’t nearly as brilliant as you think you were!”

“I was better!”

“YOU WERE A DRUG ADDICT!”

“What do you know!?” Sherlock bellowed, teeth bared. “YOU’RE JUST A WHORE!”

Irene’s rage flickered out as quickly as a smothered candle, the light in her eyes vanishing just the same. She stepped back, lips trembling apart, and then closed them softly, shoulders wilting as she dropped her gaze, and Sherlock froze, watching as she turned away, her shoulder a barrier between them.

A cold sickness washed over him, twisting at his stomach, and he closed his eyes, dropping his face to the ground. “I’m sorry,” he breathed, shaking his head, because the last thing he wanted was to hurt any more people, to pick away at the already limited number that managed to tolerate him. “I didn’t-”

“No, you’re right,” Irene interrupted, her voice barely a whisper, and, when she lifted her face, the moonlight caught in the pools of her eyes. “I am a whore. But I’m also trying to help you.” There was steel in her eyes when she met his, and he couldn’t stand to look at them, his gaze skittering guiltily away across the shadowed floor.

“I know,” he murmured, fingers twisting at a pocket flap of his coat. “I just-”

“Don’t give me excuses.”

“I’m not,” Sherlock urged, lifting his face along with a placating hand, and, though Irene’s jaw clenched, she at least hadn’t slapped him yet. Sherlock looked back toward the window, a shaky sigh rattling past his lips. “I don’t know what to do,” he whispered, turning back to find her expression softening just a little. He swallowed, dropping his eyes a moment to watch his feet shifting on the carpet. “I-I always know what to do,” he continued, twitching his shoulders in a shrug, “and, now, I-I don’t know how to-” He trailed off, dropping his face into a trembling palm as he breathed through the cracks of his fingers, and, after a moment, he felt a pressure on his shoulder, looking up to find Irene watching him with soft compassion.

“You’ll figure it out,” she reassured, lifting her other hand to the opposite shoulder. “You always do.”

“But what if I-”

“Then I’ll figure it out,” she interjected, quirking a corner of her lips in a small smile, and Sherlock chuckled in spite of himself, a frail sound that was mostly breath.

He then sobered, expression turning firm as a different kind of tightness pulled at his chest. “Irene, don’t get involved,” he ordered, and the woman smiled, flicking a hand in the air as she withdrew from his shoulders. “I mean it,” he pressed, and Irene hissed a chuckle from her nose.

“Sherlock,” she said, dipping her head, “I’m already involved.”

He closed his mouth, jaw setting anxiously, but the woman only smiled, cupping a hand to his cheek. “Don’t worry about me,” she soothed, and Sherlock let out a weak scoff.
“I wasn’t going to,” he muttered, and Irene chuckled, letting her hand fall away. He watched her a moment, her smile slowly falling away, and then stepped closer, drawing her eyes back to his face. “Please,” he said, and she blinked, startled, one of the few people who would understand the weight of that word on his lips, “be careful.”

She simply stared at him a moment, and then smiled, a watery tremble of her lips as she scanned between his eyes. Slowly, exaggerating the lean of her head to make clear her intended path, she stretched up, clicking a soft kiss to the top of his cheekbone, and then pulled back, gripping lightly over his arm. “Aren’t I always?” she said, tilting her head as she stepped away, and Sherlock was startled into a laugh, a puff of air gusting from his chest. Irene moved toward the door, bobbing her head at him as she creaked it open. “You should go,” she advised, and he nodded, crossing the carpet after her. “Go out the back,” she said as he passed her, heading down the stairs, and then she called him back. “Sherlock!”

He stopped, turning back to her, halfway through pulling on his second glove.

Irene smiled, dropping her chin, but there was nothing amused in her eyes. “You be careful too,” she urged, and he set his jaw, giving her a firm nod before continuing down to the foyer, weaving his way around to the kitchen.

He opened the back door just a crack at first, peering side-to-side, and then quickly jumped out, closing it softly behind him before making a beeline for the pavement. *Doctor Who* played from his pocket as he stepped to the curb, waving down a taxi, and he rattled the phone free, pulling a glove loose with his teeth before swiping across to unlock the screen.

*Where are you?* the text read, the latest in the thread of his conversation with John—the previous installment being a series of ridiculous faces when the boy discovered an entire new page of emoticons—and Sherlock hesitated a moment, bare thumb hovering in the cold winter air.

*On my way* he finally settled on, stowing the phone and replacing his glove as the cab drew up, and he quickly gave the man the address, settling into the backseat before wiping a hand down his cheek.

He might be the world’s worst boyfriend, but even he wasn’t going to show up with lipstick on his face.

*****

*On my way*

John frowned down at the phone, tucking it into his back pocket as he once again looked out around the room.

Sherlock hadn’t been back when John had gotten done with his post-practice shower, and he’d figured he might as well head down to the Yard, planning to physically drag the boy out of some dimly lit incident room if he had to, but Sherlock hadn’t been in any of the ones John had walked by, giving a friendly wave to the security guard as he entered, none of them even attempting to stop him anymore. Stranger still, Lestrade supposedly had the night off, but that wasn’t necessarily unprecedented, the sergeant often forgoing his free time to continue the chase, but John couldn’t find him either, and, ultimately, he was forced to resort to drastic measure.

“Hey, Anderson?” John beckoned, leaning in around the wall of the man’s cubicle, startling him as he jumped in his seat. “Sorry, I-I’m looking for Sherlock,” he said, and the man frowned, tilting his head at him.
“Sherlock?” he echoed, shaking his head after John nodded. “I haven’t seen him. And he usually makes a point of stopping by,” he added, a little bitterly, but John couldn’t really blame him for that; Sherlock did typically make a practice of strolling past to mock Anderson’s wrinkled shirt or beard, a new look he was apparently trying out.

“Any idea where he’d be?” John pressed, looking out over the other offices. “He said Lestrade called about those strangulations from last month.”

“Oh, right,” Anderson clipped, bobbing his head toward the lifts. “All that stuff’s in the big incident room upstairs. Just get off the lift, go straight, and then take a right at the fork in the corridor. Ya can’t miss it.”

“Right,” John said, smiling with a grateful nod. “Cheers,” he added, and Anderson waved a hand, not an entirely unpleasant fellow, really. At least, not when Sherlock wasn’t around.

John walked across the room, the lift only taking a few seconds to arrive, the place as quiet as it was, and he was afforded a blissfully silent ride, no overworked newbies bustling in beside him with an armload of papers and mumbled apologies. The floor he arrived on was entirely deserted, however, the silence growing almost unnerving, and he quickened his steps, peering back over his shoulder like he used to as a child, sure there was a monster ready to pounce on him the second he made the sprint from the light switch to his bed. The incident room was impossible to miss, boxes and boards visible even in the dim light reaching in stripes through the blinds, but the lights of the room weren’t on, and John cautiously stepped inside, scanning the corners for a curled-up consulting detective.

“Sherlock?” he whispered, stepping around the table, dipping his head this way and that. “Sherlock, are you in here?” he asked, louder now, and was just about to give up and call him, his phone already out and in his hand, when his eyes were drawn to something scrawled in the corner of one of the boards. He drew closer, stepping to the side to eliminate the glare of the moonlight, and then blinked, startled as much as he was confused.

It was his name, spelled lengthwise, the first letters leading off to random other names, but, as he stepped closer, he realized that wasn’t quite right. Every name listed was also a heading on one of the boards around the room, the name of a victim placed above crime scene photos and other miscellaneous collections, and John’s heart began to quicken, dread prickling at the back of his neck before understanding was even fully realized. He suddenly couldn’t seem to get enough air, scanning around the various names, matching them up one by one to a letter of his name, but it was all there, the undeniable proof staring him in the face, but, ironically, discovering five people had been murdered just to call him out was not the worst part. No, the worst part was realizing—and confirming as he leaned his face down directly in front of the lettering—that all the names were in Sherlock’s handwriting, and John doubted very much he’d just realized it tonight, some of the surrounding notes encroaching around the edges of the text, as if they’d been pinned over it.

Strangely, he didn’t feel anything at first, a hollow sort of emptiness rushing in to fill his chest as he blinked at the words, hoping they’d look different if he just looked hard enough. Following briskly on the heels of that, however, was not—as he would’ve thought—anger, but instead a stinging sort of sadness, and then promptly nausea as he wondered just how long Sherlock had known, how many lies he’d been told, how much of everything that had happened had just been a distraction, a ruse. And then there were all the things it explained, memory after memory slamming into John like a relentless barrage of waves across the hull of a ship, and he staggered back against the table, about to capsize under the force of it.

The staring off into space, the permanent attachment to his mobile, the mood swings, the changes in appetite, the constant dark circles, the desperately lost look in his eyes whenever he thought John
wasn’t looking. And those things had been going on for over a month! Just how much was John going to find out had been a lie, because he was going to find out, starting with where the hell Sherlock was right now.

He lifted his phone up, furious as he opened a message, and then stopped, fingers hovering over the keyboard. If he said anything now, it would give Sherlock time to prepare, to pull himself and a good cover story together before John returned, and, as much as he wished he didn’t even have to consider it, he could use every advantage he could get, Sherlock clearly not adverse or unskilled at lying.

Stowing the phone back in his pocket, he moved to the door, stopping just short of shutting it behind him to look once more at the names paired with his, five innocent people who had done nothing wrong but show up in certain sections of the phonebook. Was he supposed to be the sixth? Was Sherlock?

Blinking his eyes away with a rough swallow, he closed the door behind him with a sharp click, determined, at the very least, that, if anyone were going to kill Sherlock Holmes, it would be him.

*****

Sherlock knew something was wrong the second he heard the first of John’s footsteps through the walls, and he froze where he perched on the edge of their bed, mobile in his hand ringing out to voicemail for the fifth time. He’d known something was amiss when he’d come back and John hadn’t been there, but, according to Mycroft, his phone was functioning, and John had seemed fine riding in the back of a cab when Mycroft had spied on him through a few security cameras, but Sherlock still had no idea what he’d been doing there, worried his paranoid delusions of John following him to Irene’s had not been quite so delusional after all. He was prepared for that, had an explanation all worked out that was both simple and believable, only lies ever requiring detail, but he could never have anticipated what was about to happen.

John gently opened the door, not the thunderous push Sherlock had been expecting, looking like a man entirely bereft for a moment before he lifted his eyes and found Sherlock’s, a hard mask rolling out over his expression. Softly, he shut out the corridor, the lock a faint click that nevertheless echoed in Sherlock’s head, and he didn’t move as John stepped closer, suddenly unable to execute his leap-up-and-start-begging strategy.

“How long?” John asked, quietly, calmly, his arms folding protectively over his chest as he stared steadily down at him, and Sherlock could only blink, completely wrong-footed by the demeanor.

“I- What?” he murmured, and John’s mouth twitched, a smile that looked more like a death omen.

“How long have you known?” he supposedly elaborated, but Sherlock remained puzzled, shaking his head at him.

“Known what?” he asked, and it was apparently the wrong thing to say, a brief flash in John’s eyes the only hint before he was stepping forward, positively screaming down at him.

“STOP LYING TO ME!” he shouted, but his face was a twist of pain more than anger. “You’re always doing this! Why are you always doing this!?”

Sherlock was, for one of the only times he could remember, completely rattled, his chest tight with terror as he shook his head, eyes wide with ignorance and shock. “John, I- I don’t-”

“I went to the Yard,” the blond interjected, and Sherlock’s blood chilled.

His face must have shown something, some dawning comprehension of how red his hands were,
“Yeah,” he muttered, just skimming a snarl, “I saw it. Nice setup you’ve got there.” He waved a hand, an airy sort of gesture that somehow only made him look more dangerous as he ambled along the bottom of the bed. “Didn’t even know there was a big incident room, but I suppose it’s only the best for you, isn’t it?” He turned back to Sherlock, tipping his head with a venomous smirk, and Sherlock floundered, mouth flapping uselessly up at him as his palms broke out in a cold sweat. John’s expression turned hard again, and he folded his arms once more, chin lifted in defiant determination. “How long have you known?” he asked again, and, this time, Sherlock understood, dropping his face to blink at his lap. “Sherlock!”

“A month,” Sherlock blurted down at the ground, John soft intake of breath a battle-axe to his back. “More or less. It was that weekend you were gone. For the game.”


Silence a moment, Sherlock’s lungs burning for air, but he didn’t dare open his mouth, sure he would throw up if he so much as cracked his lips.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” John said, and Sherlock looked up, somewhat stunned at the tone of it, but John’s expression matched the words. He was angry, of course he was, but, mostly, he was just broken, broken and exhausted, and Sherlock considered for the first time that maybe just the lying would be enough, that it wouldn’t take drugs or murderers to drive John away, maybe he’d done it all on his own, and he twisted toward the boy on the bed, suddenly desperate.

“I-I thought I could handle it,” he stammered, hands rolling in the air over his legs, “and I didn’t want- I didn’t want you making it worse.”

“Worse!?” John spluttered, eyes wide. “Sherlock, there is a maniac out there painting a target on my back in other people’s blood!” he cried, waving a hand back toward the door, and Sherlock flinched.

“How could it possibly get any worse!?”

“Because you wouldn’t hide!” Sherlock countered, lifting his hands in earnest urging. “You would’ve taken it as a challenge, been even less careful!”

“That’s ridiculous,” John snapped, rattling his head as he turned away, and Sherlock shuffled closer across the mattress.

“Is it?” he pressed, and John shot him a glare. “You said it yourself, he’s killing people to get to you. There’s no way you would’ve stood for that; you’d have called him out first chance you got.”

“And what were you going to do!?” John shot back, rounding on him. “Let him spell out my middle name too?”

“No!” Sherlock bleated, frantically shaking his head. “No, of course not! I was going to solve it- I am going to solve it!”

“And I couldn’t help you!?!” John countered, waving his arms out in gesture. “I thought we were a team, Sherlock! I thought you trusted me enough for that!”

“I do trust you!”

“Well, how am I supposed to trust you!?!” John shouted, and Sherlock recoiled, palm planting behind him as he leaned back over the duvet. “You’ve been lying to me for months! About everything!”
“Not everything,” Sherlock muttered weakly, but John only scoffed.

“How the hell would I know?” he spat, and Sherlock turned his eyes to the floor.

He took in a breath, closing his eyes to steady himself before trying to calmly turn back up to John. “I was going to tell you,” he said, and John laughed, the sound sending shivers up Sherlock’s spine. “I was, I just- I needed more time.”

“More time for what?” John chuckled bitterly. “For Moriarty to show up so you could ask him yourself?”

Sherlock snapped his head up, mouth dropping open as his eyes narrowed in affront. “Are you suggesting I was using you as bait!?” he sputtered, nose wrinkling in disgust as John shrugged. “How can you- You can’t possibly- I would never do that!”

“Honestly, Sherlock, I don’t know what you wouldn’t do anymore,” John muttered, shaking his head, but that undercurrent of resignation was growing more and more prominent, and Sherlock panicked, batting his hands in front of him as he slid toward the foot of the bed.

“I know it was an awful thing to do, alright?” he pleaded, trying to sort through the emotions on John’s face, but they were changing too fast for him to keep track of, and it didn’t help that his vision was blurring. “I know it was. But, John,” he urged, hoping his eyes conveyed half the sincerity of his pounding heart, “I can solve it, I know I can! Nothing is going to happen to you, I swear.”

“You think that’s what this is about?” John asked, eyes wide with incredulity. “That I’m scared? Sherlock, I don’t care if he wants to make shoes out of my skin, you still should’ve told me!”

“Don’t you see!?” he cried, and John startled a step back. “That’s precisely the problem! You don’t care! You’d have set up some Old West showdown, and you’d have died, John! All for some misplaced sense of bravado!”

“Excuse me!?” John blustered, but Sherlock wasn’t done.

“But you don’t have to,” he ranted on, head shaking erratically, a bubble of hysteria spreading out across his chest. “You don’t have to, because I can fix it! I can figure it out, I know I can! I can beat him!”

John frowned down at him, anger slowly shifting to concerned suspicion as his brows closed in on one another. “Beat him?” he echoed, and Sherlock nodded eagerly. “Yes!” he exclaimed, triumphant, John’s eyes widening down at him. “I can beat him! I just need more time, more focus!” he snarled, and John jumped, staring down at Sherlock as if he were a wild animal loosed from its cage. “I need to clear out all the unnecessary information, really see things again! Then I can make the connections, I know I can, just like I used to!” He panted down at his knees, mind spiraling out away from him, chasing down the possibilities, but reality came back with a sharp smack as John shuffled forward, his trainers squeaking on the dormitory floor.

“Used to?” he echoed in a shaky breath, and Sherlock’s heart stopped, his eyes widening at the tile as his lips popped apart. “You mean, when-when you were-”

Sherlock winced, the gesture slipping past his defenses, and John’s breath hitched, his legs moving into the corner of Sherlock’s eye.

“You didn’t,” he muttered, his eyes just as frantic as his voice when Sherlock looked up. “Sherlock, tell me you didn’t. Tell me you didn’t!”
“I didn’t,” he replied weakly, shaking his head, and John notably slumped in relief, his eyes closing a long moment.

“Okay,” John panted, nodding slowly, “okay, because—that’s not going to help.” He shook his head, and Sherlock’s jaw tightened as he closed his mouth. “We-We can figure it out. You don’t-You’ll never need that.”

“John,” Sherlock breathed, ducking his chin, and he could feel the change in the air, John falling silent and completely still, “I- What if it’s not enough?”

“What?” John wheezed, eyes searching helplessly over Sherlock’s face.

Sherlock swallowed, dropping his eyes a moment before lifting them again, trying to be confident. “I was better with the cocaine,” he started, and John physically recoiled, his body twisting away as he began shaking his head. “Everything was clearer, I could see things so much faster. It’s been a month, and I haven’t gotten anywhere! I don’t- This isn’t just some case, John, it’s your life, and, if I don’t figure it out in time—”

“No,” John snapped, his head quivering at the wall, jaw set and eyes focused firmly off of Sherlock. “Don’t say that. Don’t you even think it.”

“What?” John parroted, brow creasing down at him. “Do you really think that’s possible?” he snapped, and Sherlock ducked his face to the mattress a moment.

“But, if it can help—”

“It will never help!” John interjected furiously. “Don’t you understand that? It’s a disease!”

“What am I supposed to do!?” Sherlock shouted for the second time that night, but this one hurt considerably more, his eyes already stinging. “I can’t just sit by and do nothing! And, if this is what it takes to save your life, then I—”

“Don’t,” John said, eerily calm all of a sudden, his eyes blazing. “Don’t put that on me, Sherlock.” He shook his head, lowering a steady finger down toward him, his voice dripping with venom. “Don’t you dare put that on me.”

Sherlock opened his mouth, then closed it, temporarily thinking better of the comment, and then opened it again, blurting the words out before he lost his nerve. “It’s the only way!”

“LIKE HELL IT IS!” John bellowed, and Sherlock nearly flattened himself against the bed, he skittered back so fast. John’s face twisted with torment, and then he turned away, pacing in agitated steps in front of Sherlock’s feet.

Sherlock didn’t say anything, didn’t even move beyond his eyes following John’s progress, and, eventually, the blond slowed, coming to a stop a few feet from Sherlock with a sigh.

He bowed his head, lifting a hand to grind his fingers over his eyes, and then folded his arms, shaking his head weakly down at his shoes. “I’m supposed to tell you I’d leave,” he said, voice steady as he lifted his chin, eyes focused aimlessly out in front of him toward the door. “That, if you ever did that—” He trailed off, a swallow bobbing down his throat as he blinked down to the ground again, and then turned, shaking his head softly as he looked through his lashes to meet Sherlock’s eyes. “But I wouldn’t,” he croaked, twitching a shoulder in a half shrug. “We both know I wouldn’t.
I would stay.” He nodded, pitch rising as his voice began to break, and he looked away again, clenching his teeth as he steadied. “I would stay,” he repeated, firmer now, “and I would help you, and I would be there for rehab and all the rest of it. I-I would defer admission to uni. I’d probably move in, whether you wanted me to or not. I would put everything on hold until I got you right, but—” He paused, closing his eyes to the floor as he dragged his teeth over his lip, and then gusted in a quaking breath, eyes blinking rather too much for Sherlock’s heart as he lifted his chin again. “But I would hate you for it,” he whispered, shaking his head as he met Sherlock’s gaze, blue orbs glittering like sun caught on the sea. “I would hate you, Sherlock. Resent every second, every single thing I had to give up along the way, and I—” He hissed out a breath, running a hand back through his hair as he closed his eyes again, forehead furrowed in barely restrained emotion, and Sherlock’s eyes caught fire, his throat growing tight.

“And maybe it’s my fault,” John continued, spinning back to him with a helpless shrug. “Maybe that’s my mistake, always loving people too much to save myself,” he barreled on, but Sherlock’s whole world stopped, freezing on those few simple words John had just dropped between them, rolling over the syllables like it was nothing, his tongue clearly not sticking to the roof of his mouth whenever he even thought about it, “but I can’t- I don’t know any other way to be.” He turned his head, tilting his face away as he slid the side of his palm beneath an eye, and then brushed a strand of hair behind his ears, as if to excuse the gesture, but Sherlock saw, he always saw, even when he wished he couldn’t, and this was one thing he was sure he’d never forget, because, of all the horrors he had ever seen, all the things he had ever done, he had never dreamt he would make John Watson cry, and, regardless of what John did, he knew he could never forgive himself.

“I-I don’t know how to leave, even when I should,” John continued, swallowing overmuch in a vain effort to stave off the tears, but Sherlock was in even worse shape, jaw quivering as he blinked the world blurry. “Like—Like with my mother,” he murmured, tipping his face away, and Sherlock cringed, gripping his fingers tightly into the duvet at the comparison, horrifying only for its accuracy. “I love my mother, Sherlock,” John said softly, and Sherlock met his eyes through damp lashes, “god knows I do, but I-I hated her for what she did.” His voice crept up to a creak, and Sherlock might’ve been drawing blood from his bottom lip, so determined he was to bite back the sob clawing at his throat. “Every lie I had to tell, every night I mopped up her vomit, only for her to not even remember me in the morning. Every pointless promise I pretended to believe, had to believe, and every single time…she would just go back.”

Sherlock pinched his eyes shut, a single tear breaking loose to darken a splotch on his black trousers, and he swallowed hard, drawing a breath before he could look up again, finding John blinking watery eyes toward his wardrobe.

“And I-I blamed myself,” he croaked, and a drop finally fell, glittering down from his lashes as he blinked to the floor. “Every time, I- I thought, if I had-if I had done more, if I had been more… maybe it would’ve been enough.”

Sherlock opened his mouth, desperate to just stop it, to find the words to fix the very worst thing he could’ve ruined, but he couldn’t even think through the pain of it, and, when John turned, eyes bleeding tears in slender tracks down his cheeks, Sherlock could hardly bear to look at him. He did though, owing him that much, and he felt salt scratching down his own face, cooling trails along his skin as John swallowed, jaw tight.

“Don’t make me do that, Sherlock,” he breathed, shaking his head faintly, and Sherlock hissed in a sharp gasp, a final frail effort to dam the sobs beating at his ribs. “Don’t make me live like that. Please. Don’t—Don’t be another person I can’t be enough for,” he finished on a shattered whispered, and Sherlock broke, just broke, shooting apart like shrapnel over the walls as he hung his head, rattling breath after breath out over his lap.
He screwed his eyes shut, trying to think through the shame, but what could he say? What even was there to say, what possible combination of syllables could even make a dent in the damage he’d done, the selfish self-destruction he’d never even considered the fallout of? He’d never meant to hurt him, had only ever wanted to protect him, but he was bad at this, he knew he was, bad at being good enough for anyone, let alone John Watson, but he could try. He had to try. And, it wasn’t much, but there was at least one place he could start.

“My-My desk,” he muttered, twitching a finger across the room, eyes firmly rooted to the floor. “Bottom drawer on-on the left. There’s-There’s a false bottom.” He couldn’t look up, but he felt John looking at him, the heavy weight of his gaze settling on the side of Sherlock’s face, and then he moved, crossing in front of Sherlock toward the window.

Chancing a glance out of the corner of his eye, he watched John grate open the drawer, paper shuffling as his hand delved inside, and then there was a shift of wood, and he froze, Sherlock flinching his gaze away again. He heard the faint sound of glass thunking against the side, and then a rustle of paper again, followed by the shift of John’s jeans as his legs moved back into Sherlock’s downturned vision.

“Did you—” John started, and then trailed away, but Sherlock shook his head, understanding the silence. John hesitated a moment longer, and then left, Sherlock continuing to stare at the floor as he heard him cross the corridor, the sounds of breaking glass and running water returning to him from the bathroom.

He didn’t move, couldn’t do anything but force himself to keep breathing, the air agony as it dragged in and out of his lungs, and it was a long moment before he noticed things had gone quiet, warily tipping his head toward the door.

John was standing just inside, fingers still wrapped around the handle as he hesitated, expression unreadable, and Sherlock couldn’t do it any longer, the shaky scaffolding holding him aloft finally giving way, and he crumbled into the sea with a gust of a sob.

“John,” he wept, dropping his head, dimly registering a rush of movement before he was enveloped in warm wool and the faint aroma of black tea.

“Shhh,” John soothed, pressing Sherlock into his shoulder, gentle fingers carding through his hair while the other arm wrapped tight around his back. “It’s okay. It’ll be okay,” he panted into Sherlock’s curls, and Sherlock shook against him, sobbing with a cathartic abandon he couldn’t remember since his mother had died, but he’d been alone then, not dampening a dark patch over someone else’s jumper, but John didn’t seem to mind, didn’t seem like he’d let him go even if Sherlock tried, so he didn’t, just clawed his fingers into the wool and wept, months of pent-up everything eroding his cheeks in flaming rivers.

He didn’t deserve it, to be the one comforted when he’d so clearly caused it all, but that was just John, and Sherlock could do nothing but hope he someday earned the freely-given faith, but, maybe, it wasn’t faith at all, maybe there was a better word for it, and, as Sherlock began to calm, breathing against the cooling patch of damp wool, he realized with a shock to the stomach that it had been true for him for a long time too.

“John?” he murmured, and the scruff of the blond’s chin brushed against his forehead, a small tilt of his head to indicate his attention. “What-What you said a-about you…loving people. Did-Did you mean—”

“Yes,” John whispered, and Sherlock closed his eyes, savoring the warmth that spilled out over his chest, “but I- I didn’t- It wasn’t supposed to be like that.” He shook his head, chin rustling through
Sherlock’s hair as his hand stroked softly up and down his spine. “I-I shouldn’t’ve- We can just-”

“No,” Sherlock interjected, curling his legs up as he tucked himself tighter to John’s chest, “I-I don’t-I don’t wanna forget it.”

John didn’t say anything, but his hands slowed in their movements, the heartbeat Sherlock could feel across his cheek stuttering a moment. “Okay,” John agreed, nodding against Sherlock’s forehead, and Sherlock’s fingers hooked firmer into his jumper as he steeled himself.

“John-” he started, but John shook his head, his muscles tensing.

“Don’t,” he urged, voice suddenly firm. “Not-Not right now, I- Not right now,” he repeated, and Sherlock frowned unseen down at the bed. “It-It wouldn’t- I want you to be sure,” he continued, and Sherlock opened his mouth, ready to argue, but then stalled, understanding creeping its way slowly over his brain.

John wouldn’t believe him, not at this moment, not after all the other lies they still had to sort through, and Sherlock supposed he could understand that, nodding even as a bitter taste soured his tongue.

“Alright,” he promised, and then they fell silent, the night ticking away around them as Sherlock closed his eyes, counting the beats of John’s unfailing heart.
Okay, so, this won't make a lot of sense to you right now, but it won't do you any good to know at the end. This is the disclaimer I put on the very first chapter: "Just so you know what you're getting into: this is Teenlock, this will be fluffy, this will get sexy (I promise), this will be funny, this will be sad, this will have lots of cases, this will NOT HAVE major character death, but I cannot say the same for major character danger" and I'm going to need you to remember that I have never told you a lie.

Also, DO NOT start this playlist I made before you reach the end of the chapter, or at least the "Total Eclipse of the Heart" reference, because it will ruin your reading experience, I am not even a little bit joking. The playlist covers just the next few chapters, not all the way to the end of the fic, so don't worry about that.

I'm also doing a follower giveaway thing on my Tumblr where you can get a fic written for you, something beta-read, and a bunch of other stuff, so make sure you're following me and reblog this post if you wanna be entered into that.

Sebastian Moran knocked on the door of the flat, peering into the dimly lit room. “Hello?” he asked warily, stepping onto the white carpet, the similarly colored door closing softly behind him. “Sir? Are you-”

“In here,” came an airy voice from the living room, and Moran followed the sound, stepping through the wide archway of the spacious flat—a modern, glass-encased penthouse looking out over the flickering London lights.

The glass also reflected the light inside the flat, only a single lamp and a fire, the yellow and orange waving across the polished surface like lunging snakes, but there was a large shadow of a wingback chair stretching across the floor, a pair of trouser-clad legs the only thing visible of the occupant where he sat facing the flames.

Moran inched closer, moving around from behind the chair, and then froze as pale fingers appeared on the armrest, tapping against the black leather.

“You have news,” Moriarty did not ask, and Moran swallowed, hedging forward.

“We went through the rubbish,” he said, shifting far enough around the barrier of the chair to see a file open on the man’s lap, an array of papers and photographs of faces he’d become all-too-familiar with over the past several months, although the Darth Vader one was new. “Found a tourniquet and some shattered glass. We haven’t tested it yet, but-”

“There’s no need,” Jim said, almost a sigh, as if thoroughly exhausted with the proceedings already. “It’s obvious he didn’t use any of it. Oh well,” he mused, hand pulling away from the armrest to lift up one of the pictures, a blurry surveillance camera shot of the brunette one buying hot chocolate, “it always was a frail hope. I probably would’ve been a little disappointed, actually,” he added in a chuckle that raised the hair on Moran’s neck. “It’s hardly a satisfying victory when you don’t have to stretch yourself, and it would’ve been awfully disconcerting if he’d fallen for that twice.”
“Twice?” Moran asked, but Moriarty flicked a hand dismissively through the air, leaning forward as he closed the file, tucking all the articles back inside save one, a photograph of the two boys that appeared to be taken from a camera inside a cab, the dark-haired one leaning on the blond’s shoulder while they both laughed, fingers interlaced on the seat between them.

“Immaterial,” Moriarty replied, uncrossing his legs, only a sliver of his face visible in the firelight as he stared down at the picture held aloft in his hand. “Do you have everything you need?” he asked suddenly, voice sharp, and Moran blinked, startling to attention.

“Nearly,” he replied, and Jim’s jaw tightened. “I’d like to get a few more blocks, just to be safe,” he added, and, after a beat of bated breath, Moriarty nodded.

“Good,” he said, and Seb closed his eyes a moment with relief. “We can’t afford a mistake, not at this stage of the game.” What little of his mouth Moran could see curled in private amusement, and Sebastian frowned, shuffling a little closer across the carpet.

“Jim?” he started hesitantly, and Moriarty stilled, chin tilting just slightly up toward him to indicate he had heard. “I-I still don’t understand why we’re doing this. What’s so important about this kid? And how is this even gonna help, I mean, won’t it just make him harder to—”

“Do you know what a phoenix is, Seb?” Jim interjected, and Moran blinked, watching the immobile sliver of the man’s sharp face.

“I- You mean the bird? From mythology?” he asked, and Moriarty nodded.

“They’re said to be immortal,” he began, turning again to the fire, photograph clutched in his hand as he stood. “They can live for centuries, and then, when the time comes for them to die, they burst into flames and are reborn from the ashes.”

Moran waited a moment, watching the man’s silhouetted back where he stood in front of the fire, staring down at the flickering light, and then opened his mouth in hesitant prompt. “I- I’m sorry, I—”

“The point, Seb,” Moriarty clipped, and Moran flinched, his mouth snapping shut, “is that some things need to burn before they can be rebuilt.”

With a flick of pale fingers, the photograph fell into the heat, the corners curling as they blackened, and then it caught, shadow and flame circling the frozen happiness for a moment before it was completely devoured.

*****

“His folly, Helena, is no fault of mine,” Mary recited, turning back to Molly where they stood at the front of the classroom.

“None, but your beauty; would that fault were mine!” Molly replied, turning her eyes up to the ceiling in despair, and John swallowed, going over his upcoming lines again as he leaned back around Mary’s hair—curled for the occasion—to find Sherlock leaning against the wall, waiting for his scene.

Sherlock was watching the display with mild interest, his apathy comforting after the weeks of jealousy—although John was going to miss the after-effects a little. His eyes blinked up to John, sensing the glance as always, and a corner of his mouth twitched, an entire sentence of silent mocking passing across in the gesture.

John narrowed his eyes, a look he hoped conveyed a stern reminder it was about to be Sherlock’s
John frowned, looking down at her actor-earnest eyes, and then his attention was drawn away by a snort, and he snapped a glare to Sherlock, grey eyes glittering overtop of pale fingers he was using to muffle his chuckling.

Mary cleared her throat, and John started, opening his mouth to let the programmed Shakespeare roll off his tongue.

“Helen, to you our minds we will unfold,” he said, squeezing back against Mary’s hand as she pressed against his side, and Sherlock turned away, his shoulders shaking. “To-morrow night, when Phoebe doth behold her silver visage in the watery glass, decking with liquid pearl the bladed grass, a time that lovers’ flights doth still conceal, through Athens’ gates have we devised to steal.”

Mary sighed, leaning into him in an embarrassing display of dramatics, and Sherlock was very lucky looks couldn’t kill. “And in the wood, where often you and I upon faint primrose-beds were wont to lie, emptying our bosoms of their counsel sweet,” she urged, twisting to Molly, leaving John free to glare hotly across at where his boyfriend was clutching onto a chair for support, “there my Lysander and myself shall meet; and thence from Athens turn away our eyes, to seek new friends and stranger companies.” She then turned abruptly, tugging John forward with a bitten-off yelp as she waved a hand dramatically toward Molly. “Farewell, sweet playfellow: pray thou for us; and good luck grant thee thy Demetrius!” She spun back to John, lifting his hands up within hers to clutch them between their chests as she dropped her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “Keep word, Lysander: we must starve our sight from lovers' food till morrow deep midnight.”

John blinked at her, utterly perplexed, but, luckily, it was exeunt time. “I will, my Hermia,” he said stiffly, brow furrowing even further as Mary sighed in contentment. “Helena, adieu: As you on him, Demetrius dote on you,” he concluded to Molly, who smiled at him before he was dragged across the makeshift stage by Mary, their part of the presentation concluded.

There was a break for clapping, Sherlock joining in with a teasing smirk and mockingly slow collisions of his hands, but he laughed when John sneered at him, lifting his hand to meet Mary’s as she tagged him in.

They leaned against the wall then, he and Mary watching as Sherlock stepped out in front of the class with Molly, the students falling silent as they took their places, and John couldn’t help but smile, hands folding behind the small of his back.

Sherlock glanced at Molly, lifting his brows in wordless query, and then turned away as she gave him a single nod. “I love thee not, therefore pursue me not. Where is Lysander and fair Hermia? The one I'll slay, the other slayeth me!” Sherlock began, storming across the front of the classroom, Molly hot on his heels in the planned pantomime. “Thou told'st me they were stolen unto this wood; and here am I, and wode within this wood, because I cannot meet my Hermia. Hence, get thee gone, and follow me no more!”

“You draw me, you hard-hearted adamant!” Molly urged, grabbing onto his arm and spinning him back, and John found himself getting pulled in by the words, unwittingly caught up in the flowing prose and flutter of Sherlock’s curls when he turned to the girl. “But yet you draw not iron, for my
heart is true as steel: leave you your power to draw, and I shall have no power to follow you.”

“Do I entice you?” Sherlock snapped, yanking his arm away. “Do I speak you fair? Or, rather, do I not in plainest truth tell you, I do not, nor I cannot love you?”

“And even for that do I love you the more,” John mumbled along with Molly, though, where she continued, he halted, turning curiously toward Mary’s wretch of disgust.

“Seriously?” she muttered, rolling her eyes as John frowned. “I don’t know how no one’s figured out you two are a couple yet,” she added, and he cast a quick wary glance around, but there was no one close enough to hear, and they were all paying attention to Sherlock and Molly anyway, “walking around with those cartoon hearts over your heads.”

“We do not,” John countered, elbowing her lightly in the arm, and Mary scoffed, shaking her head as she turned again to their friends, Molly still pleading desperately with Sherlock’s snapping character.

“You do,” she contested, and John rolled his eyes. “It’s sickening, and I’m jealous as hell.”

John rounded on her, alarmed, and Mary turned a curious look at him for a moment before her eyes widened.

“No, not like that! I don’t still like you or anything!” she spluttered, shaking her head, and John hesitantly smiled, uncertain if he should be comforted or offended. “I just mean…having someone,” she said, her voice dropping as she waved a hand out toward the brunette. “People don’t look at one another the way you do,” she murmured, turning her face to flash him a brief soft smile. “Not often, anyway.”

“Kendall looks at you like that,” John offered, and Mary barked a sharp laugh.

“Kendall!?” she scoffed, shaking her head. “No, he doesn’t. We’ve only been together a month.”

“Oh, right, my mistake,” John muttered, nodding with his eyes fixed forward. “I forgot you have to be dating at least 45 days before it’s possible to fall in love.”

“Shut up,” Mary snipped, swatting at his side, and John grinned down at her, chuckling as she blushed. “So, what about you?” she asked, bobbing her head toward the tall brunette. “How long’s it been?”

John hesitated a moment, mouth hovering open, and then a hiss of pain issued forth as Mary hit him hard on the arm. “Ow!” he blurted, earning a disparaging look from a nearby classmate. “What was-”

“You don’t know how long you’ve been together!?” Mary hissed, looking up at him with incredulous disapproval, and John shook his head, rubbing at the injured bicep.

“Of course, I do,” he snapped, turning out to the room again. “I was just counting it out. It’s been almost three months,” he said when Mary quirked a skeptical brow. “Since Christmas Eve.”

Mary made a sound of disgust, rolling her eyes to the ceiling as her tongue protruded past her teeth, and John laughed.

“Yeah, I know,” he shrugged, smiling brightly. “Couldn’t be helped.”

“And you love him?” Mary asked, sudden and simple, and John started, turning his widening eyes down to her soft smile.
“I-” he began, and then looked up, drawn by the rising volume of Sherlock’s voice.

“I will not stay thy questions; let me go: Or, if thou follow me, do not believe but I shall do thee mischief in the wood!” he barked, making to stamp away from Molly, who latched quickly onto his wrist, drawing up to his side as he turned.

“Ay, in the temple, in the town, the field, you do me mischief. Fie, Demetrius!” Molly urged. “Your wrongs do set a scandal on my sex: We cannot fight for love, as men may do; We should be wood and were not made to woo.”

Sherlock rolled his eyes, tugging his hand away and storming offstage to the opposite side of the room.

Molly clutched her hands together, staring listlessly after where he had figuratively vanished into the wilderness. “I’ll follow thee and make a heaven of hell, to die upon the hand I love so well,” she concluded, and then dropped her hands, turning to the class with a smile that signaled the end of the production.

The class broke into obligatory applause, Molly blushing furiously as she beckoned Sherlock with a flustered wave, and then finally lunged out at him, ripping him away from the wall to stand beside her.

Sherlock muttered something John couldn’t hear, his head turning just slightly toward Molly, but it must have been less than charitable, as the brown-haired girl promptly elbowed him in the side. The detective chuckled then, pink grazing faintly over the arches of his cheekbones as he stood before the clapping class, and he tried surreptitiously to slip away again, an effort Molly seemed to anticipate, looping her arm through his and pinning him to her side. Grey eyes snapped up to glare at the side of her face, and then looked past her, fixing on John with a helpless expression, but John only laughed, grinning broadly as he joined in the applause.

“Yeah,” he said, nodding gently as he glanced down at Mary, who paused in her wolf-whistling to blink owlishly up at him. “Yeah, I do,” he repeated, and Mary smiled, both of them turning back to catcall as Molly tugged Sherlock down into a bow by his tie.

*****

Sherlock slammed into the dorm, startling John where he sat his desk, the blond spinning around in his chair.

“What the-” he started, and then paused, shocked expression falling to a stifled smile as he searched over Sherlock’s face.

Sherlock just glared at him, lowering his violin case to the floor in front of his wardrobe. “You said they’d forget about it,” he muttered bitterly, and John dropped his face, sucking his lips in over his teeth in a vain effort to hide his treacherous amusement.

“They will,” he assured, and Sherlock scoffed, toeing off his shoes. “It’s only been a day.”

“They keep yelling ‘Demetrius’ and following me out of rooms,” he snapped, and John laughed, standing up as Sherlock sighed, flopping down on their combined beds and slinging an arm over his eyes. The mattress moved beneath him, the back of his neck tingling with awareness of John’s approach, and he shuffled to the side, lifting his head to pillow it on John’s thigh.

John chuckled, body shaking faintly as his fingers lifted to Sherlock’s curls. “Maybe they just want your autograph,” he teased, and Sherlock opened his eyes to glare at him, the inverted face of the
blond breaking into a grin.

He huffed irritably, and John laughed, running his fingers down the edge of Sherlock’s jaw and back, a touch he instinctively leaned into.

“You were really good though,” John mused, and Sherlock’s eyes fluttered shut as the tan fingers pushed back through his hair. “If I didn’t already say.”

“You did,” Sherlock replied, and John huffed a breathy chuckle. “Several times.”

“Well, one more won’t matter then,” he quipped, his body shifting, and Sherlock opened his eyes just before John’s lips settled over his, the blonde bending down to kiss him at the endearingly awkward upside-down angle. He then pulled away, leaning back to smile softly as his thumb stroked down to Sherlock’s chin, and Sherlock’s lips parted over a hitched breath, the deep blue of John’s eyes still able to knock him speechless. John smiled, as if he knew—and he probably did, Sherlock not exactly subtle in his attraction—and then thumbed over the chapped skin of Sherlock’s bottom lip. “You hungry?” he asked, lifting his eyes as he turned to the clock on the desk behind him. “We’ll have to eat soon if we wanna get it in before the game.”

“I’m fine,” Sherlock said, much preferring to stay here than just about anything else, but his stomach grumbled, betraying him, and he cringed as John chuckled above him.

“You sure about that?” he teased, and Sherlock sneered, lifting an arm to swat at him, but John deftly caught it, lifting the back of Sherlock’s hand to his lips. He chuckled, the air brushing warm over Sherlock’s skin as John grazed a kiss over the knuckles. “I love you,” he said fondly, shaking his head, and Sherlock’s heart clenched, a stiff swallow moving down his throat.

It had been about a week since the night that will live in infamy, and they had more or less settled back to normal, if not even better. Sure, John had been a bit distant those first couple days, but, with gargantuan effort, Sherlock had given him his space, squirreling himself away in his lab so he wouldn’t be tempted to push. It was there John had found him, rapping on the door with a bag of Haribo and a mumbled invitation to pick up where they’d left off in *Doctor Who*, and that had been the end of it, a quiet sort of forgiveness that had culminated in very little *Doctor Who* actually being watched.

Sherlock had been relieved, blissfully so, but the rekindling of the relationship brought with it its own challenges, namely in the form of John’s fondness for a certain ‘L’ word Sherlock couldn’t manage to push past his lips.

It wasn’t that he didn’t love John, fairly sure he’d fallen long before the blond had even stumbled, but he couldn’t find the right moment to say it, John’s iterations of the sentiment never quite lending themselves to an easy ‘you too’. He was going to do it, he was, but not before the time was right, a little added pressure on his shoulders after the circumstances of John’s confession, and John didn’t seem to mind waiting, simply smiling at Sherlock every time he said it like he already knew it was requited.

Which was what he did now, shuffling forward and forcing Sherlock to sit up. “Come on,” he beckoned, standing up and lowering down a hand to Sherlock, who took it with a begrudging groan. John just chuckled, pulling Sherlock up at his side before bustling off to pluck his coat from the wardrobe. “You’ll thank me later,” he assured, pressing Sherlock’s trench coat to his chest as he passed, and Sherlock took it from his hands, slipping his arms through the sleeves as John moved to grab the rugby jacket draped over his desk chair.

Sherlock sighed, flipping up his collar as he made for the door, resigning himself to considering
where he wanted to eat as he turned the handle, and then froze, eyes blowing wide as he swung open
the wood.

“Oh!” Harriet Watson said, just as startled as Sherlock as she drew her outstretched hand back to her
side. “Sorry, I- Hi,” she muttered, lifting her fingers again in a faint wave. “Sherlock, right?” she
added, pointing questioningly at him, and Sherlock was just opening his mouth to reply when John
drew up behind him.

“Harry?” he said, peering around Sherlock’s shoulder, his frown instantly blossoming into a brilliant
smile. “Harry!” he repeated, and Sherlock stepped aside, letting John pass to sling his arms around
his sister’s neck. “What are you doing here?” he asked as he withdrew, though his hands lingered on
the girl’s shoulders, which shook gently as she chuckled.

“Heard your team’s got a shot at the finals,” she said, grinning as John dropped his arms with a shy
smile. “Thought I’d better stop in for a game before they started charging. Clara’s here too,” she
added, waving a hand back up the corridor as a blush touched her cheeks, and John smirked.

“Oh really?” he drawled, and Harry wrinkled her nose at him.

“As if you’ve got any room to talk,” she snapped, bobbing her head at the room over their shoulders,
and they turned, realizing with identical wide-eyed looks of horror that their combined bed was in
plain view. “So,” Harry quipped, lifting a smug brow as she folded her arms, “which one of you
sleeps in the wet spot?”

Sherlock let out a startled laugh, the sound quickly shifting to a yelp as he was pushed roughly out
into the corridor by John snapping the door shut on his back.

“That- That’s not-” John stammered, but Harry cut him off.

“What it looks like?” she supplied, glancing between the two of them. “Because it looks like
somebody needs a lecture on protection.”

“Sherlock,” John snapped as Sherlock snorted, covering his mouth with a hand, but Sherlock only
laughed, waving a hand out toward the girl.

“John, really, there’s no point in-” he started, but John silenced him with a glare, Sherlock rolling his
eyes with a sigh, his lips twitching as Harry flashed a wink at him.

“We were just about to get some lunch before the game,” John said stiffly as he turned back to
Harry, remarkably composed considering how red his neck was, “if-if you and Clara wanna come
along.”

Harry smiled, smug with knowing, but nodded, dropping her arms. “Sounds good,” she chirped,
beaming between them as she rocked back on her heels. “My first double date!”

Sherlock tried to press his lips flat, ducking his head, but it evidently hadn’t been subtle enough, as
John pointedly shouldered him in the arm as he passed. Sherlock slipped his hands into the pockets
of his trench coat, walking at John’s side as they headed down the corridor, Harry poking her head
up in between them.

“So, how long has this been a thing?” she asked, pointing at them in turn. “Like, officially, I mean?
Obviously, it was a thing from the get-go, but-”

“There’s an Indian place that’s pretty good,” John interjected, hands curling to fists as he thrust them
into the pockets of his rugby jacket, jaw set and eyes fixed forward. “Or pizza. Couple places for
“Really?” Harry muttered, looking at the side of her brother’s face, which Sherlock turned to see was still flushed faintly. “You’re seriously going to pretend this isn’t happening?”

“There’s also a café,” John continued, spine pulled taut as he pushed out the main doors into the damp chill of waning winter. “They’ve got sandwiches and such, lighter stuff, if you’d rather that.”

“Honestly, what’s the big deal?” Harry scoffed, shrugging her shoulders as she blew a stray strand of hair up off her face. “So you’re shagging your roommate, I doubt you’re the first.”

“We’re not shagging.”

“Sherlock!” John sputtered, rounding on him with furious incredulity.

“What?” Sherlock replied, waving a hand back at a cackling Harry. “She’s clearly not going to stop.”

“Oh my god,” John sighed, bowing his head as he pinched at the bridge of his nose, and Sherlock smiled soft with sympathy.

“Okay then,” Harry clipped, positively swaggering up to Sherlock’s opposite side, “how long have you two been not shagging then?”

“About three months.”

“Seriously?” John hissed, but Sherlock only shrugged, turning back to Harry as the girl threw her head back with a laugh.

“Oh, John, calm down,” she said, shaking her head as she moved back to stand between them. “I’m happy for ya,” she urged, slinging an arm over his shoulder, and John turned, eyeing her warily.

“‘Bout time you got that stick out your ass. Oh, never mind, forget I said that. Poor choice of words,” she muttered, rattling her head with a wince, and Sherlock lost it, bending double as he staggered with laughter.

“Harry!” John blurted, pulling away from under her arm as he gaped at her. “That—That is—” he stammered, and Harry shook her head, rolling her eyes as she started off down the pavement again. “Relax, John, it’s just a joke,” she murmured, waving a dismissive hand over her shoulder, and, though still glowering, John moved to walk beside her again. “Obviously, it’d be this one with the stick up his ass,” she added, bobbing a thumb to Sherlock, who only shrugged, and then they both spun around, turning with alarm as John stopped, coughing violently down at the pavement.

“John?” Sherlock inquired, stepping back with concern, but John held up a hand, holding him off as he cleared his throat and stood back upright.

“I’m alright,” he squeaked, not quite able to meet Sherlock’s eyes, and Sherlock sucked his lips in over his teeth to stifle a smile. “Just…something in my throat.”

Harry snorted, and John snapped his head up, glaring white hot fury at her, a look that quickly shifted to Sherlock as he couldn’t help but chuckle.

“Stop encouraging her!” he snipped, and Sherlock lifted his palms in front of his shoulders, a silent gesture of surrender.
“I’m not,” he replied, very little laughter in it, but John narrowed his eyes all the same.

“John, seriously, you need to lighten up,” Harry said, slinging an arm around Sherlock’s shoulder, and he started, twisting his neck to look at her, utterly perplexed by the familiarity. “No one’s questioning your masculinity or anything.”

“That’s not even-” John snarled, stepping forward, eyes flashing, but Sherlock interceded, stepping out from under Harry’s arm.

“John,” he said softly, laying a hand on the man’s shoulder, and John turned up to him, a helpless sort of fury tugging at the creases of his face. Sherlock tilted his head, bobbing his eyes back to indicate Harry over his shoulder. “It’s just her way of being supportive,” he whispered, and John closed his mouth, a sigh hissing out of his nose as he dropped his gaze. Sherlock smiled, moving his hand back to his side, and John shook his head, smiling back a moment before looking over his shoulder to Harry.

“Come on, then,” he muttered, bobbing his head out at the street ahead of them as he started to walk, and Harry beamed, turning to fall into step with the two of them. “So, where’s Clara?” he asked after a moment, looking around as they crossed the road. “I thought you said she was here.”

“She wanted to check out the bookstore,” Harry replied, tone a touch forced, and Sherlock turned, looking across John to scan shrewdly over her face.

“She didn’t want to come in with you?” he supposed, and Harry snapped her eyes to him, jaw tightening, apparently a hereditary trait.

“What?” John questioned, looking between them, but his eyes ultimately returned to Sherlock. “What did I miss?”

“Clara’s concerned about your opinion of her now that her and Harry are romantically involved,” Sherlock explained, and John’s jaw dropped.

“Oi!” Harry spouted, glaring at him a moment before her eyes shifted to John’s turning face. “Seriously?” he chuckled, and Harry flushed, dropping her gaze to the pavement as John laughed. “She’s worried about me?”

Harry shrugged, slipping her hands into the pockets of her army green jacket as he kicked at a loose stone. “You’re my brother,” she mumbled, and John’s spine stiffened in surprise, blue eyes blinking to Sherlock a moment as if to check he’d heard it too. “Granted, you’re a git most of the time—“

“Cheers.”

“—but…well, I- It matters. What-What you think,” she murmured, curling a shoulder up as she peered out through her lashes, and John’s posture slumped with shock, his steps slowly.

Sherlock smiled, ducking his head as he quickened his pace, moving ahead to give the siblings a small measure of privacy.

“Really?” John asked tentatively at his back, and he pulled out his mobile, a pantomime of distraction.

“Of course,” Harry replied over a frail chuckle. “I mean, you practically raised me.”

“Don’t say that,” John interjected, voice quaking a little, and Sherlock swallowed, throat thickening
with secondhand pain.

There was silence a moment, Sherlock’s steps speeding up even further as Harry sighed.

“I didn’t mean- I know Mum’s getting better,” she said, “and I know- I know you had a lot to do with that.”

“I didn’t-”

“John,” Harry interjected, and John fell silent, Sherlock’s fingers freezing on his mobile screen as he failed in stopping himself from listening. “You don’t have to tell me, but don’t expect me to believe she had some miraculous epiphany either.”

John did not reply, and Sherlock wasn’t breathing, listening shamelessly now.

“Look, I’m not- I’m glad she’s getting help, and-and I hope it works, I just- Well, you’re important too,” she muttered, and Sherlock’s eyes fluttered closed in a flinch, a strange impulse to text Mycroft twitching up into his fingers before he violently stamped it down. “What you think, I mean. Your- Your opinion, it’s-it’s important.”

No one spoke a long moment, nothing but the hiss of cars across the wet pavement punctuating the silence between them.

“Well,” John muttered, a stone clattering past Sherlock’s feet from where the blond must have kicked it, “I don’t think Clara has anything to worry about. I mean, I’ve known her since you two were seven.”

Harry chuckled, a smile curling at Sherlock’s lips in response. “Yeah, I- Thanks,” she muttered, and Sherlock started to slow down again.

“No course,” John answered, “and, you know…your opinion… Well, it’s not always entirely useless.”

Harry laughed, and John chuckled, Sherlock smiling as he fell back in at John’s side.

“So, if I said I didn’t like Sherlock-”

“Don’t push it,” John interjected, and Harry grinned, flashing Sherlock a wink as he turned to her. “But, to be honest,” the blond continued, a smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth as he shrugged, “I wouldn’t be shocked.”

Harry broke into laughter, but Sherlock only shook his head, smiling out at the street as they neared the bookstore.

“I wouldn’t either,” he said, lifting a shoulder as he slipped his hands into his coat pockets. “I’m extraordinarily unlikable.”

The Watsons laughed, Sherlock turning to smirk between them, and then the group slowed, a young woman with dark auburn hair approaching them from the closing glass door of the bookshop.

“Hi,” she said, voice high with nerves as she flicked a weak wave, and John nudged Sherlock lightly on the arm, a wordless warning to be on his best behavior.

“Hey, Clara!” John replied brightly, beaming at the young girl, whose smile instantly eased at the edges, John just frustratingly charming that way. “We were just trying to figure out where to eat.”
“I’m not too hungry, really,” Harry said, moving across to stand beside Clara, their arms just barely brushing. “Clara’s mum gave us some stuff for the train.”

“Alright, well, there’s Lindsey’s,” John suggested, waving a hand to the café across the street. “They’ve got sandwiches and salads and such. Coffee, lots of coffee.”

“Well, I could always use some of that,” Clara joked with a smile, and she was quite pretty, Sherlock supposed, and it was clear Harry thought so, bobbing lightly against the girl’s side.

“Alright then!” John chirped, waving a hand for them to go ahead, and they continued down the pavement in pairs, Harry and Clara leading the way toward the pedestrian crossing.

As they passed the bookstore, Sherlock turned, looking through the front window to the display of new releases, and then turned back to the café, remembering a much different view.

“Hey,” John said softly, fingers just grazing his, a passable accident for the public setting, “you alright?”

“Of course,” Sherlock replied, forcing a smile, but John only frowned, tilting his head at him, and then followed Sherlock’s previous eye line, lips parting in understanding as his eyes alighted on the café window.

“We can go somewhere else,” he offered, but Sherlock scoffed, rattling his head as they crossed the street.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” he snipped. “It’s just a café.”

John was quiet a moment, looking between Sherlock and the ground as they neared the door of the eatery. “You know,” he murmured, and Sherlock chanced a glance at him from the corner of his eye, “if it helps…I didn’t like you being there with Molly either.”

Sherlock spun toward him, heart skittering with shock, because, though that had been obvious even at the time, it was different hearing it, a comforting confirmation he hadn’t even known he’d needed. “Really?” he questioned, voice creaking in betrayal, and John smiled up at him, a blush tinting his cheeks.

“Really,” he confirmed, nodding in a nervous twitch, and Sherlock was already counting the minutes until they were alone again. “I guess we’re both the jealous type,” he added with a chuckle, and Sherlock laughed, catching the door as Harry pushed it off her fingertips.

“So it would seem,” he replied, and John grinned, walking ahead of him as they converged in front of the ‘Please Seat Yourself’ sign.

“Guess that only leaves one question then,” John mused, looking out over the café, and then turned to Sherlock with a growing smirk. “Do we sit where you had your date with Molly, or where I had mine with Mary?” he clarified, and Sherlock laughed, Harry and Clara turning to them in amused confusion as they waited for directions.

“You and Mary,” Sherlock decided, nodding as he struck out ahead toward the table. “Mine wasn’t a real date.”

“Like hell,” John scoffed, following behind him, and, if he noticed Sherlock chose Mary’s chair, he didn’t comment on it. “You two were sitting awfully close together.”

“I was hiding behind a menu,” Sherlock contested, shaking his head as John rolled his eyes, and then
they both shuffled closer to the window to make room for Harry and Clara, who apparently preferred to add chairs onto their table instead of sitting separately.

“Well, hello there!” the proprietor said, the kindly old man Sherlock remembered from his only other visit. “How’s everyone doing today?” he asked, and they all mumbled agreeably, taking the menus he distributed. “I’ll give you a minute to look those over, but does anyone know what they’d like to drink?”

“Can I get a latte, please?” Clara said, turning up to the man, who nodded, jotting a note on a pad.

“I’ll have one of those too,” Harry added, and then the man turned, looking between John and Sherlock with an expectant smile.

“I’m good with water,” John said, smiling politely, and Sherlock opened his mouth to add his order, the sound choked off as John stomped hard on his foot. “So’s he,” he added, bobbing a nod to Sherlock, who glared at the impassive smile a moment before giving up and nodding in confirmation.

The man closed his notepad with a flick, smiling around at them all. “Alright! I’ll go grab those for you, and then we’ll see about getting you something to eat,” he said, and then turned, whistling to himself as he headed back toward the kitchen.

The second he was out of sight, Sherlock turned to John, lips parting to plead, but John cut him off with a shake of his head.

“You had two cups this morning,” he chided, and Sherlock slumped over the table with a disgruntled huff.

“But we have a game later,” he whined. “How am I supposed to consult if I’m falling asleep?”

“You never sleep.”

“That’s because I drink coffee!”

“And that’s precisely the problem!”

“Oh my god,” Harry muttered, and they turned to her, finding blue-green eyes looking between them, “three months in and you’re already married.”

Clara laughed, Harry joining her, but Sherlock just turned to John, the blue eyes already fixed on him.

John held his gaze a moment, and then a corner of his mouth twitched, followed quickly by a shrug, and, a second later, they were all laughing, uncaring for the sharp glances of strangers as they wiled away the dreary afternoon behind the café glass.

*****

“I didn’t mean it, you know.”

Sherlock turned, looking away from the locker room John would be emerging from any moment, the opposing team already gone, their damp heads hung in shame as they’d sulked back to their coach.

Harry smiled, ambling toward him from the bleachers, where Clara was waiting, clearly giving the interaction some space. “What I said earlier. About not liking you,” she clarified, but it still didn’t make much sense to Sherlock, and he frowned, tilting his head slightly as he turned properly toward
her. Harry’s smile broadened, and she looked eerily like John for a moment, her eyes twinkling with knowing. “I do like you, Sherlock,” she said with a nod, and the reiteration only made it more puzzling.

Sherlock opened and closed his mouth, words croaking away to silence several times before he managed to convey any semblance of meaning. “You-You do?” he asked, and Harry chuckled, ignorant to how uncharacteristic the question truly was.

Wordlessly, she nodded, and Sherlock simply gaped at her a moment before blinking himself back to reality.

“Why?” he spluttered, astounded, and Harry bent forward, laughing outright now.

“I have no idea,” she puffed through her amusement, and Sherlock smiled, that information a little easier to stomach. “Maybe… Maybe because he does,” she continued softly, and Sherlock turned expectantly, but it appeared she was only nodding toward the locker room, John still nowhere in sight. “I know he seems confident,” Harry said, shuffling closer to him across the muddy ground of the sidelines, the grass torn up in chunks by the players’ boots. “Real easy-going and all that, but John- He doesn’t often trust people. Not really, anyway. Not enough to let them in past the surface.”

Sherlock, though he could have already guessed at that, did not reply, a small frown creasing his brow as he waited for the girl to continue.

“I- He’s always taken care of me,” she said, her posture growing determined as she waved a hand toward the locker room in another false alarm. “He never complained, but I know it was hard; I know he sacrificed a lot so I wouldn’t have to. He doesn’t deserve- If you’re not sure-”

“If this is the part where you threaten to castrate me or something equally vile should I ever hurt him, you needn’t bother,” Sherlock interjected, finally understanding, and Harry faltered only a moment with surprise before she set her jaw once more.

“I’m serious, Sherlock,” she clipped, so like John in that moment, stubborn and unwavering, and, just like he always did when faced with that reaction, Sherlock simply nodded.

“I know you are,” he replied, but Harry didn’t appear convinced, her eyes narrowing as she crossed her arms. Sherlock sighed, shaking his head at the ground. “Fine,” he allowed, turning his face back to her, “if you must get all the way through your threat to my genitalia, please, be my guest.” He waved a hand through the air in invitation, and Harry snorted, smiling as she shook her head.

“I wasn’t going to threaten you,” she said, and Sherlock quirked a brow. “Okay, fine, maybe I was,” she muttered bitterly, and Sherlock chuckled, quickly stifling it as the girl glared, “but that’s not what I’m going to say now.”

Sherlock waited, watching as Harry swallowed, her eyes momentarily dropping to where her fingers twisted in front of her.

“I just- I wanna make sure you know,” she said softly, looking up at him through the tops of her eyes. “He’s- John’s special,” she continued, her gaze far away as she turned to look out toward the locker room, and Sherlock didn’t even check this time, stunned by the sudden quiet sincerity that had settled in around them. “I need to know that you understand that,” she urged, looking back to him, eyes fierce and voice stern, and Sherlock closed his mouth, countless witty retorts recoiling from his lips.

“I know,” he answered instead, stomach twisting as Harry stared at him a long moment, but,
however embarrassing, the naked emotion he couldn’t quite pull back from his expression seemed to appease her, and she smiled, nodding softly.

“Okay,” she approved, and then her face abruptly shifted to stone, “but, just so we’re clear, I will hang your balls from my rearview mirror if you hurt him.”

Sherlock blinked, momentarily alarmed, and then simply frowned, tilting his head at her. “You can’t drive,” he countered, and Harry’s mouth dropped open, the girl just beginning to shake her head at him as John drew up beside them.

“Hey!” he greeted, still a bit breathless, his eyes bright with victory. “Sounds like there’s gonna be a bit of knees-up in the common room if you guys wanna stick around,” he offered, but Harry shook her head, looking over her shoulder to include Clara, who was slowly creeping forward now that the coast looked clear.

“Nah, we’re already barely gonna make the last train.”

“We can get you a cab,” John replied, Sherlock nodding to second it, but, though Harry smiled between them, her head continued to wave.

“Thanks, but we really should be getting back,” she said, surreptitiously brushing across Clara’s hand as she smiled at the girl. “We’ve sort of got a curfew.”

“At Clara’s house?” John asked, brows lifting as the two girls nodded. “Wow,” he muttered, nodding faintly, “I like your mum already.”

Clara laughed, Harry rolling her eyes, but she smiled a moment later, stepping forward to wrap her arms around her brother’s neck.

John was still a moment, eyes widening, and then his mouth quirked in a small smile, arms settling around Harry’s back.

They did not speak, just held one another tightly a moment, Sherlock and Clara both shuffling a bit to give them some space. When they broke apart, John’s arms returned to his sides, but Harry’s lingered a moment, hovering at his shoulders.

“I’ll see ya around,” she said, smiling brightly as John nodded, and then withdrew, stepping back to Clara’s side.

“You two should come to the final,” John offered, flicking a hand at them. “I mean, assuming we make it.”

Sherlock scoffed, but John silenced him with a glare, the blond’s insistence on caution in the face of empirical data a tired argument between them.

“Yeah, definitely,” Harry said, Clara nodding beside her.

“Wouldn’t miss it,” she added, and John beamed between them.

“Alright then!” he pronounced, clapping his hands together. “Come on, I’ll walk ya to the gate.”

“No, don’t bother,” Harry interjected, shaking her head. “We know where it is. Go toast your victory with your sweaty teammates,” she added, throwing a grand wave of her arm back toward the dormitory, and John laughed, dropping his face to the ground as he nodded.
“Alright. Text me when you get back?” he prompted, and Harry rolled her eyes, still a little bit of a teenager at heart.

“Aye aye, Captain,” she muttered, flashing a salute as she turned.

“It was nice seeing you again!” Clara bade, and he and John lifted their hands in synchronized farewell before the girl turned, following close to Harry’s side up the hill.

John watched them until they reached the top and disappeared, Sherlock watching him all the while, and, eventually, the blond tilted his head up at him, a frown folding the skin between his brows. “What were you and Harry talking about?” he asked, and Sherlock smiled, a breath of a chuckle hissing from his nose as he started toward Kingsley.

“Nothing much,” he said, shrugging as he slipped his hands into his pockets. “She was just threatening to turn my testicles into fluffy dice.”

John stopped, jaw dropping as Sherlock turned to glance at him over his shoulder. “She what!?” he spluttered, and Sherlock laughed, slowing his strides for John to catch up. “Why would she-Seriously?”

Sherlock nodded, chuckling out ahead at the glowing dormitory windows. “It appears she was concerned as to my…investment in our relationship,” he said, as tactfully as possible, and it took John a moment to understand, his face a frown in the corner of Sherlock’s eye before his expression widened in comprehension.

“Oh,” he murmured, blinking down at the grass beneath their feet. He then slowed as they reached the crest of the hill, the doors not far away, and Sherlock turned to find blue eyes already on him. “And?” he pressed, a hint of trepidation in his gaze. “Are you?”

“What, invested?” Sherlock asked, dropping his face to the pavement as John nodded, the trainers bought at John’s insistence scuffing along the concrete. “Maybe,” he mumbled, and John laughed, elbowing him in the arm, the pressure lingering a moment to convey an added sentiment.

“You’re ridiculous,” he chuckled, and Sherlock wondered if this was what John felt when he called him an idiot, the same silly smile that always stretched across the blond’s face now on his own in response to the insult. “Hey, you care if we skip the party?” he asked, Sherlock looking to his upturned face with a frown.

“Why?” he questioned. “I mean, I abhor social interaction, so of course I don’t mind,” he continued in a rapid mutter, and John laughed, throwing his head back to the stars, “but you always want to go.”

“Yeah, I know,” John shrugged, stopping entirely now as they reached the door, “but I’m not really up for it tonight. Think I’d rather just hang out in the dorm.”

“Are you ill?” Sherlock presumed, and John puffed a laugh, shaking his head at the ground as he ran a hand back through his hair.

“Sherlock,” he chuckled with all his usual fond exasperation, “I am suggesting we stay in tonight.” He lifted his brows, dropping his chin in clear hint, but Sherlock remained perplexed, his frown deepening. John simply grinned, shaking his head at him, and then bobbed a nod toward the door, pulling it open as he gave Sherlock’s sleeve a small tug. “Come on,” he muttered, leading the way down the corridor, and Sherlock followed, mind working frantically as they paused in front of the common room, John making his brief obligatory rounds.

“Sherlock,” he chuckled with all his usual fond exasperation, “I am suggesting we stay in tonight.” He lifted his brows, dropping his chin in clear hint, but Sherlock remained perplexed, his frown deepening. John simply grinned, shaking his head at him, and then bobbed a nod toward the door, pulling it open as he gave Sherlock’s sleeve a small tug. “Come on,” he muttered, leading the way down the corridor, and Sherlock followed, mind working frantically as they paused in front of the common room, John making his brief obligatory rounds.
The second they rounded the corner, it clicked, a breath of understanding whistling past his teeth as his mouth flew open, and John burst into laughter, shaking his head down at the door handle as he twisted the key free.

“I swear,” he chuckled, dropping the keys on top of his chest of drawers as he stepped inside, Sherlock following after him, face flaming as he quietly closed the door, “sometimes you’re very lucky you’re pretty.”

“I’m not pretty!” Sherlock sputtered, grimacing in offense, but then John’s hand cupped the back of his neck, pulling their lips together, and being mad wasn’t all that important anymore.

John’s lips were cold and chapped, his probably no better, but they warmed quickly enough, John tilting his head and twisting his hold in Sherlock’s hair in that way that always sent a shiver up his spine, and his throat decided to whimper entirely on its own.

John smiled against his mouth, pulling away to graze cool fingers down his jaw. “Yes, you are,” he whispered, tapping a kiss to the corner of Sherlock’s mouth as he attempted to scowl, and then stepped back, rounding the bed to drop his athletic bag beside his desk. “I gotta shower,” he sighed, tugging demonstratively at the damp uniform shirt as he returned to his drawers, plucking free pajama trousers and a plain shirt. “Can you set everything up?” he asked, waving a hand at the Doctor Who laptop setup that had migrated to the foot of the bed at some point, and Sherlock nodded, John smiling back at him as he opened the door. “There’s leftovers in the fridge,” he said, pausing halfway into the lab to turn back. “You should really try and eat again. And don’t stay in those damp clothes; you’ll catch something for sure.”

“I think this whole Captain thing has gone to your head,” Sherlock remarked, shrugging off his coat as John laughed. “Next you’ll want one of those megaphones so you can nag at even higher decibels.”

“Careful, Sherlock,” John chided, eyes glittering over a smirk as he halfway shut the door between them, “or I’ll make you run laps.” He winked, Sherlock losing his grip on his coat an entirely unrelated occurrence, and then closed the door, his laughter drifting back across the corridor.

Sherlock swiped his coat up from the floor, shaking his head bitterly as he forced the garment on a hanger, his cheeks burning. “Idiot,” he muttered, and then smiled in spite of himself, pulling a dry pair of pajamas from his drawer for no reason other than personal preference.

*****

“I’ll be back in time for practice.”

“Alright.”

“Maybe not the second it starts, but I shouldn’t be more than a few minutes late.”

“Okay.”

“Ten minutes at the absolute maximum.”

“Sherlock!” John laughed, grabbing onto the harried detective’s arm, and the brunette stopped, eyes wide and bright as they paused just inside the school gate. “It’s not a big deal,” he assured, reluctantly pulling his hand away for the sake of potential prying eyes. “A break in the case is more important than new plays.”

Sherlock smiled, dropping his face to the ground as he nodded. He opened his mouth, lifting his
A plain black car pulled up in front of them, the horn blaring in two quick spurts. John side-stepped around Sherlock’s shoulder, lifting a hand in greeting at the sergeant behind the wheel, and Lestrade flicked a two-finger salute through the window in response.

“I’ll call you when the bomb squad’s done with it,” Sherlock said, the package that had arrived at the Yard that afternoon having to go through every possible examination before the contents could be revealed, and John nodded, slipping his hands into his pockets so he wouldn’t be tempted to do anything else with them.

“Sounds good,” he replied, shoulders shaking slightly as a shiver coursed through him, and Sherlock rolled his eyes with a long-suffering sigh.

“I told you that shirt wouldn’t be warm enough,” he chided, bobbing his head down at the long-sleeved garment beneath John’s rugby jacket, and John glared at him even as his arms tightened around his body against the chill. “It’ll be at least another week before you can retire those hideous jumpers, assuming the April averages hold true.”

“They’re not all hideous,” John muttered, but Sherlock only quirked a brow. John huffed, his arms falling to his sides. “I’ll probably run back and change,” he admitted, the detective beaming smugly at him. “Into a completely respectable jumper,” he added in a snap, and Sherlock chuckled, head shaking fondly down at him.

“Oh course, you will,” he quipped, grinning when John narrowed his eyes.

The horn honked again, and Sherlock hissed an exasperated sigh over his shoulder, waving a hand at the car before turning back.

“Well, I’d better…” He trailed off, shuffling a step back as he bobbed a thumb behind him, and John chuckled, rocking on his heels, inexplicably charmed and confused how every ‘see you later’ still managed to feel like waffling over a first kiss at someone’s doorstep.

“Yeah,” John said, nodding at the retreating brunette. “Have fun,” he added, and Sherlock paused just short of the door, tilting his head with a frown.

“Have fun opening a belated Christmas present from a serial killer?” he mocked, and John laughed.

“Well, naturally,” he replied, prompting Sherlock to grin.

“Naturally,” he echoed with a strange, sudden sincerity, and John blinked, smile shifting softer.

“Bye,” he muttered, tossing his hand in an awkward wave, and Sherlock bowed his head in silent reply before dropping into the passenger seat, the car darting off before the door had even completely closed.

John hovered there on the edge of the pavement a moment, inexplicably bereft, and then rattled his head, shaking the weight of solitude from his mind. He took a breath, heading back up toward the dorm instead of directly to the locker room to turn on the heat, and didn’t even realize he’d needlessly pulled his mobile from his pocket until it shook in his fingers. Slowing his steps, he turned right at a fork in the pavement, avoiding the courtyard to walk the long way around Kingsley—and not pass Kevin’s window, the well-intentioned fullback having a habit of rushing out to talk his ear off every time he saw him now that the final was just a couple weeks away—as he swiped open the message.

_I suppose the blue one isn’t completely unbearable_
John chuckled softly to himself as he rounded the back of the dormitory, holding his breath as he passed the dumpsters and tapped out a reply.

*The plain blue one or the Christmas one Mrs. Hudson got me?*

*Don’t be smart.*

John laughed, trying to stamp down his grin as he neared the next corner of the building, dorm windows occupying the upcoming wall.

*Well I can hardly help that can I?*

*Don’t you have teammates to strike the fear of god into?*

As soon as I find my brown jumper

*That one truly is the worst, remind me to mop up a chemical spill with it*

Will do. Stop ignoring Lestrade!

*But he’s being boring*

Aw poor baby. *Talk about the weather. Or garrotings, you love a good garroting*

*It’s lucky my brother is the government, because otherwise they’d be very worried about us. I think they probably are regardless.*

*In all likelihood. Lestrade keeps trying to read your messages.*

John smiled, leaning against the brick wall just around the corner from the dormitory door, not quite ready to give up the privacy of the outdoors, regardless of the damp chill creeping in toward his bones.

*Should I say something dirty? Send a dick pic?*

*Now he’s asking why I’m laughing. I think he might subpoena my phone records.*

Might as well make it worth his while then

*Idiot*

*I love you too*

There was no reply, and John let the phone fall to his side, lifting his chin to search out over the grounds.

Spring was fast approaching, the hard ground melting into mud as every dip and valley across campus filled with water, half the pavements turning into something of an obstacle course. He could see the bare patches of earth on the rugby pitch from here, his face pulling up into a grimace, neck already itchy in anticipation of the thick coating of dirt, and then his attention was pulled away by movement near the locker room.

A figure stepped out through the door, looking side-to-side before heading across the pitch, and John took a step forward, mouth opening to call out to the groundskeeper before the shout died in his
throat.

He leapt around the corner of the building, peering back beyond the brick barrier, heart thundering in his throat as his mouth went dry, but no amount of squinting and blinking could turn the image before him into something else.

The groundskeeper was a middle-aged man with salt and pepper hair, not the tall blond figure striding swift and confident out from beneath the bleachers toward the well-worn path in the woods, and John’s mobile shook in his hand as he watched the man disappear before ducking back around the corner, breaths quick and shaking as he leaned his skull against the rough stone.

Sebastian Moran. Here. Coming out of the locker room John was supposed to enter any minute, a reliable part of his routine.

Even he could work out what that meant.

He bolted to the door, and, if anyone attempted to talk to him in the corridors, he didn’t notice, no sound reaching his brain but the rushing of his own blood as he raced to their dorm, swinging the door open before slamming it shut, leaning against the wood as he panted.

He couldn’t stay here, couldn’t hide, knowing it was only a matter of time before his teammates started heading down to the locker room, unwittingly stumbling into the trap meant only for him, so he did the only thing he could, the only clear thought ringing through the panic.

His fingers still shook, but less so, his breathing evening out as he lifted the mobile to his ear, stepping across the room to close the blinds as it rung.

“John?” Mycroft’s voice came across the line, and somehow the anxiety in his tone steadied John, being brave always easier when you have to do it for someone else. “What is it? What’s happened to Sherlock?”

“Nothing,” John croaked, shaking his head for no one as he cleared his throat. “Nothing, Sherlock-Sherlock’s fine, he’s-he’s not here. I- Mycroft, it’s Moran.”

Mycroft didn’t say anything, which said more than any of his words could have, and John blew out a breath, reaching down with his left hand to brace himself on his desk chair.

“He’s here. Moran, he- I saw him coming out of the locker room, and I-I’m supposed to- I always go down there before practice and turn on the heaters, everyone knows I go down there and turn on the heaters, and-”

“John, John, calm down,” Mycroft urged, and John heard himself laughing without any real awareness, a strangled sound of high-pitched hysteria.

“Calm down? How am I supposed to-”

“Where are you?”

“I- In the dorm, but-but people are going to start heading down there soon; I-I can’t let them-” He faded away with a jagged hiss of breath, eyes closing as he tightened his hold on the back of the chair. “Mycroft,” he breathed, vision blurring as he blinked down at the wooden desk, “I think I’m going to die.”

“Just stay where you are,” Mycroft said, a sound like the revving of a car coming across the line, but John was suddenly calm, sinking down to the edge of the mattress as he shook his head.
“I can’t,” he replied, voice clear and steady. “If anyone else goes down there before I do-”

“John, do not leave that dormitory,” Mycroft interjected, and John’s eyes pinched shut, a stiff swallow moving down his throat. “The people I have onsite are coming to you now, and I have a full team on the way. We have a plan for this; we know what we’re doing.”

John didn’t say anything, looking down at the tile between his trainers as he listened to the whir of Mycroft’s tires.

“John!” Mycroft prompted, and John drew in a breath, straightening his spine as he pinned the phone to his ear with his shoulder, shrugging out of the left sleeve of his rugby jacket.

“Okay,” he replied, switching the phone between his ears as he rattled loose the other sleeve, and then pulled the jacket into his lap, tracing his thumb over the felt Captain’s patch.

“Okay,” Mycroft repeated stiffly. “John, you know you can’t-”

“I know,” he interrupted, swallowing down the acidic shame rising up his throat as he stood, draping his jacket over the back of Sherlock’s chair, hand lingering over the printed surname. “I know.”

*****

I love you too

Sherlock stared down at the message, fingers tapping anxiously at the edge of the screen.

What was he supposed to say to that!? Yes, in the context, it had been a joke, but he knew John meant it, and knew he hadn’t yet managed to say it back, but that wasn’t exactly a milestone you passed in a text message. Was it?

He sighed, turning the phone over on his thigh as he leaned back against the headrest, head lolling toward the window while he watched the suburbs blur into downtown.

It was awful, really, having his emotional interpreter be the person he was having the emotions for, and thus the one person he couldn’t ask, but he’d figure it out somehow, and there was always Molly, he supposed. As an absolute last resort.

Lestrade’s mobile rattled in its holster on his belt, and he lunged for it, pulling it free as he glanced at the screen before swiping to answer the call. “Hello?” he said, lifting the phone to his ear, and Sherlock turned, raising a brow at him.

“Isn’t that illegal?” he muttered, and Lestrade glowered at him, Sherlock chuckling as he looked back out the window.

“Did the bomb squad finish with the package? … Turn a- … What are you talking about? We’re almost at the station. … Sally, I can’t- … There’s no reception for a stretch coming in from Langley, you know that. … What?”

Sherlock snapped his head back, startled by the shift in the sergeant’s tone.

Lestrade’s mouth was caught open, eyes wide and shifting in aimless horror as he listened intently, and then his gaze flicked to Sherlock, only for a second, but it was enough to instantly chill his blood.

His stomach dropped, heart pumping hard as it shook against his ribs, and he stared at the side of
Lestrade’s face, his palms beginning to sweat around the mobile his fingers gripped like iron.

“No, I- I have Sherlock,” Lestrade said, voice quaking worrisomely as he cast another glance from the corner of his eye. “We’ll be right there. Keep everyone back, and don’t tell anyone anything until I get there.” He dropped the phone away from his ear, ending the call and replacing the device at his hip, and then flipped on the siren, his jaw set and eyes steel as they whipped a U-turn, tires squealing.

“What is it?” Sherlock asked, wincing as his shoulder slammed hard against the door. “What happened? Did the bomb squad find something?”

“No,” Lestrade answered, gaze fixed out the windshield as they weaved around the drivers too slow or stupid to get out of the way, “it’s- Something happened at Langley.”

Sherlock gasped, time stalling a moment as the world tilted beneath him, sending his head into a tailspin. “What?” he panted, and Lestrade’s brow pinched, a swallow bobbing down his throat. “What happened? Is- Is everyone-”

“There was an explosion,” Lestrade supplied when Sherlock faded away, and he turned his face down toward the floor mats, sure he was going to be sick. “And- And I don’t know,” he added, barely a whisper, and Sherlock blinked back up at him, a stinging terror beginning to build behind his eyes.

With shaking hands, he lifted his mobile in front of his face, flinching as he was confronted again with John’s message, and then quickly tapped the call button, lifting the speaker to his ear.

It rang endlessly, Sherlock’s lips moving in silent plea to whatever god would still listen to him, but the only answer he got was John’s recorded voicemail message.

“Hi, you’ve reached John Watson! Obviously, I can’t come to the phone right now, but leave your name and number, and I’ll call you back the second I can.”

Sherlock hung up before the beep, dialing again, but got the same result, an apparently futile effort he nevertheless continued, because it didn’t mean anything, really, John always leaving his phone in the dorm or his bag during practice. He was fine. He had to be fine.

In record time, they were squealing to a stop in front of the gates at Langley, and Sherlock stared out, momentarily frozen in terror at the unrecognizable scene.

Every emergency vehicle in London must have been there, the lights flashing off the cars and windows like some macabre fireworks display, and there were people everywhere, what looked like the entire school gathered in front of a police barricade already set up at the juncture of the courtyard some distance away. Sherlock jolted out of his trance, reaching for the handle to join them, but Lestrade’s voice called him back.

“No,” he barked, and Sherlock started, alarmed at the veracity of the man’s tone. Lestrade’s eyes were flashing, not quite with threat, but with an intense sort of urgency Sherlock was far too scattered to parse out at the moment, and the sergeant shook his head, leaning back into the car where he already stood outside his door. “Stay here; we don’t know what this is yet. Mycroft’s gonna take you home, and I’ll be by later to-”

“Mycroft’s here?” Sherlock interjected, and, more than anything, that information hit him like a train, shaking through his bones in waves of nausea, because Mycroft wouldn’t come unless- wouldn’t be taking him home unless-
He flung himself out the door, ignoring Lestrade’s shout at his back, and raced around the edge of
the crowd toward the police barricade, weaving around fire engines and ambulances as he went. His
legs pressed on without him feeling them, his entire body seeming to exist separately from his mind,
which was spinning around a steady stream of assurances he could not even consider being wrong.

“Sherlock!” Mycroft appeared from his left, Sherlock distracted enough not to notice him at first,
which was the only reason he got a hold of him, grabbing onto a shoulder as his other arm wrapped
across Sherlock’s chest in an attempt to push him backward. “Sherlock, stop!” his brother urged,
wrestling against his writhing body. “We have to get you out of here, it’s not safe!”

“No!” Sherlock cried, the ragged voice drifting up to his ears as if through water. “No, I-I have to
find John, I- We can’t leave without John!”

“Sherlock!”

“We can’t leave him!”

“SHERLOCK!”

He stilled, breaths hissing in frantic gasps as he turned up to his brother’s face, blinking clear his
blurry vision.

Mycroft looked down at him, gaze unwavering, a pained creased between his brows as his jaw
shifted, and all the air left Sherlock’s lungs, quivering away over his lips.

“No,” he whispered, shaking his head, the movement making his already dangerous vertigo even
worse.

Mycroft’s expression crumpled, eyes pinching at the edges, and then he looked away, the final proof
Sherlock refused to accept.

“No!” he raged, shoving Mycroft aside, his brother’s widening eyes the last thing he saw before
tearing off again.

“Sherlock, stop!” Mycroft shouted, but he paid him no heed, hardly able to even hear the man over
his own gasping breaths.

Squeezing around an ambulance parked near the fence, he managed to slip past the police line,
racing forward through the courtyard toward the crest of the hill, the rugby pitch almost in view
before there were arms on him again, frailer arms partnered with a voice so shocking, there was a
moment he didn’t even struggle.

“Sherlock, don’t!” Anderson implored, expression earnest, but Sherlock quickly came back to
himself, closing his gaping mouth as he tried to elbow the man away. “Stop! Sherlock, stop!”

He was going to hurt him, was halfway through planning out the escape that would leave the man
with a well-deserved bloody nose when Anderson spoke again, softer now.

“You don’t wanna see it!” he urged, and Sherlock’s struggling ceased, his eyes slowly drifting to the
man’s face. Anderson’s brown eyes looked steadily back at him, a sheen of moisture glittering off the
dark surface as the man gently shook his head. “You don’t wanna see it,” he echoed, the words
cracking, and Sherlock simply blinked at him, dumbfounded, before turning his gaze back out.

The courtyard was deserted apart from officers and technicians he didn’t recognize, and that was just
as well, he supposed, in the end, the sympathy of strangers never something he had much tolerance
for. He couldn’t see beyond the crest of the hill, but there was still a faint grey haze of smoke rising up from beyond it, and he knew what would lie at the base, the only thing that possibly could be at the end of that ominous column. As he looked out, a familiar head of hair began rising over the hill, the rest of Sally Donovan following a moment later, a grave expression on her downturned face, and, as she lifted her chin, her eyes immediately found Sherlock’s.

She stopped, lingering several meters away at the top of the hill, but Sherlock could still clearly see the tortured expression on her face, the shine of her eyes before they dropped to the ground, her jaw shifting as she swallowed. She looked up again a moment later, clearly having steadied herself, and, holding his eyes, she shook her head in a single slow motion, and that, somehow, was his final straw.

He felt his body deflate, shoulders slumping in resignation, and his knees rattled, an oddly disconnected moment of ridiculous terror washing over him at the possibility he was going to faint in Anderson’s arms, but he felt a hand settle heavy on his shoulder, and looked up, Anderson withdrawing as his brother pulled him against his side.

“We have to go,” he said softly, applying a small amount of pressure, and Sherlock mindlessly followed, nearly tripping several times, unable to fully lift his feet for every step.

He got to the car somehow, Mycroft practically lifting him into the backseat, and then they started off, Sherlock staring blankly at the floor in a trance of grief. He had assumed they would be going back to the manor, but it was with some relief that the car rattled to a stop much sooner, his head lifting to find 221B Baker Street looking down at him.

Mycroft opened the door, offering to help him out, but he shook his head, stumbling into the flat himself.

Mrs. Hudson wasn’t in the foyer, but he knew it was only a matter of time, and quickly made his escape, slowly staggering up the steps into the living room.

He lingered in the doorway a moment, searching over the familiar scene as a sudden sob threatened to claw its way up his throat, but he couldn’t do that yet, wasn’t ready to let that dam break, and instead shuffled to the sofa, collapsing down sideways on the worn leather.

It was impossible to say how long he lay there, curled up and staring without seeing as the late afternoon light was swallowed by darkness. He came to at odd points, a glass of water and a sandwich sitting on the table in front of him the first time, the fire lit sometime later, and there was a distant awareness of constant muffled voices and opening and closing doors, but no one talked to him, he didn’t think, and that was probably just as well.

He didn’t have anything to say.

The fire was nothing but embers when next he returned to the world, and he moved for the first time in hours, head turning toward a silhouette lingering in the doorway.

Mycroft stepped forward, his face shrouded in darkness, but Sherlock could read the purpose in the set of his shoulders, and swallowed to steel himself, forcing his body into a sitting position.

“Moriarty?” he asked in a voice not his own, the strangled syllables scraping tonelessly from his throat.

Mycroft’s outline nodded, drawing closer across the creaking floor. “It appears so,” he replied, and Sherlock nodded, eyes staring unfocused down at the coffee table. “We- The official report will be a gas leak,” Mycroft continued softly. “The school will be closed for at least the next week while they
inspect the other buildings. There’s- Everyone will think no one was hurt,” he pushed out, rushing over the syllables, and Sherlock flinched, head turning away from the words. “Hopefully- Hopefully we can force Moriarty out of hiding if he believes-” He did not continue, but there was no need, the logic sound enough to be self-explanatory, and Sherlock nodded down at the carpet. “I- There’s something- Lestrade brought this over with your things from the dormitory.”

Sherlock turned, tipping up his chin to try and make out the bundle he now noticed in Mycroft’s hands.

The man shuffled closer, shifting the object in his grip. “He- He thought you might…want to have it.” He extended his arm, Sherlock’s heart seizing as the frail light from the embers caught on the mass in his grip.

The rugby jacket was neatly folded, his own widow’s flag, and he reached up with trembling hands, drawing it down into his lap. His throat was thick as he traced around the small lettering stitched across the chest, following the lines and swirls, and then sucked in a breath, forcing himself to speak if only to distract from the onslaught of tears. “I guess you were right,” he choked, swallowing the creak his voice as he blinked bleary-eyed up at Mycroft. “Caring’s not an advantage.”

Mycroft was still a moment, and then hissed out a trembling sigh, stepping closer before lowering himself to perch on the edge of the sofa beside him. “Sherlock, if you never listen to another word I say,” he began, and Sherlock couldn’t look at him, focusing back down at the jacket instead, “at least hear this.” He paused, clearly waiting, and, after a moment, Sherlock tilted his face just enough to peer up at his brother through his lashes. Mycroft tipped his head further into his view, tone dropping low with sincerity. “I was wrong,” he said, the words barely more than breath, and, dimly, Sherlock recognized the unprecedented nature of the sentiment, but he didn’t have it in him to care, and instead dropped his face away, crushing his eyes shut. Mycroft didn’t say any more, merely stood, grazing a hand over Sherlock’s shoulder before moving toward the door, and Sherlock did not open his eyes until he heard his footsteps reach the bottom of the stairs.

He blinked down at the bequeathed garment, breaths heaving swift and shaky, but his time had run out, and the barricade of shock finally crumbled away, a guttural sob tearing up from what could only be his soul. His head fell forward, pillowed against the soft fabric in his lap, and, as he sucked in air to fuel his rabid grief, he was accosted by scents, by the tidal wave of memories that flashed vivid in his mind’s eye as his lungs filled with tea and salt spray and freshly broken earth, and he collapsed onto his side, curling in on himself as he wept into the cloth. He couldn’t breathe, couldn’t think, couldn’t do a thing to stop it as the images pounded into him, blurring together as they spun like debris in the whirlwind of his tangled mind.

All the horrible things he’d said, the things he’d done, the days and weeks and months of time they’d wasted, time he couldn’t get back, couldn’t make up for. The stories he’d never told, questions he’d never asked, endless list of things left for a tomorrow they’d never had the chance to reach, and, unbidden but unstoppable, the image of John’s last text message imprinted itself on his eyelids, flashing up at him with a mocking that pulled forth a freshly kindled sob.

He’d never told him.

John had said it all the time, any time, at whatever small opportunity afforded to him in the weeks since the revelation, and Sherlock had never managed to be brave enough, never given that moment back to him. And now he never would.

Violently, a wave of bile rushed up his throat, but he pushed it down, shaking his head against the damp jacket, his cheeks catching on the edges of the patches.
John had known, he must have known. It hadn’t been like that, hadn’t been some parade of horrible mistakes and missed opportunities. They’d fought, yes, but they’d been friends, if not always a little more than that. They’d been happy, he was sure they had, but, now, his own failings were all he could think of, growing like a deadweight over his chest until he could barely gasp for breath.

His fingers gripped painfully tight into the fabric of John’s jacket, his head shaking fiercely against the self-flagellation as he tried to summon up something, any small sliver of light before his head sank beneath the drowning darkness, and then, suddenly, he heard a voice in his head so clearly, someone may as well have shouted into his ear.

‘Amazing.’

Sherlock’s eyes flew open, his sobbing temporarily stalled as the memory played out—the first time he’d met John, the moment he’d let himself consider that, this time, this particular person, just might not be like all the others.

His own skeptical question played back at him, and then John’s voice came again, bold and bright, and Sherlock gasped at the clarity of it, almost tempted to look around if not for the impossibility of John being there.

‘Of course it was! It was…extraordinary!’

With that, the levee broke, a fresh wave of memories rolling over him, but it was different now, less tangled and frantic as John’s voice intertwined with small sunlit flashes of smiles and blue eyes.

‘John Watson, lighting rod of genius. Business cards are still in the post, I’m afraid.’

‘Ya know, Sherlock, you might be right about everyone else, but you’re wrong about you.’

‘Interviewing murderers, firing guns, finding fingers in the fridge. Just a typical day in the life of John Watson.’

‘It’s hardly a leap to trust you, Sherlock.’

‘Ya know, I don’t even like lattes. Or Romanticism.’

‘You’re stuck with me now. You jump, I jump.’

‘Somewhere deep down—deep, deep, down—beneath your ‘I hate everyone’ exterior, Sherlock Holmes has a heart.’

‘No problem, peaches.’

‘Sherly-lock! Who sings the song? You know, the-the eclipse in my heart song. You know it. You know everything! It’s the one-the one… You know! Turn around briiiiiight eeeeyes!’

‘Fine, fine, by all means, you ring the brothel doorbell.’

‘Well, you’re a superhero to me, then. I mean, you’ve nearly got the cape.’

‘I’m in shock and have formed an emotional attachment to this blanket. Happens all the time.’

‘This was my choice, Sherlock, my decision. And I don’t regret it. So you don’t get to either.’

‘Sherlock, we are taking a selfie with Darth Vader, and there’s nothing you can do about it.’
'What difference does it make if- if I say it? If I tell you? Because I know you know, and I know- Or, well, I think- I think you feel the same.'

'400 pounds!? Jesus! Can I dump him and take odds on tomorrow?'

'If-If this all goes pear-shaped—and I’m not saying it will. But, if it does...do you- Do you think you’d- Would you...delete me?'

“So, it doesn’t matter that you’re a man, because you’re you, and I- Well, I want you. My white picket fences have beehives now.’

‘No, you hang up first!’

‘Which one of these says ‘I promise I won’t flunk out or kill anyone’?’

‘I think you should just sit there quietly and wait to be resuscitated.’

‘Don’t make me do that, Sherlock. Don’t make me live like that. Please. Don’t-Don’t be another person I can’t be enough for.’

‘I guess we’re both the jealous type.’

‘I love you too’

‘I love you too’

‘I love you too’

“Sherlock.”

He froze, gasp whistling over his lips as his eyes flew open, his mind falling silent to leave only the steady thrum of his heart in his ears. The clock on the mantel was thunderous as he listened, eyes scanning over as much of the moonlit flat as he could see without moving, because he’d thought- He could’ve sworn-

“Sherlock.”

He started to sitting, spinning toward the sound as he scrabbled backward toward the armrest, and then his entire body went numb, eyes widening at the impossible sight. “John?” he breathed, gaping at the figure perched on the opposite armrest.

John—because it was John, the tousled hair and vivid blue eyes unmistakable as they caught the moon—tilted his head, smiling softly across at him, but there was no mirth in it, the gesture little more than a miserable twist of his mouth.

Sherlock blinked, but the image remained, and he scanned over it, searching for some sort of explanation. At first, he could find nothing, the vision appearing every bit genuine, but then he found it, his eyes stalling on the collar of John’s rugby jacket, the jacket he couldn’t possibly be wearing, the fabric still held solid and damp in Sherlock’s hands. He looked back to John’s face, his tongue growing bitter. “You’re not real,” he surmised, and John’s eyes blinked down to the stretch of sofa between them.

“No,” he whispered, shaking his head as he lifted his chin, and Sherlock hissed in a trembling breath, a fresh crack splintering across his heart.

“Am- Am I-"
“You’re awake,” John interjected, bobbing a nod, and then turned his face away, standing up and turning his back to Sherlock as he ambled across the rug, his footsteps soundless. “It’s sort of like your mind palace,” he explained, shrugging a shoulder as he turned back, a corner of his mouth twitching in a faint smirk, “except closer to a hallucination.”

Sherlock puffed a jagged laugh, and then closed his lips again, swallowing as he blinked up at John’s face.

Looking closer now, Sherlock realized it wasn’t entirely authentic, John appearing a little too clearly in the dark of the flat, his movements a little too smooth, too effortless, but, still, Sherlock’s subconscious ought to be commended, every inch of the man in front of him recreated in gut-wrenching detail, right down to the stain on his left shoe from when one of Sherlock’s beakers had broken, leaking liquid down over the side of the lab table. He knew he ought to be worried, ought to be calling some hotline right now instead of talking things out with a figment of his imagination, but, if was going to go crazy, there were worse ways to go.

“John, I-” he croaked, and the man’s face turned back to him from looking across to the window. “I’m sorry,” he breathed, and John frowned, tilting his head at him.

“Why?” he asked, hands slipping into his pockets as he shifted to face him. “You didn’t do anything.”

Sherlock hissed out a frail sob, dropping his face to shake his head down at his knees. “I-I should’ve- If I hadn’t-”

“There was nothing you could’ve done.”

“Yes, there was!” Sherlock countered, snapping his head up, and John blinked, eyes widening in alarm. “I-I should’ve left, should’ve never even known you! If it weren’t for me, you would’ve been fine, would’ve been safe!”

“No?” John echoed, half chuckling with incredulity. “Sherlock, I never would’ve been safe. I was going to join the army after graduation, you know that.”

Sherlock shook his head in denial, though he did know that, of course, it impossible for the mirage of John to know anything he himself did not. “It might not have happened though,” he argued, and John sniffed derisively, rattling his head out toward the kitchen. “You might have been fine. If I hadn’t let you-”

“Sherlock, you didn’t let me do anything!” John interjected, eyes flashing as he stepped forward, jabbing a finger down at him across the coffee table. “This was my choice, alright? Mine,” he urged, tapping his fingers to his sternum. “I knew the risks- I chose the risks again and again.” He paused, straightening his spine as a slow breath eased the set of his shoulders. “You can’t blame yourself for not making me leave,” he said softly, and Sherlock flinched his gaze away. “You never could have made me leave. I’m far too stubborn for that,” he added, a frail quip, but Sherlock was nevertheless started into a breathy chuckle, though it promptly withered as he looked back up.

“John, I-” he began, and then a sound came from downstairs, both of them turning toward the living room door, closed for the first time Sherlock could remember.

“Mrs. Hudson’s coming up to check on you,” John said, a conduit for Sherlock’s own realization. “Probably heard you talking,” he added, glancing back at him briefly, and then began to blur, the darkness creeping in to muddy his edges.
“No, wait!” Sherlock cried, panic gripping cold around his heart as he lurched forward, and John cleared, meeting his desperate gaze with a puzzled expression. “Don’t-Don’t go,” he breathed, shaking his head.

John smiled, eyes glittering with a broken sort of fondness. “Sherlock,” he whispered, “I’m already gone.”

Sherlock’s lungs heaved, sucking in the beginning gasp of a sob as John vanished in front of him, dissolving away like mist to the night. His stomach spun, eyes burning anew as he dropped them to the jacket in his lap, and he pulled the fabric up tightly to his chest, screaming sorrow into the folds as Mrs. Hudson appeared at his side, pulling him into her arms and whispering promises that could never be fulfilled.
Okay, so this playlist takes you almost to the end of the fic except one song that I'll add later, but it won't really start to make sense until the end of the chapter. There's no specific spoilers or anything though, so you can start it whenever.

Find me on Tumblr!

“Hi, you’ve reached John Watson! Obviously, I can’t come to the phone right now, but leave your name and number, and I’ll call you back the second I can.”

“Not at all?”

“No. At least, I don’t think so. Every time I woke up, I heard him, at any rate.”

“Hi, you’ve reached John Watson! Obviously, I can’t come to the phone right now, but leave your name and number, and I’ll call you back the second I can.”

“Has he eaten?”

“I’ve brought things up, but the plate’s always still full when I go up and check.”

“What are you giving him? Maybe he just doesn’t like it.”

“Yes, Gregory, clearly the food is the problem.”

“Hi, you’ve reached John Watson! Obviously, I can’t come to the phone right now, but leave your name and number, and I’ll call you back the second I can.”

“I’m just saying; he’s got to eat.”

“You think I don’t know that? I’m not quite senile yet, Sergeant!”

“Enough.”

Sherlock turned his head toward the bedroom door, Mycroft’s sharp voice cutting into the hushed meeting in the living room for the first time.

“Hi, you’ve reached John Watson! Obviously, I can’t come to the phone right now, but leave your name and number, and I’ll call you back the second I can.”

He rolled back to his mobile where it rested on the rugby jacket draped over the pillow beside him, playing John’s voicemail message on repeat for an untold amount of hours. At first, he’d just called over and over, but the seconds wasted between calls started to wear on him, so he’d recorded it, the words spinning in an endless loop from the phone he had eventually needed to plug in.

“How long has he been doing that?” Lestrade’s voice drifted under the door, softer than before, but not quite so quiet as to avoid meeting his ears.
“I don’t know,” Mrs. Hudson replied, and Sherlock swallowed, a flinch flickering across his face at the pity in her tone. “Since I got up, at least.”

“Hi, you’ve reached John Watson! Obviously, I can’t come to the phone right now, but leave your name and number, and I’ll call you back the second I can.”

John’s voice rang out in the silence, and Sherlock stared hard at the ceiling, trying not to think about what he knew was going through the minds of the trio just down the hall.

“Do you think I should-”

“No, he’d want to know,” Mycroft answered the sergeant, and Sherlock’s interest genuinely piqued at that, his head lifting off the pillow to completely free his ears. “It might help.”

“How could this possibly-”

“Gregory.”

There was silence a moment, then a heavy sigh from Lestrade, followed by soft footsteps creeping toward Sherlock’s door.

“Hi, you’ve reached John Watson! Obviously, I can’t come to the phone right now, but-”

Sherlock paused the recording just as a knock rattled the wood in its frame, and he swung his legs over the side of the bed as the door began to open inward, Lestrade wisely not waiting for the invitation that never would’ve come.

The sergeant looked as though he’d aged dramatically since Sherlock had seen him only yesterday, his face unshaven and eyes sunk within circles dark enough to pass as bruises. He smiled, a brittle reflexive twitch of his lips as he shuffled into the room, the door opening to reveal Mycroft and Mrs. Hudson hovering only a few feet behind. “Hey,” he muttered, hand twitching in an aborted wave at his side. “How- How are you-”

Sherlock blinked, tipping his head to the side a small fraction, and Lestrade cut off his question, clearing his throat as he dropped his eyes to the ground. Looking past the sergeant’s shoulder, Sherlock caught Mycroft’s eyes, his brother’s expression softening for a blink, a silent plea for him to take it easy on the haggard man, and he turned his gaze away with a sigh. “Fine,” he replied, half of Mycroft’s mouth lifting with approval as he and Mrs. Hudson stopped in the doorway, but Lestrade only startled, blinking at him with wide eyes. Sherlock forced a frail smile, nodding faintly. “What was it you wanted to tell me?” he asked, and Lestrade’s hand instinctively lifted to his pocket, his thumb tracing hesitantly over the top seam.

“I-” he started, dropping his chin as he swallowed, and then set his jaw, straightening up as he stepped further into the room. “The bomb squad cleared the package,” he said, and Sherlock blinked, having completely forgotten about the mysterious parcel they’d been en route to the day before, less than 24 hours and a lifetime ago. “No prints, no fibers, nothing,” Lestrade continued, pulling an evidence bag from his pocket and turning it over in his hands. “The entire package was clean. This was the only thing inside.” He extended an arm, the crumpled plastic bag cradled in his palm, and Sherlock stood up, taking the bag from him before walking closer to the window, a sliver of light still striping through the drawn curtains.

Smoothing the plastic, he located the object held within, a small silver medallion on a delicate chain, and held it up to the light, squinting at the antiqued image pressed into the polished surface.

“We’re not quite sure what it-” Lestrade began, but Sherlock cut him off, turning his face toward the
window so no one but Mycroft would notice his flinch.

“It’s a St. Luke medal,” Sherlock clipped, a little too sharp to be subtle, and he took a breath to steady himself as he turned back, stretching the bag toward Lestrade as he met his gaze with determined passivity. “Patron Saint of physicians and surgeons.”

Lestrade’s hand froze halfway to the bag, Mrs. Hudson’s horrified gasp issuing from behind him, but Sherlock’s eyes looked to Mycroft, his brother’s eyelids fluttering over a pained blink as he turned his chin away.

He then turned his gaze back to Lestrade, meeting the sergeant’s apologetic grimace with a stoic mask as the medallion was passed between them. “Was there anything else?” he asked, and Lestrade shuffled a step back, shaking his head a moment before stalling.

“Well, er, actually,” he muttered, turning back to Mycroft, who dipped his head in wordless answer to the glance, “there’s, um- There’s some news on-on the-” The man faltered, dropping his chin as a swallow bobbed down his throat.

Sherlock blinked, a knot of nausea tightening thick and fast in his stomach, and he nodded when the sergeant lifted his face, not wanting to hear it any more than Lestrade wanted to say it.

The older man’s hand slowly clenched as he fortified himself, and then he drew in a breath, meeting Sherlock’s hollow gaze. “Hooper says it was quick,” he said simply, and Sherlock appreciated the brevity even as it wrenched the air from his lungs. “Instantaneous, even. He-” Lestrade began, but stopped as Sherlock couldn’t help but flinch, his hands snapping to fists. The sergeant’s expression softened then, the kind of pity Sherlock knew ought to rile him, but, instead, it was only comforting, a silent confirmation that the perpetual twisting knife in his chest was justified. “There was no pain,” the greying man concluded, and Sherlock startled even himself with a bitter bark of laughter, shaking his head as he pondered whether the platitudes felt just as worthless to everyone else.

He gathered himself regardless, lifting his chin and forcing what he hoped was a smile. “Thank you,” he replied, bobbing a brief nod to the sergeant, who smiled frailly back.

“Of course,” he said softly, moving toward the door, and then stopped, turning hesitantly. “You know, if you- If you need anything, anything at all, I-”

“I know,” Sherlock interjected, smile slightly less painful as it twitched over his lips, but it did nothing to dull the concern in Lestrade’s eyes, which creased critically as they searched over his face.

“We have- The police psychologist could-”

“No,” Sherlock blurted, firmly rattling his head. “No, I- I don’t need-”

“It’s nothing to be ashamed of,” Lestrade pressed, eyes pleading as his hands shifted in the air between them. “After what you’ve been through, anyone would-”

“I’m fine,” Sherlock spat, eyes narrowing, but Lestrade only stepped forward, never one to be cowed.

“Fine?” he challenged. “Sherlock, you haven’t eaten, haven’t slept.”

“It’s been one day!” Sherlock blustered, but Lestrade just shook his head.

“Still, you have to eat,” he snapped, determinedly staring down Sherlock’s glower. “You can’t just sit in the dark all day. And you’ve got to stop playing that recording; it’s not healthy!” he urged, and
Sherlock suddenly found himself laughing, high and hysterical.

“Healthy!?” he echoed, shaking his head at the sergeant, who blinked at him, stepping back with wary concern. “What, are you the shrink now? Tell me, Lestrade, how exactly _should_ I be acting? In your _professional_ opinion, I mean,” he mocked scathingly, and Lestrade sighed, shaking his head to the ground.

“That’s not what I meant,” he murmured, looking suddenly exhausted. “I’m just saying, you’ve been through a trauma. It couldn’t hurt to—”

“Trauma?” Sherlock repeated, incredulous even as the rage that had been simmering just below the surface for hours started to hiss steam through the growing cracks in his facade. “Trauma is car accidents and bank robberies, not people being _blown up!_” he shouted, prompting a startled yip from Mrs. Hudson before the woman turned away, clicking back down the corridor toward the stairs.

“It could _help_, Sherlock!” Lestrade barreled on, and Sherlock turned to Mycroft, finding the blood traitor conveniently avoiding his eyes. “Even just having someone to talk to. I brought you that jacket because I thought it would _help_, not so it could hold you back! You’ll never move on like this, trying to keep him alive. You have to accept—”

“You think I don’t know that!?!” Sherlock spouted, startling the man. “That it somehow _slipped_ my mind!? Because, believe me, Sergeant, if there’s one thing I am _acutely_ aware of, it’s that I couldn’t keep John alive!” His breaths hissed over his teeth as he stared down the two men, Mycroft’s gaze still averted while Lestrade simply blinked. The scene then began to blur at the edges, and Sherlock turned his face to the window, blinking frantically to clear the dew from his eyes.

“Sherlock—” Lestrade began at his back, but there was a loud thump from down the corridor, all three of them turning toward the interruption.

Anderson stood at the top of the stairs, a large cardboard box held in his hands as he looked anxiously between them. “Sorry,” he muttered, shuffling closer along the corridor, and, as he passed beneath an overhead light, Sherlock could see the shadows stretching down from his bloodshot eyes, a day’s worth of growth darkening his jaw. “I—I brought—” he started, twitching the box in his grip, and Lestrade stepped aside, waving him in.

“Just leave ‘em there,” the sergeant said tiredly, waving one hand at the door while the other pushed at his eyes over the bridge of his nose, but Anderson hesitated, fingers twitching on the edges of the box.

“I- Well, there’s sort of…a system,” the dark-haired man muttered, glancing down at the cardboard lid, and then lifted his gaze directly to Sherlock, some hidden message straining at the creases around his eyes.

Sherlock’s brows twitched in a momentary frown, and then his face regained its blank expression, his gaze listless when Lestrade met it with a sigh.

“I had Donovan pull a few cases,” he explained, beckoning to Anderson with a curl of his fingers, the slight man shuffling into the room to pause at Lestrade’s elbow. “Thought it might—Ya know,” he mumbled, tipping his head toward the box, and Lestrade nodded, a twinge of guilt nibbling at the pit he couldn’t shake from his stomach. The older man then cleared his throat, shuffling away toward where Mycroft still hovered in the doorway, his watchful eyes slightly narrowed as they swept over Anderson’s back. “Well, you, er, explain your…system, then,” he muttered gruffly, giving Anderson a brisk nod. “And then get back. I need you helping out downstairs,” he added, casting the man a pointed look, but the subtly was futile, Sherlock knowing from the second Anderson entered the
room that he was helping the bomb squad sift through debris looking for pieces of the incendiary device—the soot under his nails had taken care of that.

Anderson nodded in reply, and then walked past Sherlock to place the box atop the desk beside the window, lifting free the lid and flicking his fingers aimlessly through the files.

Lestrade turned to leave, starting down the corridor with Mycroft just ahead, but Sherlock called him up short.

“Lestrade!” he blurted, but no further words came as the man turned around, eyebrows lifting expectantly. Sherlock’s mouth shifted in silence, and Lestrade smiled, dipping his head in a gentle nod as he accepted the wordless apology.

“Take care of yourself, kid,” he said softly, eyes warm with sincerity, and a little bit of the ice around Sherlock’s heart chipped away with a genuine twitch of his lips. Lestrade then ducked his head, moving down the hall with Mycroft while Sherlock watched, staring after them until both their footfalls could be heard descending the stairs.

There was a rustle behind him, and he turned, finding Anderson setting the lid of the box aside, his fingers twitching against the cardboard as his gaze flicked between Sherlock and the files.

“Er, so...how-how are you-”

“Can we skip the hollow pleasantries?” Sherlock interjected tiredly as he rattled his head at the floor. “You clearly have something to say, and apparently razors to buy, so, in the interest of expediency…” He rolled his hand through the air in beckoning, and Anderson, after a moment of blank staring, cleared his throat, splitting the files at a seemingly arbitrary spot and wriggling his fingers into the gap.

“It’s only the preliminary,” he said, pulling free a hastily stapled collection of paper, “and I’m under strict orders not to let you anywhere near it, but…” He trailed away, turning slowly to Sherlock as he held the packet in front of his chest, and then thrust it out, holding it at arm’s length between them.

Sherlock looked between the pages and the man’s disheveled face a moment, a frown growing between his brows, but then he caught sight of a logo atop the cover sheet, and his mind fell quiet as his eyes blinked wide. With a faint tremble he quickly suppressed, he reached out, taking the bundle between his fingers as his eyes rolled over the crookedly scanned cover page of the preliminary autopsy report, nothing but the logo and Mr. Hooper’s signature staring back at him, and he suspected Anderson had included that page for his benefit, the faint outline of the generic body silhouette used to mark wounds showing through from the following leaf as it was.

“I thought you might-” Anderson muttered, waving a weak hand at the paper as he faded away, and Sherlock started, having temporarily forgotten the technician was there. Anderson quirked a corner of his lips, dropping his chin as he swallowed, and then moved around behind Sherlock without another word, though his footsteps stopped in the doorway. “I- I’m helping with the debris,” he said to Sherlock’s back, and, though it wasn’t news, hearing the words still hit like a lorry to the solar plexus. “I’ll let you know if-if we find anything.”

Sherlock tilted his chin back just enough to make his nod visible, and then turned back to the window, watching the paper shake in his hands as he listened to Anderson’s steps retreat, not realizing he’d been holding his breath until he heard the door close beneath his feet, and his starving lungs heaved in a gust of oxygen.

The radiator below the window clunked to life, pulling him out of his trance, and he lifted his right
hand to the bottom corner of the cover page, his heart pounding in his ears as he twitched at the paper, a war of inquisitiveness and willful ignorance being waged over his muscles as he wavered.

“You shouldn’t look at it.”

Sherlock gasped, spinning around and catching himself on the chair of his desk as his feet fumbled in their haste to skitter away from the voice.

John stood in the doorway, ankles crossed as he leaned against the doorjamb, his arms folded across his chest so the black and white stripes of that jumper that always make him look 12 wrapped tight across his biceps. “It’ll only make things worse.”

Sherlock glared at him, the startled thundering of his heart fading into a steady thrum of fury. He’d tried to get John back all night, drifting in and out of vivid nightmares as the looping voicemail played out darkness and heralded dawn, but he’d never reappeared. Not until now, anyway, and seemingly only to tell him off. “What do you know?” Sherlock snapped, and John chuckled as he pushed free of the doorframe, sidling into the room.

“Only what you do,” he replied, and Sherlock flinched his face away, looking once again to the report in his hands.

He shifted the paper between his fingers, the quiet scrape of the wood pulp seeming to crackle in his ears with possibilities. “It could be important,” he murmured, trying to make out the writing on the next page through the cover sheet, as if reading through the pale foggy filter might somehow lessen the impact of the words.

“How?” John challenged, and Sherlock startled a step back, the blond suddenly leaning against the corner of the desk beside him. “It won’t change anything. You’ll just be able to imagine it better.”

“Maybe-Maybe I can-” he stammered, but John cut him off, rising to standing as his eyes sharpened. “What? Find something they missed?” he questioned, shrugging a shoulder. “ Probably,” he allowed, and then his expression turned stern, looking between Sherlock and the handful of paper, “but is it worth it?”

Sherlock’s brow creased in confusion, eyes blinking as he tilted his head. “Is it- What?” he muttered, and John sighed, more pained than exasperated.

“What do you think you’re going to find, Sherlock?” he asked softly, and Sherlock turned away, his shoulder a barrier between them as he focused steadily down at the black logo of St. Bartholomew’s. “You already know who did it. You already know why. What good could possibly come from knowing the particulars?”

“I-I don’t- I don’t know yet,” he countered, rattling his head as he tightened his grip on the pages. “Maybe there’s something they- Something I could-”

“You don’t want it to be me.”

Sherlock winced at the words, his eyes lingering closed as a stiff swallow worked its way down his throat.

“You think you can find something,” John continued, his voice seeming to swirl in at him from every direction. “Something to prove they made a mistake, that I’m not dead.”

“They make mistakes all the time,” Sherlock croaked, blinking down at the carpet. “You know that.
Remember that story I told you?” He looked up, finding John where he’d left him at the corner of the desk. “About that young girl Anderson thought was a sixty-year-old man for three days?”

John stared steadily back at him, a ripple of threat pulsing across his eyes. “No,” he said icily, “I don’t remember. Because I’m not real.”

“Don’t say that,” Sherlock spluttered, shaking his head as he retreated, but John simply stepped forward, following after him.

“I’m dead, Sherlock.”

“Stop it!” Sherlock cried, terror rising in his chest as he backed his way toward the door, though he couldn’t say what he was so afraid of.

“None of this is real,” John continued, his voice breaking as he shook his head, eyes growing bluer as they glistened. “You can’t pretend it is.”

“I’m not!”

“Then what are you doing!??” John suddenly shouted, throwing an arm out at his side. “Hiding in here listening to that bloody voicemail all night like you can fucking conjure me up!”

“I’m not- I’m not hiding!” Sherlock defended, stumbling back into the wall, his head spinning from exhaustion and dehydration.

“Yes, you are!” John stopped short, never getting much closer than a meter away. “You are hiding in your bedroom talking to yourself, and the sooner you realize that, the better!”

Sherlock shook his head, closing his eyes as his skull rattled against the cool plaster behind him. “No, you- You’re wrong, you- Why are you doing this!?” he accused, glaring as best he could with tears threatening to spill over his lashes. “Why are you even here!?”

“Because you want me to be!” John answered, and Sherlock looked away, the blank plaster wall swimming in front of him. “Because you know deep down that this isn’t right! I’m just… the voice of reason, Sherlock,” he said sorrowfully, shaking his head as Sherlock peered back at him out of the corner of his eyes. “Nothing more.”

Sherlock scraped in a breath, the exhale rattling as he grit his teeth against a sob. He then dropped his face to the carpet, swallowing once as he clenched the autopsy report in his fist. “No,” he growled, shaking his head, pushing off the wall and barreling past John while the blond was still opening his mouth. “No, you’re wrong. I’ll find something, I- I always find something!”

“Sherlock-” John started, and then fell silent as Sherlock ripped back the cover page of the report, his eyes falling on the series of lines and check boxes marred by Mr. Hooper’s nearly illegible handwriting.

**DECEDEENT: John Hamish Watson**

**RACE: W**

**SEX: M**

**AGE: 18**

“No, you’re wrong. I’ll find something, I- I always find something!”

“Sherlock-” John started, and then fell silent as Sherlock ripped back the cover page of the report, his eyes falling on the series of lines and check boxes marred by Mr. Hooper’s nearly illegible handwriting.

**TYPE OF DEATH: Violent __ Casualty __ Suicide __ Suddenly when in apparent health __**
“Sherlock, stop.”

**NOTIFICATION BY:** Scotland Yard  
**INVESTIGATING AGENCY:** Scotland Yard

“I can do it!”

**EYES:** Blue  
**HAIR:** Blond  
**WEIGHT:** 68.03kg  
**HEIGHT:** 1.69m

“Sherlock.”

The generic black outline figure used to document specific wounds was a mess of arrows, crosshatches, and cramped handwriting, the section devoted to listing them in no prettier a state.

**PROBABLE CAUSE OF DEATH:** Explosion trauma

“Sherlock, put it down.”

**Explosion trauma**

“Just put it down.”

**Explosion trauma**

“Sherlock!”

Did he really die instantly? Was he close enough for that?

“Sherlock, stop!”

Or did he feel the beginnings of burns, the slicing of shrapnel?

“Dammit, Sherlock!”

Was there time for one last thought? One wasted prayer?

“Listen to me!”

Or did it just go dark? Go light? For, if there was a heaven, surely John would be let in.

“SHERLOCK!”

“Sherlock?”

He blinked, his eyes focusing on the paper shaking in his hands before lifting to the doorway, alighting on an unmistakable silhouette, however blurry it was.

“What are you—” Mycroft stopped, his eyes widening a moment on the page before he blinked, his expression turning solemn.
Sherlock trembled from head to foot, his body quaking with a cold far too deep to warm. “It’s not true,” he whimpered, head shaking faintly as he blinked, realizing belatedly that tears were already rolling down his cheeks. “It’s wrong,” he continued, looking back to the drawing before him, though he could no longer glean any semblance of meaning in the watercolor mess of black on white. “I can find something,” he muttered, the floor creaking as Mycroft slowly moved into the room. “I can solve it.”

“Sherlock,” Mycroft said gently, a warm hand settling on his shoulder, “you need to rest.”

“I can solve it,” he repeated, his own voice seeming to drift away from his ears, and his fingers offered no resistance as Mycroft peeled the autopsy report from his hands. “I can always solve it.”

Mycroft did not reply, simply placed a guiding pressure on his back, pushing him in slow steps toward the bed. “Lie down,” he bade when they reached the edge of the mattress, and Sherlock automatically complied, peeling back the blankets and slipping between the sheets.

He was dimly aware of Mycroft adjusting the blankets over his chest, but he could not even twist his neck to look, his eyes fixed unseeing on the swirled plaster ceiling. “It’s not him,” he said as Mycroft’s footsteps moved away toward the door, and he turned his face just enough to bring his brother’s pained one into view. “Tell me it’s not him,” he added, barely more than a breath, but Mycroft flinched regardless, a swallow moving down his throat.

“I’m sorry, Sherlock,” he whispered to the hardwood, and then turned his back, catching the door and pulling it shut behind him as he vanished into the corridor.

Sherlock pinched his eyes closed, cold tears rolling backward into his hair. Tugging the duvet up over his shoulder, he rolled onto his side, muffling a sniff against his pillow as he drew in a choked breath. “John?” he breathed into the silence, blinking out at the hazy shape of his desk in the filtered afternoon sun, but there was no reply, and, after waiting several more beats of his heart, he closed his eyes, burying his face into the dampening pillow.

*****

Sherlock awoke with a soundless shout, his eyes cracking open within stale, tear-dried skin. His head swam as he realized he was already sitting up, and then he promptly collapsed back onto the mattress, a wave of nausea rushing up his throat. Closing his eyes, he tried to measure his breaths, the bile receding little by little as he cast his mind around for something else to focus on.

It was dark, the time he ought to have been going to bed instead of waking up if the silence in 221B was any measure, but it quickly became clear he was still exhausted, his thoughts beginning to flicker and fade faster than he could grab onto them. Random images passed in front of his mind’s eye, the sort of nonsense he remembered from when he’d gotten terribly sick once as a child, ravaged by fever for days. It took him a moment to make sense of it, but, when he did, his nausea returned with a vengeance, stomach twisting as he tried to close his eyes tight enough to lock out the world.

He’d been dreaming, he remembered, although most of the details were still fuzzy, but he was sure there had been fire, the vivid orange and yellow burning so bright behind his eyelids, he could almost feel the heat of it. Another image overtook the flames as the memory of his dream progressed, the colors swirling together and darkening to scarlet before the rest of the scene came into view, and he tightened his grip on the duvet, a shiver running through him.

There had been so much blood, too much blood, blood he couldn’t stop no matter how hard he pressed. It gushed out from beneath his fingers, rolling over his hands, staining his skin, and it was a bitter merit of his profession that his subconscious could perfectly form the expression on John’s
face, blue eyes dilated and unfocused within an ashen mask.

“Go back to sleep.”

Sherlock turned to face the door, but found it blocked by a figure lying beside him on the bed, though his mind quickly noted there was no corresponding dip in the mattress. “John?” he murmured sleepily, hardly recognizing the name as it hummed off his tongue, and the blond chuckled, shaking his head where it was propped up on his palm, elbow bent to hold him aloft as he looked fondly down.

“Go back to sleep,” he echoed, hand shifting where it rested on the duvet between them, and, mindlessly, Sherlock grabbed for it, his hand stalling in the air over the tan fingers.

Glancing up, he found John doing the same, blue eyes turned navy with shadows and pain. The blond shook his head, but Sherlock ignored him, just like always, focusing intently on the skin below his descending hand.

He tried to remember what it felt like, where John’s skin was calloused versus smooth, where he had a scar from attempting to help his mother cut carrots, but, as his fingers brushed the image of John’s, he could only conjure up a faint tangibility, a slight imagined warmth where there was nothing but air and ghosts. Unsurprised, but still somehow disappointed, he withdrew his arm, tucking his hand back into the blankets and curling it beneath his chin.

“I can’t make it feel real,” he murmured, his tongue loose with drowsiness as his blinks slowed, and John’s soft chuckle drifted down to his ears in the dark.

“I suppose every superhero has their kryptonite,” he replied, and Sherlock laughed, a faint puff of air that ached in his chest.

“That’s exactly what you would say,” he whispered, throat thickening as his eyes began to sting, but John hushed him calm.

“Go to sleep, Sherlock,” he said, and, as Sherlock closed his eyes, he could almost imagine cool fingers carding through his curls.

*****

It was Day 3 before he ate, caving equally to Mrs. Hudson’s worried looks and the growing weakness of his limbs. It was only a bit of toast and tea, Mrs. Hudson up with the sun every morning to tap gently on his door and offer him the fare with waning hope in her voice, but he’d opened it today, if only because he knew she had been up for hours already, neither of them getting much sleep lately.

He’d never thought about it before, never had a reason to consider the phenomenon, but it seemed so strange to him now, the way grief could so easily turn to guilt. Not over John, that much was expected, but with everyone else. The red in Mrs. Hudson’s eyes, the exhausted pallor of Lestrade’s face when he came in to tell the floor in Sherlock’s presence that the DNA results they’d rushed were conclusive, the wrinkles in Mycroft’s normally pristinely pressed suits, it all weighed heavily on his conscience, and he found himself wishing there was a way to help everyone else get over his grief, himself already given up as a lost cause.

He was under no disillusions as to how abnormal his behavior was, he himself knowing better than anyone just how founded their concerns truly were. True, he hadn’t been able to make John appear again since the night before, but the fact that it was happening at all was cause enough to get him
committed, let alone his mind spinning over potential ways to trigger it, even going so far as to wonder if he might be better off going back to not eating. Even he knew that was a dangerous train to jump on, however, and so he had sipped at the soup Mrs. Hudson brought him at lunch and tried to take solace in her smiles, though the broth was nothing but sickly warmth on his tongue.

“Mr. Holmes?”

He turned from the living room window he’d been gazing aimlessly out of, the fifth cup of tea Mrs. Hudson had brought him cradled in his hands, steam swirling upward in the late afternoon light.

Lyle, Sherlock’s favorite of the drones Mycroft had moved into 221C on a rotating basis, several more camped out in vans or circling the block, stood in the doorway of the living room. He was dressed in an incredibly unconvincing painter’s uniform, Mrs. Hudson doing some renovations being the cover story for the constant stream of people, but that was more for the sake of the neighbors than anything else, Sherlock having security hardly something that would need to be concealed from Moriarty.

“I’m going out,” the dark-skinned man continued, twitching at his earpiece. “Probably grab a takeaway on the way back. You want anything in particular?”

Sherlock smiled, shaking his head. “No,” he replied, and Lyle nodded, his smile tainted with the pity Sherlock had become intimately familiar with.

“Alright. I’ll be back in a half hour or so. Erickson and Bennet are downstairs, if you need anything.”

Sherlock nodded, not bothering with the feigned smile, the man’s back already turned, and then listened to his heavy footsteps bound down the stairs, the door banging shut behind him. Moving to the window, he watched Lyle’s back retreat down the street, the man giving a friendly wave in at Speedy’s as he passed, the owner kindly offering the occasional free coffee to the “workers”.

Clinking his cup down on the table, Sherlock crossed the rug to the chairs by the fireplace, flopping sidelong over the black leather. Mrs. Hudson had managed to tut him into putting on real clothes today, and the dark jeans bunched uncomfortably, a scowl wrinkling his face as he fidgeted, tugging at the denim. Eventually, he gave up, readjusting to stare at the ceiling with a sigh as he folded his hands over his chest, thumbs sliding against the thin emerald cashmere. On instinct, he turned his head toward the red armchair across from him, the pit in his stomach somehow plunging even deeper at the sight, the very color of the upholstery seeming duller with the absence of its occupant.

Swallowing hard, he flipped the opposite direction, curling up to breathe in the worn scent of the leather as he pressed his head down into the armrest. His arms folded across his chest, his left hand rubbing absentmindedly at his right forearm as he thought, frowning into the shadow created by the back of the chair.

Ever since reading the autopsy report, something had been needling at him. It was nothing in the report, his brain having unfortunately memorized it and gone over every gruesome detail more times than he would’ve thought he could bear, but there was something, some tangential connection it had inspired, a circuit that was sparking, but not quite complete.

Snarling at his own ineptitude, he rolled back to the ceiling, tapping the hand against his forearm as he considered how long he had until Mrs. Hudson returned from Mrs. Turner’s and made him eat. At least another half hour, he wagered, and, by then, Lyle would be back with the food he’d have picked up for him anyway, enabling him to make a show of picking at that and temporarily stave off her mothering. His eyes made to turn once again to the armchair, but he pulled the impulse back,
dropping his gaze instead to his fingers tapping nonsensical rhythms against his green-cloaked arm, and then froze, hands stalling as his brain pieced it together so cleanly, he would swear he heard a *click*.

In a whirlwind of limbs, he leapt from the chair, crossing the room in two strides to pluck his mobile off the coffee table. Finding the contact he wanted out of the very short list, he swiped to dial, and then began pacing, his hand tapping impatiently against his side as he marched between the table and his chair.

“Hello?”

“Mr. Hooper!” he blurted, probably not helping the already wary tone of the man’s voice. “I need to ask you a question about- About the-” He couldn’t say it, his throat crackling as his mouth hung open, but the man inferred it well enough.

“Sherlock,” he said with a heavy sigh, “you know I can’t tell you anything about that. I shouldn’t even be talking to you at all right now.”

“I know, I just- It’s just one question,” he pleaded, sensing Ben’s resolve wavering in the silence. “One highly specific question. You won’t have to reveal anything important, I swear.”

A silence he didn’t dare even breathe in stretched across the line, and then, to a chorus of angels, Mr. Hooper sighed.

“Alright,” he caved, dropping his voice to a whisper, though, considering the particular clientele he worked with, Sherlock couldn’t imagine who the secrecy was for. “But just the one, okay? Just one question. And, if I think it’s giving away too much-”

“You don’t have to answer, fair enough,” Sherlock finished impatiently, his chest tightening as the moment of truth built to a crest. “When you- Did the-” He faltered, closing his eyes and standing still a moment as he blew out a slow breath. “Were there any signs of fractures in the arms? The radius or ulna on either side?” he asked, heart so loud in his ears, he wasn’t sure if Mr. Hooper was quiet or had just been drowned out. “They’d be old injuries. Twelve years.”

Ben puffed out a breath. “Sherlock, that’d be- At that age, fractures often don’t show up at the *time*, let alone twelve years-”

“But did you see anything?” Sherlock interjected, trying and failing to rein in the misplaced aggression. “Anything at all?”

The man was quiet a long time, Sherlock almost considering asking again until, very softly, he posed a question of his own. “Sherlock,” he began cautiously, Sherlock’s stomach instantly tightening in response, “why are you asking me this?”

Sherlock did not reply, firmly exercising his rights against self-incrimination, but Ben seemed to guess, a long sigh drawing out of him.

“Sherlock, I’m sorry, but-but we ran the DNA. Twice.” He spoke slowly, gently, but, just as with everyone else, it took none of the sting out of the message. “A fracture that old- It doesn’t-”

“I know,” Sherlock said, his voice quaking more than expected, and Mr. Hooper sighed yet again.

“I am sorry, Sherlock,” he reiterated, and Sherlock turned his head away from the phone, swallowing as he blinked down at the rug beneath his feet.
“Thank you, Mr. Hooper,” he replied with an unseen nod, his voice more stable, but also more brittle. “I-I appreciate you taking my call.”

“Of course,” the man answered kindly, and Sherlock, quite overcome, said nothing more, pulling the phone from his ear and tapping the call to an end.

Motionless, he stared down at the floor, and then, dragging in a much-needed breath, he lifted his chin, dropping his phone back to the table and boxing yet another bulging bag of emotion away as he slumped toward his chair. His attention was diverted, however, by a sound from downstairs—two muffled pops followed by a heavy thud.

Sherlock froze, whipping his head around to stare at the living room doorway with wide eyes. He tried to calm his heart enough to listen, but he hardly needed to bother, there being no doubt in his mind what that sound had been, and, sure enough, he heard the step halfway up creak under stealthy pressure. A brief review of his current position brought up no good news, any reasonable means of escape cut off by the need to pass the stairs, and he didn’t quite fancy taking a swan dive out the living room window, so all he could do was shuffle backward toward his chair, hand stretched out behind him to find it before he tripped.

He had no intention of hiding or running, but, still, as Sebastian Moran stepped into the room, silenced pistol glinting in his hands, the knowledge that he couldn’t anymore ran through him with a shiver.

The blond man smiled, his gun dropping to hang at his side as he lowered his arms, and Sherlock frowned, watching the rather counterproductive motion. “You look taller in your photographs,” Moran said blithely, tipping his head as he scanned Sherlock up and down, and Sherlock set his jaw, fingers clenching to a fist.

“Take the precaution of a good coat and a short friend,” he spat, and Moran chuckled, shaking his head at the floor as he sidled into the room.

“Well,” he clipped, shrugging a shoulder, “at least you’ve still got the coat.”

The gibe caught him off guard, and Sherlock’s breath hitched over a gasp, his face pulling into an involuntary wince.

Moran grinned, chuckling breathily as he stopped at the edge of the rug some two meters away. He then simply stood there, gun still held at his side as he met Sherlock’s eyes in a steady gaze of glinting ice, and, if there ever had been, there was no longer any question as to his intent. Moran’s lips curled in a sneer, as if he could sense Sherlock working out his own imminent end. “You know, it’s funny,” he said suddenly, frowning down at the floor as he began to move again, stepping to the side as opposed to closer, the gun swinging with seemingly idle gesticulations as he talked. “All this time spent dancing around it, and, in the end”—he lifted his face, half his mouth lifting as he shrugged—“it’s just as simple as a bullet.” He hoisted the gun in front of his face, twisting the glimmering suppressor in the dusty light of the window, and Sherlock took the opportunity of his temporary distraction to shift just slightly to the right—only a few inches closer to the door, but he would take what he could get.

He froze when Moran looked back up, smile firmly fixed on his visage, the light from the window casting menacing shadows down his face. That and the gun aside, however, he would have looked remarkably normal, just an average man heading home from work in black trousers and a white dress shirt, the collar slightly open as if a tie had been removed. Sherlock imagined there was probably a briefcase downstairs where he had housed the weapon, but that hardly mattered now. Not like he’d ever get to check.
“I heard it all the time,” Moran continued, a note of bitterness cracking into his tone, and the hair on the back of Sherlock’s neck stood up, the tension in the room palpably rising. “Sherlock this, Sherlock that. You’d think you were the fucking second coming!” He laughed, but it was sharp, brittle, and, when his eyes fixed on Sherlock’s again, they held no mirth, nothing but hollow black pools gaping out of his tanned face. “I wouldn’t hold my breath on a resurrection, though.”

Sherlock twitched a sneer, his eyes narrowing, and Moran laughed, turning to him where he stood in front of the window.

“He built you up like a god,” he mused, shaking his head perplexedly as he stepped forward, Sherlock matching it with a retreat. The blond man then moved again, shifting back toward the center of the room, blocking off Sherlock’s path to the door, and Sherlock swallowed, his hands beginning to shake with adrenaline. Moran’s gaze tracked down his arms, his lips twisting as he saw the quaking digits, and then he lifted his eyes, brown sparkling over the taunting smile. “Well, how ‘bout it, Sherlock?” he quipped, tipping his head as he lifted the gun in the air beside his face, twisting it pointedly in his hand. “Let’s see if gods bleed.”

It was the longest second of Sherlock’s life, watching the smirk unfold on the man’s face, his arm slowly stretching out, pistol barrel levelling toward Sherlock’s head, and, with the kind of clarity only panic can bring, Sherlock simultaneously formed a plan and knew it wouldn’t work.

Snappping his hand behind him, he plucked a book from the table beside the armchair, flinging it out in distraction as he bolted toward the door, stumbling as the gun went off—though only from the disorienting shock of the sound, no pain accompanying it. Of course, he didn’t get past Moran, the mercenary grabbing him by the arm and flinging him backward so hard, he was flying a moment. He hit his chair with a force that knocked the wind out of him, toppling over it to fall in a heap at the base of the bookshelf, his skull colliding heavily with the wood, and he blinked furiously, trying to clear his head.

Everything was blurred, his mind dulled and ringing with pain, but, somewhere in the back of his foggy thoughts, he recognized the sound of furniture scraping across the floor, the chair in front of him pulled aside to reveal a pair of polished shoes.

“GET UP!”

Sherlock blinked, blearily turning his head toward the window.

John looked frantically between him and Moran, his chest rising and falling with urgent breaths he didn’t need. “GET UP!” he shouted again, but Sherlock only stared at him, watching the confusion grow in his eyes.

The light catching gold in his hair wasn’t real, the grey jumper Sherlock should have told him he was fond of wasn’t real, the sparkling cerulean eyes weren’t real, but, for just that moment, Sherlock didn’t care, and, if there was a moment to stop caring, it seemed only appropriate it be the last.

Gently, he shook his head at the blond, John’s eyes widening with horror as a resigned peace settled over his own heart, and, as he turned his face to meet the shadowed barrel of a gun, there was nothing left to do but close his eyes and hope he’d been wrong about heaven.

The room shook with the sound of a gunshot, Sherlock sure the entire street was rushing curiously to their windows, and then, upon realizing he was still able to think about the sound of the bullet that was supposed to be in his skull, he opened his eyes. Not a moment too soon, either, as, the second his gaze focused on the figure hovering above him, he had to dive to the side to avoid it, flinging himself across the rug in front of the fireplace.
At his feet lay Moran, the man’s limbs crumpled unnaturally under his motionless body. The gun lay some two feet from his hand, but he wouldn’t be reaching for it, his lifeless eyes wide open and staring at nothing as blood slowly began to bloom across the rug from beneath his stained shirt.

Sherlock could hear his own breaths intertwining with the pounding of his heart, but, through the din, he heard someone calling his name, and turned toward the sound, looking through the legs of the overturned table to find a figure in the doorway, and, suddenly, everything fell silent.

The man was dressed in simple jeans and a worn white t-shirt, all of it, along with his heavy workman’s boots, stained with pale blue paint, the decoy color Mycroft had had splattered over all the agents who were rotating through the house. He lowered his outstretched arm, drawing Sherlock’s attention to the pistol held in his hand, the black weapon striking a chord of memory that reverberated through his bones, and then the man’s eyes dropped to Sherlock’s, and he abruptly forgot how to breathe.

“John?” he whispered, more moving his mouth than really making sounds, because it looked so real this time, John standing there, his father’s pistol in hand and an agonized look in his eyes, but, less than a blink later, a pair of gun-toting men in suits burst into the room, no doubt the real saviors, and Sherlock tried to compose himself, pointedly averting his eyes from the mirage.

“SHERLOCK!” Mycroft exploded in after his agents, his expression downright animalistic in its terror, and Sherlock didn’t know what was more alarming: that, or the jarring degree of realism his hallucinations had obtained. Mycroft’s eyes found him them, scanning briefly over his body for injuries before lunging forward, kneeling to the ground and yanking the table aside. “Sherlock!” he panted, grabbing onto his arms and gently helping him to standing. “Thank god! Are you alright?”

“I’m fine,” he mumbled in reply, but his head swam, and he pitched to the side, catching himself on the arm of John’s chair.

“Jesus!” Mycroft hissed, and Sherlock almost passed out from the shock of hearing that in his brother’s voice alone. “Sit down,” he urged, guiding Sherlock into the chair by the shoulders, and he couldn’t even muster a show of impudence, willing to admit that, just this once, Mycroft’s idea wasn’t abysmal.

Even the slight bounce of sitting set lightning loose in his head, and he hissed with pain, ducking his chin as he lifted a hand to the back of his head.

“Get Peters!” Mycroft shouted, turning his face to the men hovering behind him, and they bolted out the door, practically racing one another down the steps.

“I’m fine,” Sherlock insisted irritably, but Mycroft only glowered at him, pulling him forward by the shoulders as he pried his hand away, peering at the wound himself. Huffing in an obligatory demonstration of frustration, Sherlock then went still, permitting Mycroft’s examination as he lifted his hand in front of him, checking for blood. Finding none, he knew the head wound likely wasn’t serious, but it would do no good trying to tell Mycroft that before he was done, so Sherlock instead peered out from around his brother’s arm, scanning the opposite wall.

John was still there, tucked out of the way just inside the doorway, an inexplicable expression on his face. He’d already been looking at Sherlock, but, when their eyes met, John’s widened with terror, his jaw clenching shut like steeling himself for a blow, and Sherlock frowned, perplexed by the reaction.

A man rushed into the room, breaking his line of sight, and Sherlock turned to him, not wanting his eyes to linger too long on what, to everyone else, would simply look like a blank expanse of
wallpaper.

“About time,” Mycroft snapped, standing up and allowing the medic to take his vacated spot. “He might have a concussion.”

“I don’t- OW!” Sherlock bleated, yanking his head away from the medic as the man began to prod at his skull. “What the hell are you-”

“You two!” Mycroft interrupted, barking orders at the two suited goons the second they reached the top of the stairs. “Get a team in here to clean this up. Make sure none of the neighbors get too close, and call Anthea and Lestrade; we’ll need to get out in front of this.”

The two men nodded briskly, spines straightening, and then turned as one, moving back down the stairs once more.

Mycroft then turned to- But that- That wasn’t-

“What the hell happened!?” he shouted, and Sherlock managed to suppress his wince, not wanting to close his eyes for even a second. “You and Erickson we’re supposed to-” He stopped, shoulders lowering, and John blinked his eyes down to the floor, shaking his head.

“He’s dead,” John said simply, and Sherlock gasped, the medic muttering an apology as he misinterpreted the reaction for pain. “I checked him myself.”

Sherlock couldn’t feel his own body, wasn’t even in his body, his consciousness hovering somewhere over the scene as he looked, really looked over the figure in front of him.

John was four pounds lighter than when Sherlock had seen him off at Lestrade’s car three days ago, his hair dulled and unruly, eyes more grey than blue within red-streaked corneas surrounded by days’ worth of shadows. The John Sherlock had imagined had never looked that way, had always been just the way Sherlock had left him, the very best version his mind could conjure. And then there was the fact that Mycroft appeared to be talking to him, but he wouldn’t- He couldn’t-

Maybe Sherlock had just died. Maybe Moran had shot him after all, and this was his hyper-realistic heaven. Or, perhaps, his hell.

“We heard a sound upstairs in Mrs. Hudson’s flat,” John explained, bobbing the gun in his hand as he talked, and that drew Sherlock’s attention to the pistol, his heart picking up as the evidence mounted.

He’d forgotten all about the gun John had in their dorm, his father’s service pistol that he’d taken from his house at Christmas. How could he be imagining it if he’d forgotten it had ever existed?

“Erickson was going up to investigate when-when Moran shot him on the stairs,” John said, his voice dropping quiet as he avoided Mycroft’s eyes, and the taller man sighed, bowing his head as he shook it at the floor. John swallowed, the click of it audible to Sherlock’s disbelieving ears. “I waited around the corner,” he continued stiffly, looking at nothing in particular. “I thought he’d come down to see if there was anyone else, but-but then I heard the gunshot.”

“The what!?” Mycroft spouted, rounding on Sherlock, eyes blazing.

It took Sherlock a long moment to register what was being said to him, that he was being addressed at all. His eyes were fixed on John’s face, which was turned pointedly away from him, but, as the silence drew on, the blue eyes slowly lifted, peering through pale lashes with a cocktail of shame and sorrow that sent the final shard of truth straight through Sherlock’s hammering heart. “You’re-
You’re…real?” he breathed, and John flinched, eyes closed as he turned away, a swallow scraping down the front of his throat.

Sherlock dropped his eyes to the ground, brow twitching as his brain struggled to connect the dots, but it was like herding shooting stars, the questions and possibilities rocketing around to ping across the inside of his already pained skull. He could hear his breathing beginning to pick up, the first hisses of hyperventilating whistling past his teeth, and promptly clamped his jaw shut, not wanting to give anyone any more reason to worry about him.

“Are you-”

“Peters,” Mycroft interrupted, his tone quiet, but not to be challenged. “We’re fine up here. Go take care of Erickson, will you?”

Peters turned around, his green eyes looking hesitantly between the two brothers. “I- Sir, I’m not sure-”

“He’s fine,” Mycroft said, voice sharpening, and Peters stood, taking his leave with a nod.

No one spoke until Peters’ footsteps had disappeared, and, though Sherlock couldn’t be certain, unable to look at anyone to ascertain their emotional state, he thought he felt the air thicken with their combined discomfort.

“Sherlock,” Mycroft started, moving a single footfall closer, but Sherlock turned his head away, blinking out toward the kitchen. Mycroft didn’t move any further, the blurry figure frozen in the corner of Sherlock’s eye bowing its head as a sigh cut into the silence. “I- It was the only way, Sherlock,” he said softly, and Sherlock’s blinks stuttered, his hand curling and uncurling where it rested on his thigh. “If-If you had known- It had to look real.” He shifted forward again, but Sherlock twitched his jaw, wordlessly conveying it would be detrimental to his health to continue the effort. Mycroft looked out toward the window, shaking his head. “You wouldn’t have been able to pretend,” he continued after a moment, tone growing defensive. “Not well enough, anyway. We had to fool Moriarty, had to draw him out of hiding. If you’d known-”

“We?” Sherlock interrupted, the word coming out much quieter than he’d expected, but, nevertheless, Mycroft halted. He turned, eyes skipping over John entirely as he fixed his brother with a hollow look. “Who?” he demanded, and Mycroft, for the first time Sherlock could remember, looked genuinely cowed, his hands twisting in front of him as he dropped his gaze, but Sherlock could take no joy in that victory now.

“No one,” Mycroft replied, shaking his head. “Just myself, John”—he waved a hand back at the blond still pressed against the wall behind him, but Sherlock didn’t allow his eyes to follow the gesture—“and a few of my people who had to bring the decoy body from the morgue. And Anthea, of course,” he added with a tip of his head.

Sherlock swallowed, staring at his brother’s shoes. “Lestrade?” he asked, looking up just high enough to have Mycroft’s head in his field of vision as it shook, and, though he wouldn’t quite say he was relieved yet, his chest was at least a little less tight. “Mrs. Hudson?” Mycroft shook his head again. “Lyle?” Sherlock pressed, his stomach twinging at the possibility, but Mycroft rattled his head yet again.

“No,” he answered. “No one in-house knew. We snuck John in with the first load of equipment, and then both teams just thought he was their third. No one knew he never left.”

Sherlock stifled a gasp to something he hoped simply sounded like a steadying breath.
John had been there the whole time? Just two floors away? Had he heard anything? Did he know Sherlock had-

Sherlock looked up, careful not to look at John directly, but it wouldn’t have mattered.

John had moved a step or two closer, hovering on the edge of the rug in front of the door, his body pulled taut with tension as his eyes focused on an arbitrary spot on the floor. The gun was no longer with him, one of the minions no doubt having taken it for “processing”, and he seemed bereft by the absence, his firing hand twitching against the side seam of his jeans. Still, as Sherlock watched him, he didn’t appear to be squirming any more than he had been, so, presumably, the specific secrets of his hallucinations were safe.

From John, at least, but the way Mycroft was looking at him when he turned his eyes back up told him he hadn’t been quite so lucky there.

“I only picked people who hadn’t seen him before,” his brother continued, gaze heavy with questions Sherlock would avoid answering. “Everyone here just thought he was another agent, Agent-”

“Bennet,” Sherlock interjected, having put that together himself already, and his eyes dropped to the red upholstery stretched over the arm beside him.

“So, I suppose, if I’m Mr. Darcy, that would make you Elizabeth.”

“How do ya figure that?”

“Because you’re always bothering me when I’m trying to work.”

Brain a little too slow to catch his eyes, they lifted, finding John already looking at him, blood-rimmed blue glittering with guilt.

Sherlock looked away.

“Yes,” Mycroft confirmed. “James Bennet. And, if at all possible-”

“You’d like to keep it that way,” Sherlock surmised, and Mycroft nodded. Sherlock stared at him a moment, and then sniffed a derisive hiss of laughter, half his mouth curling in a humorless smirk.

“Don’t worry, Mycroft,” he drawled, rising to standing on suddenly steady legs, iron fury bolstering him as it clenched cold over his heart. “Your secret’s safe with me.”

Mycroft Holmes, hammer of the British government, a man seven years his senior who needed only to snap his fingers and someone halfway around the world would drop dead, flinched, ducking his face away as Sherlock breezed past him.

He didn’t look at John, but John wasn’t looking at him either, his face pinched up in agony as he stepped back, giving Sherlock a wide berth as he moved down the hall toward his room. He was almost there, just passing in front of the bathroom door when Mycroft called him to a halt.

“Sherlock!” he blurted, and, if he’d sounded any less desperate, anything close to normal, Sherlock would have been able to keep going. “You have to understand!”

“I do,” he snapped, twisting on the spot, and Mycroft grew quiet, aggressive posture falling away. “If I had known, I would have acted like I’d seen other people grieve, and it wouldn’t have been nearly authentic enough to fool Moriarty,” he explained on Mycroft’s behalf, hoping the growing trembling in his arms went unnoticed. “No one else could know because no one but you would be able to lie to
me,” he continued, voice breaking only a little over the admission, and Mycroft shamefully hung his head, “and you had to hide Bennet”—his teeth bared over the terminal t, prompting John to wince—“here so he’d be protected while still staying out of sight.” He paused, looking between the two older men, both of whom were looking everywhere but at him. “It was the logical choice,” he clipped, surprising even himself with how clearly the intended insult came across, his two targets cringing in tandem. “And, you know, in a way,” he continued, flicking his hand in a sharp slice through the air, “it’s probably helped. Now, if I ever do have to pretend Lestrade or Mrs. Hudson have been splattered all over the walls somewhere, I know exactly how I’d react.” He smiled, blood vibrating with rage as he shifted his eyes over the two men still pointedly watching the floor. “Valuable learning experience for everyone,” he finished curtly, narrowing his eyes one last time between them, and then turned, striding quickly to his door and flinging it open.

“Sherlock.”

He stopped halfway through closing the wooden barrier, his fingers trembling on the painted white edge as his eyes slowly lifted.

John looked even older than Sherlock felt, and twice as tired, but his eyes were still bright, the damp blue glinting gold as they reflected the overhead lights. His mouth moved soundlessly a moment, pale lips quivering, and then he closed them, swallowing as he momentarily dropped his gaze. “I’m sorry,” he breathed, miserable and watery, shaking his head as he lifted his chin.

Sherlock curled away from the words like a blow, his fingers tightening around the width of the door. Without a word, he slowly pushed it closed, the click of the latch the only sound a moment before he heard John’s hitched breath, and then moved away, stepping silently over the hardwood floors toward his bed.

His vision was blurring, his boiling rage beginning to ebb away to exhaustion, but then he caught sight of the rugby jacket folded neatly on the pillow beside his, and the embers flared bright once more. Lunging forward with a snarl, he wrenched the jacket up in a fist, flinging it back behind him to smash against the wall, his eyes tracking it as it pooled down to the floor, slowly deflating as the air left it.

There was a sound in the living room, a squeak of wood and a series of low mumbles, but no one approached, and, after a moment, Sherlock’s anger melted away, and he sank down onto the edge of his mattress, cradling his head in his hands. His eyes burned, and he counted his breaths, slowly pulling himself back from the brink of sobbing.

He had shed enough worthless tears.

Sucking in a gust of air, he straightened his spine, blinking out toward the door, but his gaze was drawn by the bundle of blue and white on the floor, and he stood, approaching it like a wounded animal. Tentatively, he bent down, and then elected to sit, turning to lean against the wall as he pulled the jacket into his lap. On reflex, he turned the garment over in his hands, pointing the surname upward as he traced over the white print. With a stiff swallow, he bent his knees up, clutching the jacket tight to his chest.

“John,” he whispered, and even he wasn’t sure which version he was talking to, but, in the end, he supposed it didn’t matter.

Neither one of them was real.

*****
John stared up at the familiar ceiling, watching as the red hue cast over the plaster paled. Turning his head, he looked at the clock, finding it had shifted from 3:59 to 4:00, and heaved out a sigh, lifting a hand to pinch at the bridge of his nose.

He’d been dreaming about sleeping in a proper bed for days, but, now that he was here, it eluded him, too many thoughts knitted together to form an impassable barrier between him and unconsciousness.

He looked back to the clock again, finding yet another minute had rolled past him, and finally sat up, bending his knees to brace his elbows as he pushed his fingers back through his hair.

He’d gone to bed hours ago—11:54, to be precise—after the second most brutal verbal beating of his life, Sherlock taking top honors, of course.

The Agent Bennet strategy had lasted only as long as it had taken Mrs. Hudson to slip inside past the agents, the woman listening to the first couple sentences of Mycroft’s appeal for secrecy before storming up the stairs, screaming at the top of her lungs.

‘JOHN HAMISH WATSON!’ she’d shouted, and John finally understood the fear he had seen in his friends’ eyes when their mothers would call them by their full names. She had then proceeded to shred what was left of the entrails Sherlock had ripped out, her face reddening with righteous fury as words John probably needed to be baptized after hearing spit off her tongue, and then, abruptly, instead of tossing him out the window—the bet he most certainly would have taken—she had flung her arms around him, bursting into tears on his shoulder.

He’d done nothing but stare over her head at Mycroft for a moment, the older man lifting his hands, clearly equally nonplussed, and then gingerly patted her back, prompting an even tighter hold that made him question whether it had all been a ploy to kill him after all.

‘What were you thinking!?’ she’d accused moments later, swatting him across the arm.

‘Mycroft-’ he had started, but she’d only hit him again.

‘The hell with Mycroft!’ she’d barked, the owner of the name making a hasty and silent retreat down the steps at her back. ‘I’m asking you! How could you do this to Sherlock!?’

John had opened his mouth, meaningless sounds crackling up his throat as he looked between her and the still-closed door. ‘I-I had to,’ he’d replied, and Mrs. Hudson had only sighed, shaking her head with a disappointment that hurt almost as much as the betrayal in Sherlock’s eyes.

John swallowed, resting his chin on his folded hands as he stared out at the window on the opposite wall, the curtains pulled tight, one of the conditions of him being allowed to freely wander the flat. He couldn’t leave, of course, much to what he was fairly confident in saying would be Sherlock’s dismay, the detective not allowed to venture out alone either, and John imagined there was no one in the world Sherlock would want to be cohabitating with less than him right now. He’d probably sign up for an indefinite stint with Kevin and his perpetual “that’s what she said” before breathing the same air as John for even another hour, but John pushed those thoughts aside, rattling them loose with a shake of his head.

He deserved it, after all.

But he’d never thought- Never dreamt-

Closing his eyes, he hung his head, blowing a breath down at the duvet draped between his knees as he tried to ease his once-again pounding heart.
Mycroft hadn’t told him much of anything, and John had never been allowed to leave 221C, even hiding in closets on occasion when Mrs. Hudson would come down to sneak a quick tidying up, but he knew. Not all of it, he was sure, but he knew enough, reading it in the growing shadows under Mycroft’s eyes and snatches of whispers he caught drifting in from the foyer, and, on one memorable occasion, Sherlock’s voice thundering down through the floors, John holding his breath for as long as he could hear it.

‘He talks to you,’ Mycroft had said, pulling “Bennet” aside on the second night of his imprisonment. ‘I can hear him sometimes. Through the door.’

John had swallowed, guilt or vomit—not that it couldn’t be both—rising bitterly up his throat. ‘He always did that,’ he’d muttered, attempting to dismiss it with a shrug. ‘Says he can work stuff out better when he pretends he’s bouncing it off me.’

Mycroft had only shaken his head. ‘This is different,’ he’d said, and John had not replied, no rebuttal coming to him then or now, because it was different.

Everything was.

There was a sudden creak to his right, and he snapped his head toward the sound, hand halfway to the gun on his nightstand before he recognized the silhouette in the doorway, though that only made his pulse quicken further.

“Sher-”

“I don’t wanna talk to you,” Sherlock interrupted, voice cracking like a whip, and John leaned back, holding his breath as he felt himself physically shrinking. Sherlock stepped into the room, the filtered light from the streetlamps outside casting a pale glow on his tortured expression, though his eyes were on the floor between them. “But—” he stammered, throat clicking with a swallow, “but I need to know you’re here.” Slowly, he peered up through his lashes, meeting John’s eyes for only the scantest of seconds, but it was still somehow almost too long for John to bear.

He blew out a trembling breath, dropping his eyes to the mattress, and then started to shuffle further toward the wall, pushing down the duvet beside him. There was only one pillow, and he pulled it to Sherlock’s side, the man pausing at the bedside to frown curiously at the gesture a moment before his face returned to impassive, and then he dropped down onto the bed, turning his back to John and pulling the duvet up over his shoulder.

John stayed still a long time, propped up on his elbow until his shoulder went into spasms, and then lowered himself down onto the mattress, pulling some of the duvet from behind him and bunching it up beneath his head.

Sherlock was still, his side rising and falling as if already asleep, but John could see the pulse point leaping in his neck, and was just trying to work out the impossible right thing to say when he felt something brush against his ankle, and started, nearly jerking away before he realized what it was.

Unexpectedly, his eyes burned, heart swelling to clog up his throat as he slowly slid his foot along the side of Sherlock’s, and the detective’s breathing wobbled a moment, a slip of character that ground John to dust.

Twenty minutes later, Sherlock was really asleep, breaths whistling out of his nose the way they always did when the allergies he wouldn’t admit he had were acting up—although, in this case, John suspected a slightly sadder cause of congestion. He mumbled something in his sleep, rolling over and tangling their legs, and John swallowed through a thick throat, gently sliding his hand up between
them to brush wayward curls out of the man’s eyes.

“I’m sorry, Sherlock,” he whispered, tracing a thumb over the arch of a cheekbone, more prominent now than he remembered. “I am so, so-”

Sherlock sniffed, a soft sound of sleep sighing from his mouth as he curled his head down into John’s chest, and John bit hard at his lip, trying as best he could to keep still while he wept.
Well, we’ve broken the chapter record! Enjoy a whopping 26,499 words (really, I couldn’t’ve added one more?) on me!

Also, if any of you are at GridLOCK this weekend, feel free to come up and say hi! I’ll be the one with the purple hair, and I’m also on the Novel-Length Fanfiction panel (shocking, right?).

Got a Tumblr? Find me!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“John, you know you can’t-”

“Stay down, Mr. Watson!”

“It’s the only way.”

“Did you hear something?”

“How could you do this to Sherlock!?”

“I don’t wanna talk to you. But- But I need to know you’re here.”

John shot upright with a gasp, his hair and shirt cemented to his skin by cold sweat. Disoriented, his head spinning, he had to blink several times before he could bring his surroundings into focus, momentarily surprised to find himself in his room at 221B, but the events of the previous night came quickly back to him, and he turned, looking down at the mattress.

Sherlock was gone, the sheet cold to John’s touch as he ran his fingers over the wrinkled fabric, a single dark hair caught in the dent of the pillow the only proof he had ever been there at all.

John swallowed, even that small hint of Sherlock setting bitter shame loose in his stomach, burning up his throat like bile, and he closed his eyes, resting his forehead on his knees as he drew his legs up in front of him, breathing down into the duvet and telling himself for the hundredth time that he hadn’t had any other choice.

Up to a point, that was true, Mycroft’s men having barged into his dormitory mere moments after John had ended the call, unceremoniously dragging him out, a hand he’d been tempted to bite clasping over his mouth when he’d tried to ask where they were going.

“Stay quiet,” the man behind him had hissed, John’s feet barely touching the ground as the four armed agents hurried him through a maze of corridors, taking the most indirect route to avoid prying eyes.

John hadn’t had any choice there, nor when he was practically tossed into the back of a car waiting in the loading zone behind the school kitchen, his body landing hard on the black leather seats before the door was slammed behind him, the car charging forward a few moments later with such force, he
nearly lost his balance, clutching onto the nearest seatbelt for support. “What the hell-”

“Stay down, Mr. Watson!” someone in the front seat snapped, and John fell silent, strangers adding titles to your name generally an indication that you weren’t in a position to argue.

Looking up through the window in front of him, he could see only sky for a time, and then some distinct trees came into view, the towering oaks John knew flanked the entrance, and, sure enough, there was a heavy thump as they rolled too quickly over the gutter, John holding on for dear life as the car turned out onto the street, moving swiftly away from the school. A few moments later, he started to creep up to sitting, the car no longer seeming to be speeding and no one yelling at him anymore, but a loud sound behind them caused him to bolt upright, spinning around to look frantically out the rear window.

“Mr. Watson!”

The cloud moved in slow motion, a swirl of black smoke rising high into the sky, the bottom tinged with yellow and orange as flames rolled up with the debris, but then the car turned a corner, cutting off John’s view of everything but the thick cloud slowly spreading out like a blanket over the rugby pitch he knew would lay just below.

“Mr. Watson, you need to get down!”

Immediately, sirens started to wail, the high pitch of police cars mingling with the bellow of firetrucks, and John watched as people on the street around them turned to stare, some clutching their hands to their mouths, their children to their sides, while others took off running, no doubt worried for the fate of their loved ones who resided at the school.

“MR. WATSON!”

John turned, tracking the progress of an ambulance that was racing toward them, its sirens reaching a deafening volume before it passed, lights reflecting off the stopped cars before it squealed around the corner toward the school’s entrance, but John knew it wouldn’t be needed, knew there would be no one to save.

“Mr. Watson, please!”

Hands shaking, body numb, John dropped back down to the cold leather, staring blankly up at the clouds rolling by overhead as the car made its way toward London.

He was dead.

He was dead.

And Sherlock…

John opened his eyes, lifting his chin as he looked out once again at his room, the room he’d stayed in more times than he could count, but it looked so different now, darker, like the paint itself was wasting away before his eyes, its color drawing back into the wall.

What was he going to say?

Distracted as he was by the daunting prospect of explaining himself to his…whatever Sherlock wanted to be anymore, it was some time before he noticed the large suitcase just inside the door, the same one he’d brought with him when he’d first moved into Kingsley. It was stuffed full once again, and, as he pushed off the blankets, quietly crossing the room and unzipping the luggage, it proved to
be filled with all the same things, the past eight months of his life packed in neat rows and lines before him. It was strange, seeing so much time folded up with his books and jumpers, and he wondered what the dorm must look like now, his side washed clean of his presence, as if he’d never been there at all. Which had, of course, been the idea, Mycroft having told him about Lestrade organizing a small group of people to remove all of John’s things that very first day, just in case Sherlock had to come back for any reason, and supposed that was thoughtful, in a way, but it was still an odd feeling, knowing he had been erased.

The question now was whether it would stay that way, Mycroft already in the process of delaying the reopening of the school a few extra days, but, once their time was up, if Moriarty hadn’t revealed himself, if John was still playing dead…

He shook his head, brushing off those thoughts for now as he reached into the suitcase, pulling free a pair of jeans and the grey jumper Sherlock pretended wasn’t his favorite—a dirty trick he nevertheless hoped would help his cause. He changed quickly, rubbing at his stubble in the mirror, but the bathroom was downstairs, voices he could hear through the floorboards eliminating the possibility of sneaking down to shave, so, instead, he merely did his best with his hair before popping a few mints from the package in his suitcase, chewing hastily as he pulled open the door with a creak.

Instantly, the voices downstairs fell silent, and John winced, imagining he could hear Chopin’s funeral march playing as he descended the steps, trying to avoid the squeaky spots. The door into the living room was ajar, offering a slim peek of the room beyond, John’s view stretching just far enough to see a single socked foot resting on the carpet in front of where he knew Sherlock’s chair would be, and he sucked in a steeling breath, closing his eyes as he blew it out and pushed open the door.

Thankfully, Sherlock didn’t look at him when he entered, all but his curls hidden behind the day’s newspaper he held aloft in front of his face, and John was momentarily relieved at the reprieve before he noticed the story that was facing him on the front page: “School Explosion: Officials say gas leak to blame”.

John dropped his face, his fingers twitching as they clenched in and out of a fist at his side, but he shouldn’t have expected anything less.

Sherlock always was about as subtle as a brick.

“Okay,” came a voice from the kitchen, and John startled, whipping his head around to see Lyle entering through the glass doors, a steaming mug in hand, “I think I’ve got it right. Kettle said 98, and I steeped it for just over two minutes.”

Sherlock lowered the paper, quirking a brow down at the cup as Lyle placed it on the table with a proud click. “I didn’t say the first one was wrong,” he remarked, and Lyle shrugged a shoulder, the sleeve of his paint-smeared shirt shifting against his dark skin, a few streaks of blue also added to his arm for extra authenticity.

“No, you just didn’t say anything,” he replied, the little bit of his face John could see pulling up in a smile. “I’ve learned that amounts to the same thing.”

Sherlock chuckled, taking the tea from its coaster and cradling it beneath his chin, and John felt a sharp twist of unjustifiable jealousy in the pit of his stomach, annoyed beyond measure at a simple cup of tea he hadn’t been the one to make.

“Morning, Lyle,” he greeted with a nod as the man turned around, his brown eyes meeting John’s but a moment before staring straight ahead, chin lifting as he marched toward the stairs.
“Agent,” he snapped in reply, and John turned, watching the man’s back until it disappeared around the doorframe, a rumble of footsteps descending away from him before the exterior door closed with a pointed snap.

John stared at the floor, blinking down at the hardwood, his hand once again clenched at his side, and then his eyes caught on an unfamiliar splash of red in the corner of his vision, and he turned, frowning at the intruder.

It was only a new rug, but it still felt like an invasion, like something he should have been consulted on instead of the powers that be deciding to redecorate in his absence, to transform yet another place into a fresh world he’d never touched. Just as quickly as he’d narrowed his eyes at the intricate red and grey swirls, however, they sprung wide again, his mind finally piecing together why the new rug was there, and his gaze shifted to the spot beside the fireplace where Moran’s body had fallen, something growing cold within him as he stared at the now-clean expanse of floor, all evidence of his crime most certainly washed away.

He didn’t feel anything. Nothing apart from guilt over not being able to feel anything, but, still, he’d killed a man yesterday, watched his blood slowly pool out around him, smelled the stench of copper thicken in the air, and yet… And yet he knew, sure as he was standing here, that he wouldn’t bat an eye at doing it again, wouldn’t lose a solitary wink of sleep over that man’s death, and he drew in a deep breath, lifting his eyes away from the spot and trying not to think about how close he might be to the very monsters they worked so hard to catch.

Sherlock was watching him, or rather, paying attention, his eyes focused back on the folded paper he held aloft in one hand, but he clearly wasn’t reading it, his gaze settled on a fixed point on the page, and John smiled just slightly, a silent answer to the unasked question of if he was about to have a nervous breakdown. With that crisis apparently averted, Sherlock cleared his throat, flicking the paper back up to obscure his face as he pulled his tea into the makeshift fortress, and John bit back a sigh, dropping his eyes to the floor and shuffling into the kitchen.

He could feel Sherlock’s eyes on the back of his head as he made his tea, his fingers nearly losing their grip on the handle more than once at the sheer palpability of the tension in the air, but, every time he glanced into some reflective surface, hoping to catch Sherlock’s gaze in a spoon or a glass, the detective was back to staring at his paper, as if intent on making John question his sanity.

Several close calls with second-degree burns later, John walked back into the living room, hovering at the arm of his chair a moment before dropping down onto the familiar red upholstery, tapping his mug with soft clinks of nails on ceramic as he surveyed the room like a newcomer. He drew breath in three times to say something before he finally managed it, and, when he spoke, his voice was hoarse, the syllables grating out like wheels over gravel. “I, er- I think we-”

The front door opened again downstairs, both teenagers turning to the living room entrance as someone bounded up toward it, and then the haggard figure of Greg Lestrade burst into the room, the knot of his tie coming undone, and his eyes rimmed with red. Instantly, his gaze found John, who froze, blinking back at the sergeant’s stunned stare, and then lowered his cup to the small table beside his chair, rising warily to face the man.

“I, er-” he started when Lestrade didn’t speak, swallowing down at his bare feet where they shuffled against the soft new rug. “Greg, I-“

Suddenly, there were hands on his shoulders, yanking him forward, and he toppled into the sergeant’s chest with a muffled yip of surprise, the man’s arms closing around his back like a vice.

“Thank god,” he breathed, holding John too tightly for him to even attempt to reciprocate the
embrace, but Lestrade released him a moment later, moving his hands back to John’s shoulders as he held him out for examination. “When Mycroft told me, I- Well, I could hardly believe it! I mean, the evidence was so- And the DNA-” He shook his head in bewilderment, his palms slipping from John’s shoulders as he stepped back, still scanning over his form like he couldn’t trust its corporeality. “I can’t tell you how much I- And Sherlock,” he continued, voice breathy with relief as he turned to the detective, causing Sherlock’s jaw to stiffen and John’s stomach to roll with trepidation. “I can’t even imagine how- I mean, you’re probably- You must have been thrilled!”

Sherlock had remained seated so far through the proceedings, but he rose at that, levelling an icy look at the sergeant. “Must I?” he retorted, quirking a brow, and Lestrade seemed, too late, to have realized his mistake, the corners of his lips slowly abandoning their upward curves. Sherlock blinked, dropping his eyes from the sergeant’s as he turned back to the table, picking up his now empty cup and ambling toward the kitchen. “I’m afraid you missed all the cartwheels,” he remarked, passing between them, his back firmly turned to John, “but there’s talk of a parade later this week. That is”—he paused at the kitchen doorway, looking back at Lestrade’s pale face—“if we can fit it in around the funeral.” He smiled, a steel-edged curl of his lips that made John shiver, and then stepped away, clunking his cup down beside the kettle before disappearing down the hall, the sharp click of his bedroom door snapping back to their ears a few moments later.

John stared at the corner he’d vanished around, throat tight and jaw aching with tension as Lestrade blew out a heavy sigh.

“Well,” the man muttered, rocking back on his heels as he slipped his hands into his pockets, “that could’ve gone better.”

John huffed a bitter laugh, shaking his head as he dropped his face to the ground. “No,” he answered flatly. “No, it couldn’t’ve.”

Lestrade smiled, soft and pained with sympathy, but he did not argue, and, after a moment, John sighed, temporarily boxing away the guilt gnawing at his stomach as he met the sergeant’s gaze.

“Are you here about the shooting?” he asked, tipping a nod to indicate the fireplace behind him, but Lestrade shook his head.

“No, Mycroft already took care of all that. By which I mean, officially, it never happened,” he added with a pointed lift his brows, and John nodded, hardly troubled by adding another lie to the list. “I don’t really know why I’m here,” he continued with a shrug, glancing aimlessly over the room. “Got a call from Mycroft last night telling me to be here at 11. He didn’t say why,” he added, heading off the question John was just opening his mouth to ask, “just told me he needed to read me in on a few things. And that you were alive, of course.” He smiled, a gesture John managed to return, and then grew thoughtful, stepping closer as he dropped his voice. “How did you manage that, by the way?” he asked, looking back over his shoulder as if to check they were still alone. “Where’d you get the decoy body? And how’d you get the DNA to match?”

“Er,” John stalled, glancing down the corridor toward Sherlock’s room, imagining the detective’s ear pressed against the wooden door, but, thankfully, he was spared responding by Mycroft’s appearance at the top of the stairs.

“By switching your samples,” he said, striding into the room, his umbrella leading the way with soft clicks against the hardwood. “Everything you collected from the dorm for a comparison was swapped out with materials from the body double before it could be tested. As for getting the body,” he continued, shrugging a shoulder as he came to a halt at Lestrade’s side, “that was the easy part. Then it was simply a matter of changing a few of the particulars on Mr. Hooper’s autopsy report, and-”

“I don’t know if I’d call it ‘hacking’,” Mycroft replied. “I believe some degree of difficulty is required to merit that term.”

Lestrade spluttered a moment, his mouth moving with nonsensical syllables of outrage. “Mycroft, you-you can’t just-”

“Oh, please, we didn’t *look* at anything,” Mycroft dismissed, rolling his eyes, and Lestrade dropped his head, pinching at the bridge of his nose in a sure sign of an oncoming Holmes-headache, something John was all-too-familiar with. “Just changed the height and weight measurements to John’s in case Sher- In case someone noticed.”

There was an awkward pall as everyone avoided one another’s gaze, John fidgeting with the cuff of his jumper as Lestrade cleared his throat.

“Still,” Mycroft continued, tapping his umbrella on the floor for emphasis, “it might be time to update your network security. I could send some of my people over, if you’d like.”

“And, by that, you mean they’re already there,” Lestrade supposed, rolling his eyes when Mycroft smiled.

“Already finished, actually,” he amended, and Lestrade shook his head. “But, you know what they say: Better to ask forgiveness than permission.”

“I’m not sure you have much practice with either.”

The group jumped in tandem, necks twisting toward the kitchen doorway where Sherlock had silently joined them, his arms folded and ankles crossed as he leaned against the doorjamb.

“But, then again,” he added, sweeping upright and taking a few steps into the room, “what would I know?” He smiled, his lips curling with threat more than amusement, and John could feel the barometric pressure climbing in the room, every hair on his body rising with it.

Mycroft blinked, a small twitch in his jaw and readjustment of the umbrella in his hands the only outward signs of his discomfort, but the fact that he was showing anything at all spoke volumes.

“Sherlock,” he said stiffly, nodding in greeting as the boy halted a few feet from the group, positioning himself closest to Lestrade. “You look…better.”

“I could hardly look worse,” Sherlock retorted, eyes sparking, and Mycroft’s gaze flinched away, a swallow moving down his throat as his fingers tightened on the handle of his umbrella.

John could feel the tremor building in his hand, an old anxiety response he thought had faded away with his father years ago, and, though Sherlock hadn’t looked him square in the eye since his reappearance yesterday, John couldn’t tear his eyes away, staring at the stone grey irises even as he could feel himself growing colder for it. John Watson didn’t scare easily—for heaven’s sake, he’d *shot* a man yesterday!—but, when it came to facing a furious Sherlock Holmes, even standing between a police sergeant and the most influential man in Britain, John was *terrified*. He couldn’t quite identify why, Sherlock thinner and paler than ever as he stood before them, hardly an outwardly intimidating figure, but there was something in the set of his jaw, the glint in his eyes, the taut spring of his stance that rattled John to the core, strangling the air he desperately needed to drag into his lungs. At least he wasn’t the only one, Mycroft clearly just as anxious, but, from John’s perspective, that only made things worse.

Mycroft was an extremely powerful man, something John had learned even more clearly in the past
few days. If you ever ended up on the wrong side of him, you’d get a diplomatic smile, just enough
time to think you’d gotten away with it, and then a man with no name would shoot a bullet straight
through your heart from a rooftop hundreds of meters away.

Sherlock, however… Sherlock was unbridled, untamable, and completely unconcerned with
consequences. He was the hands around your throat, the poison burning through your veins, the
broken bones before the bullet, the added twist of the knife.

Mycroft may be a bolt of lightning, but Sherlock was the whole damn thunderstorm.

And there was no cover in sight.

“If you have some purpose for calling this meeting,” Sherlock continued, eyes on the ground as he
ambled across to John’s armchair, leaning against the upholstered back, “I suggest you get to it. I’m
not much in the mood for entertaining at the moment, and we’re completely out of tea sandwiches.”

Mycroft opened his mouth, defiant, and then closed it just as quickly as Sherlock quirked a brow,
silently begging him to try it. “I thought,” he began instead, turning his eyes to Lestrade, and John
focused on the sergeant as well, his fingers clenching to a fist as he fought not to turn to where
Sherlock was hovering in the blurry corner of his right eye, “all things considered, that you deserved
an explanation beyond a mere text message.”

“How thoughtful of you,” Sherlock remarked, John wincing while Mycroft managed to contain his
reaction to a slight shift of his jaw.

“And,” Mycroft continued, gaze shifting to John, “I also needed to discuss something with Mr.
Watson.”

“Mr. Watson?” Sherlock scoffed, and, derisive as it was, John’s heart still tumbled in his chest, those
words the closest so far that Sherlock had gotten to saying his name since his resurrection. “All that
quality time together, and you’re still not on a first-name basis? And here I thought friendship
bracelets couldn’t be far behind.”

Mycroft turned his head away, tongue pressing against the side of his cheek, while Lestrade simply
smiled, ducking the gesture to the ground as he coughed.

John, on the other hand, thought they might need to plan a funeral for him after all, his heartbeat
sending tremors through his ribs as his vision blurred. If his own nerves didn’t do him in, Sherlock
certainly didn’t seem like he’d have any qualms about finishing the job, and John swallowed, trying
to get ahold of himself even as his palms broke out in a cold sweat, Mycroft’s voice watery to his
ears when the man continued.

“Your sister hasn’t stopped calling,” he said bitterly, and John twitched a smiled, biting back an ‘I
told you so’. “Your mother and aunt still appear to be content with the text messages, but Harriet is
insisting on speaking to you. She called eight times yesterday alone.”

John nodded, not the least bit surprised. “Yeah, Harry’s never been good at taking ‘no’ for an
answer. Have Ebeling do it,” he advised, having expected this enough to already have a plan in
mind. “He sounds enough like me. Me with a bit of a cold, anyway. And make sure he nags her
about studying,” he added, and Mycroft nodded, prompting a disbelieving huff from Lestrade they
both turned toward.

“And here I thought the friendship bracelets were an exaggeration,” he muttered, eyes flicking
between them. “Tell me, where’d you get the matching tattoos?”
Sherlock snorted, turning away toward the kitchen before sharing an amused glance with Lestrade out of the corner of his eye, and the exchange hit John like a wrecking ball to the stomach, reminding him just how thick the battle lines had been drawn, and how firmly Sherlock was on the other side.

“Do you want to be read-in or not?” Mycroft snapped, but there was faint flush of pink around his collar, and Lestrade seemed to notice, not looking the slightest bit intimidated as he shrugged.

“If you like,” he replied, and Mycroft glared a moment before hissing a frustrated sigh.

“Well, to be honest,” he said, dropping his eyes to where his umbrella clicked against the ground, “there isn’t much I didn’t already explain to you this morning. We can’t move forward with anything more until Moriarty crawls out of his cave.”

“But you do have a plan?” Lestrade asked, and Mycroft nodded.

“Oh yes, of course—several, in fact—but it’s impossible to say which one we’re going to need. Needless to say, however, that John being alive will need to remain a secret for all of them.”

“Yeah, that’s one thing I don’t understand,” Lestrade said, shaking his head as he frowned at Mycroft. “You said we were supposed to pretend John was alive in order to draw Moriarty out, but now we’re actually…pretending we’re pretending he’s alive?” he murmured, finger shifting side-to-side through the air as he puzzled it out, but it must have made more sense to Mycroft than John because the elder Holmes nodded.

“It’s what we would do if John were genuinely dead,” he explained. “Try to convince Moriarty that his plan had failed in order to lure him out to finish the job.”

John shifted his weight between the soles of his feet, growing increasingly uncomfortable with discussing his own hypothetical demise, but at least Sherlock looked mildly disquieted as well, the stiffness of his jaw a faint beacon of hope in a hurricane.

“So Moriarty is supposed to think John’s alive?” Lestrade pressed, blinking in befuddlement as Mycroft shook his head.

“No, he’s supposed to think John’s dead, that his plan succeeded.”

“Because we’re pretending it hasn’t?”

“Precisely.”

Lestrade stared at the taller man, lips slightly parted as his forehead creased, and Mycroft sighed, rolling his eyes to the ceiling.

“Pretending John is still alive is what we would do if John were dead,” he added on, accompanying the explanation with rather patronizing hand gestures that Lestrade narrowed his eyes at. “So, by putting on the charade, we make it appear as though Moriarty has succeeded, because, if John actually were still alive, logic dictates that’s not the impression we would be giving.” He fell silent, watching Lestrade carefully as the sergeant continued to stare at him in silence, and was just opening his mouth to continue when Lestrade burst in.

“But how is double-bluffing supposed to draw Moriarty out?” he asked. “If the point was to have him show himself to finish John off,” he added, waving a hand in John’s direction, “how is making him think John’s dead going to help? He’d have no reason to poke his head out of his foxhole then.”

“Gloating,” Sherlock succinctly supplied, looking around at the group as they turned to him, though
he continued to look past John. “And whatever the rest of his plan is.”

“The rest?” Lestrade echoed in disbelief, and Sherlock nodded, the epitome of unconcerned other than a slight pinching around his eyes.

“I couldn’t say what it is yet,” he admitted with a shake of his head, “but I’m sure this isn’t the grand finale. That’s been years in the making, long before I ever even met- went to Langley,” he amended, and John dropped his eyes, pretending—though likely in vain—not to notice Sherlock’s fingers twitching at the slip. “He stole those files on the Carl Powers case, remember? A mere blown-up locker room is most certainly not his endgame.”

“Mere?” Lestrade spluttered, gaping at the boy. “There was nothing mere about it! And he wasn’t just trying to blow up the locker room, he was trying to kill John!”

“Shocking as this may be to you, Sergeant,” Sherlock retorted, tongue tapping over the ‘t’, “I did manage to put that together without the assistance of Scotland Yard’s finest.”

Lestrade blinked, surprised a moment before his mouth opened, forehead wrinkling with offense, but Mycroft interrupted, sparing Greg the evisceration his reply likely would have induced.

“What do you think his plan is?” he asked, and Sherlock sniffed, shaking his head with a wry smile.

“I have no idea,” he said, the heavy resignation in his tone clearly directed toward more than just Moriarty, and they all fell silent as Sherlock started back toward the kitchen, John feeling two sets of eyes boring into him as he watched the back of Sherlock’s retreating head. “Was there anything else?” he asked, flicking on the kettle before leaning over a book resting on the kitchen table, his forehead furrowed as if in deep concentration, but his eyes never moved.

Mycroft and Lestrade both glanced at John, a mixture of pity and encouragement wrapped up in their weak smiles and creased brows.

“No,” Mycroft said, shaking his head, and then lifted up his umbrella, turning toward the stairs, “not at the moment, but I’ll keep you informed of our progress.”

“Of course you will,” Sherlock muttered, eyes still fixed on what, from John’s angle, appeared to be a blank page, and Mycroft stopped, fidgeting with the handle of his umbrella as he stepped back into Sherlock’s view through the kitchen door.

“Sherlock, I-” he stammered, adjusting the knot of his tie. “I hope- I hope you understand it was never my intention to…to harm you in any way.”

Sherlock blinked down at the barren notebook, his fingers curling against the grain of the wooden table. “Yes, well,” he clipped, spinning on his heels and crossing to the kettle, his back turned completely now, “accidents will happen.”

Mycroft dropped his face, fingers tapping against his umbrella a moment before he lifted his chin, starting again toward the door. “Well, I’d best be going,” he said, his smile thin as he turned in the doorway, looking between John and Lestrade. “No shortage of work with elections coming up.”

They nodded, Mycroft returning the gesture before taking his leave, and then both turned to Sherlock, following the man’s back as he made tea at a pace that would make watching paint dry look like a nail-biter.

“I should head out too,” Greg muttered, giving John a look of simultaneous encouragement and pity as he began backing slowly across the room. “I’ve seen toddlers shorter than the pile of paperwork
on my desk. If you, er, need anything,” he added, volume climbing to more clearly include Sherlock in the sentiment, “just gimme a ring. Or let one of the officers outside know; they’ll get me the message.”

John smiled, giving the man a single deep nod. “Thank you, Sergeant,” he said, and Lestrade chuckled.

“You know, at this point,” he said with a fond shake of his head, “I’m half-convinced you’re doing that on purpose.”

John frowned, tilting his head a moment before dropping his face with a shy smile. “Thank you, Greg,” he amended, and Lestrade beamed, giving him a wink as he bobbed his head and turned to go.

“Lestrade!” Sherlock called out, crossing to lean out the doorway of the kitchen as Greg turned around. “I- Can you tell Anderson?” he asked sharply, and John stared at the side of his face, mouth agape. “About…this?” he added, tipping his head just slightly in John’s direction, and John narrowed his eyes, trying to remind himself he had no right to be offended even as his hand clenched at his side.

“Anderson?” Lestrade echoed, frowning at the detective. “Why would you want-”

“Can you do it or not?” Sherlock snapped, and Lestrade closed his mouth, spine straightening.

“I’ll have to check with your brother,” he replied, and Sherlock nodded, lips twitching with a mirthless smile.

“Naturally,” he said, and then spun back toward the kitchen. “Don’t tell him I wanted him to know, though,” he added, moving out of Lestrade’s sight as he returned to the kettle, but John could still see him, watching the man’s pale fingers meticulously stir sugar into his tea with a silver spoon. “He’s already insufferable enough as it is.”

Lestrade frowned at the wall Sherlock’s voice was coming through, turning to John with a question in the quirk of his brows, but John could only shrug, not in much of a position to know anything going on in Sherlock’s mind at the moment. “I’ll see what I can do,” he finally said, giving John another parting smile. “You two take care of yourselves,” he advised, talking over his shoulder as he moved toward the exit. “I’ll call you when we have something.” He then rounded the corner, his footsteps thumping down the stairs before the front door clicked shut behind him, and, in the absolute silence of the flat, John could hear the car pulling away, his pulse picking up as he realized he was once again alone with Sherlock.

Sherlock, however, appeared untroubled, dropping his spoon into the sink with a clatter before settling in behind his microscope, slurping at his tea as he flipped through the pages of his notebook.

John hovered in the living room, his hand stretching and clenching against his thigh with hesitation, and then tentatively ventured forward, stalling at the doorjam as he looked down at the detective. “Um,” he murmured, scraping his teeth over his bottom lip as he struggled for what to say next, though he wasn’t sure Sherlock would be listening regardless, the man half turned away and focused down the lens of his microscope as he spun at dials on the side. “Sherlock, I- I think we should-”

“In case it’s escaped your notice,” Sherlock interjected, leaning away from the eyepiece a moment to scribble a notation in the margin of a lined page, “I’m rather busy at the moment.”

“With what?” John asked, or at least intended to ask, but some of his mounting frustrating
inadvertently leaked into the syllables, causing his tone to snap and Sherlock’s fingers to halt mid-twist on a dial. John swallowed, twisting his hands together in front of him, a few knuckles popping loudly in the silence. “I-I mean, is it for a case?”

“No,” Sherlock replied, swapping out the current slide, his eyes never lifting from the lens.

John bit his lip, toes tapping erratically on the threshold. “So then, do you think you could…take a break?”

“Why?” Sherlock answered, scrawling another small phrase in his notebook, and John blew out a steadying sigh, shuffling further into the room.

“So we can talk.”

“About?”

“Sherlock.”

“What?” the man bit, jolting back from the microscope as he flicked his pencil down against the notebook with a snap. “What do you want to talk about?”

John blinked, incredulous, an irritated furrow forming between his brows as he stared down at the man, who was still carefully avoiding his gaze. “I think that’s pretty obvious,” he answered, and Sherlock turned away, jaw shifting as he looked toward the fridge. “Sherlock, we- We have to talk about what happened.”

“Why?” Sherlock muttered, turning back, his eyes settled somewhere to the left of John’s waist. “What good would it do?”

John shook his head, stepping forward with a huff of disbelief. “What good would it- Sherlock, we need to sort this out!”

“Actually,” Sherlock snipped, dragging his tea off the table to cradle it in front of his chest, “I think I have it pretty well sorted. You fake your death in a fiery explosion, move in downstairs while I slowly lose my mind, and then rise from the ashes wanting everything to go back to normal so you don’t have to feel guilty about it.” For the first time all day, Sherlock looked him in the eye, levelling a smug look up at John’s slack-jawed expression. “Did I leave anything out?” he inquired, quirking a brow as he took a sip of his tea, and then was suddenly walking away, spinning up from his chair and heading toward the safety of his bedroom before John could so much as blink.

“Wait!” John spluttered, dodging the now-vacant chair to follow after him. “Sherlock, we-we can’t just- We have to talk about this!”

“I don’t have anything to say.”

“Like hell you don’t!” John challenged, and Sherlock stopped halfway down the corridor, twisting back with eyes blazing.

“What do you want me to say, John?” he spat, and John’s frustration faltered, his mind lingering on the desperately missed sound of his name passing Sherlock’s lips, although with none of the usual fondness. “What, precisely, do you want to hear?”

“I- Nothing,” John replied, shaking his head as he dared a step closer. “I mean, nothing in particular, I just- I just wanna know what you’re thinking.”
Sherlock snorted, looking to the wall as he shook his head with a mirthless smile. “No,” he said, voice almost as cold as his eyes when they met John’s, “you really don’t.”

“Yes, I do!” John rebutted, lunging forward as Sherlock made to turn away again. “Sherlock, please, you-you have to let me explain!”

“Oh, do I?” Sherlock blustered, eyes wide with outrage, and John cringed, internally berating himself for the truly abysmal choice of words.

“I-I didn’t mean-”

“Because I thought,” Sherlock charged on, a small portion of tea splashing over the side of his cup as his hands moved erratically, “seeing as I’m the one who was told you were dead for three days, I might get to decide what I do or do not have to do.”

“Sherlock-”

“But, seeing as you seem to have returned from the great beyond with divine insight into what’s best for me-”

“Dammit, Sherlock!” John snarled, charging a few steps closer. “Will you just listen!? I’m not trying to-to tell you what to do, I just- I just want you to understand!”

“I do understand,” Sherlock interrupted, the anger gone from his voice, but it was replaced with something even more disturbing, a bitter sort of resignation John didn’t want to ever hear from his mouth again. “Moriarty needed to believe you were dead, and I wouldn’t have been convincing enough if I’d known you weren’t. It was the only logical thing to do,” he said evenly, eyes never leaving John’s. “If it had been the other way around, I would’ve done the same thing.”

John frowned, scanning between Sherlock’s eyes, but there was nothing there, a thick sheet of grey-blue ice covering any hint of emotion. “Then why are you-”

“I don’t know,” Sherlock snapped, dropping his gaze, the sudden irritation creasing his forehead seeming to be directed more at himself than John for the moment. He blinked, the faint hiss of a breath reaching John’s ears as the detective’s shoulders lifted. “I have a few cases left from the batch Lestrade brought over,” he said, nodding backward at his bedroom door, and John’s stomach sank, recognizing the clear dismissal. “Tell Mrs. Hudson not to disturb me when she brings up supper,” he added, but John knew who was really supposed to get the message.

Still, as Sherlock opened his bedroom door, turning around and readying to shut it between them, John stepped forward, giving it one more try. “Do you…want any help?” he murmured, and Sherlock’s fingers curled around the edge of the door, his face turning inward to the bedroom as a swallow rolled down his throat.

“No,” he answered, shaking his head, the raw torment in his glittering eyes stopping John’s heart when they fixed on him. “I’ll be fine on my own.”

John blinked, his lips dropping apart as the whole corridor seemed to spin, sending nausea rolling through his stomach, and, by the time the dizziness had subsided, Sherlock was gone, nothing but a paneled door staring back at John’s bloodless face. He tried to breathe, gulping air into his lungs, but it seemed to grow thinner the harder he pulled at it, and he staggered backward, arm snapping out to brace him against the wall.

*I’ll be fine on my own.*
John swallowed, the thought of how embarrassing throwing up in the corridor would be the only thing that kept him from doing it, and stared at the door in front of him, debating if it was worth facing Sherlock’s wrath and charging in, because Sherlock couldn’t have meant- couldn’t possibly want-

His knees quaked, and John turned, leaning his back against the wall as he panted down at his feet.

Had Sherlock just… broken up with him?

He shut his eyes, trying to regulate his breathing, but it was no good, the walls of the corridor still seeming to be closing in around him, and, in a fit of panic, John bolted, skidding on the hardwood as he rounded the corner and started down the stairs. Just shy of the bottom, he realized he had nowhere to go, the world outside 221B Baker Street forbidden to him until they found Moriarty, and sank down to the steps where he stood, balancing his arms on his knees as he cradled his head in his hands.

Several thumps sounded at his left, followed by the creak of a door, and John turned just as Lyle poked his head out of 221C, casting his gaze around the foyer before his eyes widened on John.

“Oh, it’s you,” he said, surprised, but not mean-spirited, and John supposed that was the best he could hope for from anyone right now. “Thought it might be Sherlock trying to make a run for it. Or a herd of elephants,” he added with a smile, and John huffed a frail laugh, shaking his head down at the steps.

“Nope,” he muttered, shrugging a shoulder as he looked back to the man, “just me.”

Lyle smiled again, but things quickly turned awkward, and John took a deep breath, determined to douse at least one burning bridge today.

“Look, Lyle, I- I’m sorry about… everything,” he murmured, watching his fingers twist together between his knees. “I didn’t- I didn’t want to lie to you, but- Well, I didn’t have much choice.” He glanced at the man out of the corner of his eye, and then turned fully as he saw him nod.

“I know you didn’t,” he said, a corner of his mouth lifting with reassurance. “Truth be told, I think I was more upset with myself for not figuring it out,” he added, a breathy chuckle tangling with the words. “I mean, for starters, you look about 12,” he quipped, grinning as John laughed, “and then there were the faces.”

“Faces?” John inquired, and Lyle nodded, leaning his hip against one of the balusters as he folded his arms.

“Whenever we could hear Sherlock,” he explained, nodding up toward the ceiling. “They were more obvious when he was shouting or something, but, sometimes, even just him walking around would put this real funny look on your face, like something was screaming inside.”

John tried to swallow the bitter taste in his mouth, looking down at the step beneath his feet.

“At the time, I thought you just felt bad for him. Maybe were still a bit too new to be used to that sort of thing. Wasn’t until Mr. Holmes told me who you were that I realized it hadn’t been pity at all.” He lifted his chin, locking eyes with John through the railing. “It was guilt,” he finished, and John dropped his gaze, feeling the back of his neck heating with shame.

“I’m sorry,” he murmured, and Lyle smiled, giving him another deep nod.

“Apology accepted,” he chirped, reaching through the railing to clap him on the shoulder, and John
chuckled, watching the man as he moved toward the front door. “I was just about to run to Tesco,” he said, hand hovering on the doorknob. “You guys need anything upstairs?”

“I dunno,” John mumbled, twitching a shoulder. “Probably milk. We always need milk.”

Lyle laughed, beginning to twist the handle before John called him back.

“Actually,” he beckoned, and Lyle turned with a rising brow, “if it’s not too much trouble, can you check if they have any cherry bakewells?” He smiled at Lyle’s curious frown, shrugging a shoulder. “Sherlock likes them,” he added, and the man nodded in understanding, hand returning to the doorknob.

“I’ll have a look,” he assured, lingering just long enough to catch John’s thanks before passing through the door, the lock clunking into place behind him.

John stared vacantly at the wood for several blinks, and then sighed, dropping his head as he gripped into his hair. Was he really so desperate as to sink to baked goods to win back Sherlock’s affections? It would appear so, and John grimaced down at the dark wood beneath him, disgusted with himself.

He’d known Sherlock would be mad, of course, might have even expected a blow or two, but a breakup? No, it couldn’t be, it just couldn’t. Sure, John had faked his death, but only for a few days, and Sherlock had lied to him for months about Moriarty and the murders, not to mention the drugs. John hadn’t threatened to leave, hadn’t so much as considered it, and, if he could get past all that, surely Sherlock could forgive him for this. Right?

He groaned, leaning back on his elbows as he let his head loll behind him, eyes blinking up at the ceiling as those bitter thoughts were drowned in a fresh wave of shame.

This wasn’t the same thing. He’d known that deep-down, wondered in the wee hours of the morning—when Sherlock’s footsteps could be heard creaking across the floorboards overhead—if there’d be anything to come back to, but, as much as he’d worried, strategizing for countless scenarios his mind had concocted, he’d never really thought it would happen.

It was too impossible a thing to consider, Sherlock not being in his life anymore. Now that he had to think about it, however, it was terrifying, like the entire future he’d subconsciously been counting on was suddenly yanked out from under him, leaving him standing on the edge of a cliff, and, looking down over the precipice, John saw only darkness, a bleak unknown stretching on as far as his mind could imagine. Scarier still was the realization that, maybe, for Sherlock, that future wasn’t bleak at all.

He had thought John was dead, after all. Had he made plans, sculpted out a new John-less life for himself once Moriarty was taken care of? Would he leave, start anew someplace far away with streets John had never walked and corners he would never be around?

It was one thing to imagine no longer dating Sherlock—although John could only push himself so far as to consider them taking a break, a permanent dissolution of the relationship too much for his already cracking heart to contemplate—but Sherlock leaving entirely, packing his things and abandoning London, the walls of 221B left to hold only memories? John couldn’t imagine it, genuinely couldn’t force his mind to wrap around a world where Sherlock Holmes didn’t leave chemical burns on the kitchen table, didn’t charge into Scotland Yard at least three times a week, didn’t always order the same thing from the same Chinese place and then end up mostly just eating the prawn crackers.

And it was selfish, John knew it was, but how was he supposed to stay in London if Sherlock left;
how could he be expected to learn to walk alone the streets they’d walked together? How could he pass the scenes of crimes they’d solved, the coffee shops they’d dropped into, the restaurants they’d bickered at, Baker Street, Regent’s Park, Hamley’s, even Big Ben for chrissake!? How could he go to Bart’s, sit in those classrooms every day, and know he was only there because Sherlock had sent in the application, had believed in him enough to not let him settle for less?

Without his knowledge or permission, Sherlock Holmes had seeped into every aspect of John’s life, tearing down all but the foundation and building everything anew, and the thought that it could be over, that Sherlock wanted it to be over, wanted a future John had no claim to…

He drew in a shuddering breath, slowly hissing it out as he blinked, trying to quell the burning in his eyes. There was no use feeling sorry for himself.

He’d only be getting what he deserved.

“Oh!”

John turned, finding the startled face of Mrs. Hudson peering at him through the balusters.

“Sorry, dear,” she said, lowering her hand from her chest as she smiled. “Didn’t see you there. Was that you I heard going out?”

“No,” John answered, looking back toward the foot of the steps as he shook his head, hoping the woman wouldn’t notice the sheen over his eyes. “Lyle. I’m confined to quarters.”

“Oh, yes, of course,” she muttered with a nod. “Must have slipped my mind.”

John hummed in acknowledgement, continuing to stare down the stairs as he nodded, but Mrs. Hudson did not return to her flat as he’d hoped, instead drawing closer to his shoulder.

“Are you alright?” she asked, her eyes flicking up to the landing behind him. “I-I heard some shouting earlier.”

John swallowed, turning his chin away. “It was nothing,” he croaked, clearing his throat before continuing. “I’m fine.”

Mrs. Hudson did not reply, her blurry silhouette lingering on the opposite side of the railing, and then she moved with a sigh, rounding the newel post and silently climbing up to his side. When her feet reached the step just below him, she turned, bracing herself on the wall as she lowered to sitting beside him, the sleeve of her floral-print blouse brushing against his arm. She did not speak, and John didn’t either, staring blankly forward as he gathered his courage, and then, with a determined inhale, he broke the silence.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you,” he murmured, and Mrs. Hudson shifted at his side, her knee bumping lightly with his own.

“It’s alright,” she assured, soft with sincerity, “I know you couldn’t.”

John glanced at her out of the corner of his eye, watching as the woman twisted her fingers into the grey fabric of her skirt where it draped over her lap.

“Sherlock knows too,” she added, and John’s teeth clenched at the knife-twist in his stomach. “He just- He needs a bit of time,” she assured, turning her face to smile at him. “He’ll come around.”

John swallowed, hanging his head as he stared down at the dark wooden steps. “I’m not so sure,” he
murmured, and Mrs. Hudson elbowed him lightly on the arm, prompting him to meet her warm gaze.

“Well, I am,” she said, beaming when John managed a small smile in return. “So, I suppose I’ll just have to be sure enough for the both of us,” she added, slinging an arm around his shoulders and rattling him against her side, and John laughed, his leaden heart lightening a small fraction as he turned his face up toward her.

“Thank you, Mrs. Hudson,” he said, and the woman nodded, giving his shoulder two gentle taps before withdrawing her arm.

“Anytime, dear,” she chirped, flashing a bright grin before pushing herself up to standing, brushing smooth the pleats of her skirt as John rose up beside her. “Now, why don’t you come down for a cuppa? Keep an old woman company,” she offered, and John chuckled, slipping one hand into the pocket of his jeans, the other resting on the railing.

“I didn’t know you had Mrs. Turner over,” he quipped, and Mrs. Hudson giggled, swatting him on the shoulder as she started down the steps.

“Oh, you,” she muttered, rattling her head, but John could see the smile still tugging at her lips, and, with his own lifting in response, he followed her down the stairs, grateful for the temporary escape from his own racing thoughts.

*****

The flames licked up the walls as he ran down the smoke-filled corridor, dodging the chunks of wood and plaster raining down on him from all sides. Turning to look back over his shoulder, Sherlock saw the fire gaining on him, and tried to speed up, panting as he raced for the door up ahead, but, no matter how hard he pushed, his body still seemed to move in slow motion, the flames crawling ever-closer while the door remained too far away. He dimly recognized the place—the upstairs corridor that led to the library of his first boarding school—but there wasn’t time to think about how he’d gotten back there now, the fire already licking at his heels, though he could not feel the heat of it. The terror was real enough, however, and he tried to run faster, throwing himself forward through the smoke he couldn’t smell, but coughed on nonetheless.

“Sherlock?”

His eyes widened on the door up ahead, the wood rattling against the frame as it shook on its hinges.

“Sherlock, are you alright?” John called again, pounding harder now, and Sherlock opened his mouth, trying to cry out, but no sound broke free from his smoke-clogged throat. “Sherlock, can you hear me?”

The walls on either side of him began to crumble, fissures forming over the charred wallpaper as the cracks overtook him in the race to the door.

“Sherlock!?”

Suddenly, the ground beneath him shifted, and he stumbled, his eyes darting down to see the floorboards burning away to ash. Frantic, he lunged forward, diving for the door, but his fingertips fell just short of the handle, and then he was falling, limbs thrashing as he was finally able to scream into the smothering darkness.

“SHERLOCK!?”

He only heard the latter half of his gasp, already flinging upright in bed before he opened his eyes,
and then blinked wildly around, his lungs heaving as his heart thumped through his limbs.

“It’s okay, it’s okay!” urged a familiar voice beside him, and Sherlock turned, meeting John’s concerned gaze from where the boy perched on the edge of his mattress. “It was just a dream,” he assured, and Sherlock blinked hard at him, wondering why John’s face refused to come into focus before he realized there was something cold rolling down his cheek, and he lifted a trembling hand, fingertips brushing against the still-damp tear tracks on his skin. “You’re safe now,” John continued, reaching a hand out toward Sherlock’s thigh. “There’s nothing to be-”

“Don’t!” Sherlock spouted, jolting away from the comforting touch, palm outstretched to hold John at bay, and the blond instantly recoiled, eyes wide and expression stricken. “Don’t touch me!” he added with a snarl, but he could feel the adrenaline filtering from his veins, exhaustion filling in the gaps, and he curled his legs up in front of him, wrapping his arms around his ankles as he dropped his forehead to his knees. Breathing deeply, he tried to collect himself, pulling the sleeve of his hoodie over his palm as he scrubbed away any lingering tears, but there was nothing he could do to calm the frantic pounding of his heart, especially when he remembered it was John’s old rugby hoodie he was wearing, and embarrassment lodged thick and hot in his throat. “What are you doing in here?” he snapped, growing defensive in his humiliation, but John somehow managed to look even more uncomfortable, shifting his weight on the edge of the mattress as he wrung his hands in his lap.

“I- Well, I thought- I heard you talking,” he stammered, glancing up through a veil of pale lashes. Sherlock scoffed, sneering across at the boy. “Last time I checked, I was perfectly capable of talking without your super-”

“No, it-it’s not that,” John interjected, shaking his head. “I-I heard- You were saying…my name,” he murmured, and the bottom of Sherlock’s stomach fell clear through the earth to New Zealand. “I thought you were calling for me.”

Sherlock snorted, a frail façade that wouldn’t even have fooled Anderson, let alone John. “That’s ridiculous,” he dismissed, rattling his head as he looked away to the wall. “You must have been hearing things.”

John did not reply, and Sherlock didn’t dare turn around to see the look on his face, but he felt the moment John was about to speak—a slight shift in the mattress springs, a whispered hiss of breath. “Sherlock-”

“I’m sorry to have woken you,” he interjected, keeping his head turned from John as he adjusted the blankets. “It won’t happen again. Now, if you’ll excuse me”—he laid down on his side, pulling the duvet up over his shoulder as he spoke to the wall—“I’d very much like to get back to sleep.” He steadied his breathing, trying to calm his heart enough to be able to hear over it, the soft sounds of John’s breath and rustling of his clothes being smothered by the rhythmic beat.

“Right,” John quavered, the springs squeaking as his weight lifted, sock-muffled footsteps retreating slowly to the door, “of course. I’ll, er... I’ll be next door, if-if you need me.”

“Why would I need you?” Sherlock spat before he could think better of it, a familiar flare of fury making yet another sudden and irrepressible appearance.

The room fell silent, John’s footsteps stopping in the doorway as the soft clicks of his hand hesitating on the handle drifted through the blanket to Sherlock’s ear.

“No reason,” he breathed, his voice shattering over the words, and Sherlock flinched as the door shut
behind him, equal parts guilty and angry at himself for feeling guilty.

He didn’t have anything to be sorry about; John deserved everything he got and then some. Still, shame prickled over Sherlock’s skin, plucking at him until he threw his blankets off with a burst of nervous energy and a huff, bending one arm behind his head as he blinked up at the ceiling.

He wasn’t being fair. Not that he shouldn’t be mad at John—he was perfectly within his right to be furious for a long time yet, and he planned to milk every last second of it—but being cruel just for the sake of it, striking for the throat just to watch John squirm? That was vindictive, and, while he usually granted himself clemency with such things, holding the possibility of a breakup over John’s head like a phantom guillotine was going too far, even for him. If he actually intended to follow through with it, that would be one thing, but he’d never so much as considered it, not for a moment, not even with the reams of just cause staring him in the face. No, he had said those things just to hurt, just to make John as miserable as he was, but he didn’t exactly want to hurt John, not really. Trouble was, Sherlock had no idea what he did want.

He wanted John to feel guilty, which he clearly did. He wanted John to apologize, which he had. Sure, he wanted to leave John dangling for a while, petty as that may be, but he’d never intended it to go on forever, or even for this long.

He’d slept very little the first night John had been back, waking up in the middle of the night to roll over and watch the blond sleep, taking in the steady rise and fall of his chest, the subtle shifts of his lips and twitches of his lashes, tiny signs that he was really there, still-beating heart and all. He’d thought about it then, puzzled everything out, and come to terms with the fact that there really had been no other choice, that John and Mycroft had done the only thing that made any sense, the only thing that would’ve worked. Armed with that understanding, he’d expected the next day to be a simple matter of an extraordinarily awkward conversation, but, when John had come downstairs that morning, all rational thought had left him, leaving only simmering rage in its wake, and Sherlock could not for the life of him figure out how to stop it.

There was nothing more John could do, nothing more Sherlock could ask for. He didn’t want him to beg or cry or perform some grand gesture of penance, he just wanted… Well, he had no idea what he wanted, but he knew he didn’t want to see red every time John walked into the room, to feel the need to scream whenever John opened his mouth, to be unable to look him in the eye without his fingers twitching to throw something that would make a satisfying smashing sound. It felt like there was a tornado constantly spinning inside him, the force fighting against the bonds of his body, trying to break free, and, no matter how many cases Sherlock solved, insults he lobbed, or pillows he launched across his bedroom, he couldn’t tame it. And it was driving him mad!

John’s footsteps came back down the stairs, the pattern of travel Sherlock had heard through the floor suggesting he’d gone up to gather some clothes, and then moved down the corridor toward him, the creak and click of the bathroom door following a moment later. The shower came on shortly thereafter, and Sherlock busied himself with getting up to pick out his own clothes, trying not to think about the particulars as he heard the rhythm of the water stutter with John’s entrance, the shower curtain scraping shut after him.

John came back from the dead more attractive, Sherlock was sure of it, although most of that could likely be attributed to the whole assassinating a trained assassin to save his life thing.

Which, when he thought about it, was probably something he should be concerned about, being more attracted to someone after you watch them kill a man.

But that marksmanship!
Sherlock blinked, rattling his head as he plucked a pair of socks from his index, drawing from the darker end of the navy spectrum.

Yeah, he definitely needed help.

He got changed while John was in the shower, but waited some time before leaving his room, listening to the man moving about in the kitchen, the fridge door opening and closing several times as the coffee maker gurgled in the background. It was only when he heard a loud clang and a bitten-off curse that his curiosity got the better of him, and he stood, taking a moment to construct an apathetic expression before pulling open the door and striding down to the kitchen.

John didn’t notice him at first, grumbling to himself as he swatted at the white powder spattered across a sleeve of his deep red jumper, which gave Sherlock time to take in the scene before him, a moment he desperately needed.

His microscope and various other papers and petri dishes had been pushed off to one end of the table, stacked and sorted with obvious care. In their place were two large plates—one piled with waffles, the other with slightly burnt bacon—and a variety of syrups, whipped cream, and jams, the latter likely intended for the toast that sprung up at that moment, drawing John’s attention away from the powdered baking mix still clinging to his arm.

“Ah, fuck!” the blond hissed, dropping the hot toast onto a waiting plate as he swatted his hand in the air, and Sherlock bit his lip to hold back a snort, not quite ready to give up the appearance of cursing the ground John walked on, but it was probably ruined a second later anyway as John turned around with a start. “Jesus!” he spluttered, blowing out a breath as he pressed a hand to his sternum. “I didn’t hear you get up.”

Sherlock did not reply, instead turning his gaze out over the kitchen, a silent question John sprang to answer.

“Yeah, I, er,” he stammered, pointing toward the breakfast spread, and then curled his hand back in toward his body, closing his mouth as his tongue flicked nervously over his lips. “Mrs. Hudson has a waffle maker,” he blurted, as if that was supposed to explain it, and it was so abrupt, so strikingly charming, that Sherlock forgot himself for a moment, a quick bark of laughter slipping over his teeth. John blinked, eyes wide with disbelief, but swiftly collected himself, clearing his throat as he dropped his gaze. “I, um-” he muttered, waving a hand over the table as he placed the plated toast in an open spot. “You can just- I mean, if-if you- Yeah,” he blathered, and then practically flung himself back to the toaster, dropping in another couple slices of bread as Sherlock watched the back of his neck reddened.

Biting at his lip, Sherlock hesitated in the doorway, not quite sure what to do, but he couldn’t very well just leave, not while John was skittering around him like a scolded puppy, so he settled on shuffling into the room, taking the chair on the opposite side of the table from the counter the blond was now tapping with anxious impatience, his face downturned as his eyes fixed on the toaster.

In spite of this focus, John still jumped when the toast popped, his head flinging back in alarm before he cleared his throat, the blush reigniting in his cheeks as he wriggled the bread free with his fingertips. “Do you, er…” he murmured, flapping the warm bread at him in offering, but Sherlock shook his head, prompting John to nod and drop the slice onto his own plate. He hesitated then, shifting his weight between his feet as he looked between the living room and the seat opposite Sherlock at the table, his fingers twitching in and out of fists at his side. “I don’t have to- I mean, if you’d rather I didn’t- I can go somewhere else,” he offered, waving vaguely toward the living room. “The other table, or-or upstairs.”
 Sherlock bowed his head, twisting at the handle of the fork laid out beside his plate. “No,” he replied, shrugging a shoulder, eyes focused on a knot in the woodgrain, “it’s…it’s fine.”

John dithered another moment, his hands stalling on the back of the chair, and then pulled it out and sat in one sudden sweep, as if afraid the furniture might bolt if he didn’t take it by surprise. Or maybe it was Sherlock he was afraid might bolt, as he was now watching him warily out of the tops of his eyes, stretching his fork out to the plate of waffles with almost painful hesitation, like Sherlock could, at any moment, lash out at the encroachment.

Sherlock swallowed, turning his face away to reach for the bacon and grant himself a moment’s thought. He’d wanted to make John feel guilty, not send him into a nervous breakdown, but, just as he was contemplating how to even begin to break the glacier’s worth of ice, John started in, his tone stiff but trying as he scraped strawberry jam over his toast, the bread bowing under the pressure of his knife.

“Mrs. Hudson has some pictures she wants to hang later,” he said, delicately balancing his toast on the edge of his plate. “Wanted your help with it. Apparently, her level’s faulty.”

Sherlock smiled, dragging a waffle from the top of the stack to drop neatly down onto his plate. “The level’s fine,” he answered, reaching for the syrup. “Her eyes, on the other hand…” he added, tipping his head as he poured, and John chuckled, a fragile amusement that did not reach his downturned eyes when Sherlock chanced a glance.

“You can be the one to tell her that,” he teased, but the jest was hollow, a futile following of an archaic script.

Still, Sherlock smiled, however weakly, and then they lapsed into silence, the clinks of cutlery and sips of coffee the only sounds in the thrumming air between them.

It was almost unbelievable, how different a world they were living in now. Less than a week ago, he and John had been bickering over jumpers and Sherlock’s caffeine intake, curling up in their combined bed at night for the usual ritual of John nagging him to put socks on his frozen feet, but now… Now, he was sitting across the table from a stranger, or perhaps something even worse, John’s sameness almost mocking in its context.

John was wearing the same red jumper he’d worn the day before Christmas Eve, the day they’d gone to Hamley’s, the day he’d all-but-cornered Sherlock in his room and forced him to listen to the words he never thought he’d hear from anyone, and, while it looked exactly the same—small stain on the left shoulder and all—nothing else did. That moment at the manor felt so far from where they were now, Sherlock could almost believe it had never happened, that he’d simply watched it on TV or read it in a book and plugged he and John into the roles, because, surely, if they’d ever been there, they couldn’t have ended up here. Those were just not the same people; they couldn’t be.

And yet, there was John, a little worn, perhaps, but otherwise unchanged, and wearing that same stupid jumper like it was supposed to mean something, like it could resurrect a version of themselves they no longer were, and, just like that, Sherlock hated him again. He hated the gold glinting in his hair where it caught the light, the thin spots on his cuffs where his nervous habit of hooking his thumbs was steadily eroding the fabric, the clouded blue of his tired eyes, rimmed with shadows Sherlock couldn’t help but worry about, which only prompted his hatred to turn toward a more familiar target—himself.

He hated how much he still cared, how much he still needed. He hated sitting in his room most of the day yesterday, unable to focus on cases because he had to keep creeping to the door, making sure he could still hear John moving around. His heart leapt into his throat every time it fell silent, mind
always half-convinced he’d imagined the whole thing before John’s footsteps would thump across
the floor again, and he’d wilt against the door in a relief he could’ve wept with. He hated lying
awake last night, staring up at his ceiling as he listened to John toss and turn, wondering if he was
dreaming, if he was cold, if he knew Sherlock hadn’t meant it when he’d said he didn’t need him,
because god how he needed John Watson.

He needed him to make obvious observations so Sherlock could find the hidden ones, to remember
how long it had been since he’d last eaten, to patiently explain pop culture references, to understand
his jokes, to know he wanted the extra blanket even when he denied it, to tell him he was fantastic
instead of freakish, and to never ever die. And Sherlock wanted to tell him that, wanted to throw
himself across the table and scream and cry and cling until John understood just how desperately,
helplessly, helplessly lost he’d be without him, but, at the same time, a part of Sherlock suspected
that John had already known that.

And he’d still left.

And if he could do that, if he could sit two floors away and make Sherlock think he had to live
without him, and that didn’t tear him apart inside… Well, maybe this wasn’t what Sherlock had
thought it was, maybe John wasn’t what Sherlock had thought he was, and who knew what might
come next; Sherlock had to protect himself!

Not like anyone else was going to do it.

“Lestrade called this morning too. Well, last night, I suppose, but I got the message this morning,”
John said, shrugging a shoulder as he drew his coffee to his lips, and Sherlock’s fingers clenched
around his fork as he suppressed the urge to smack the mug from his hand. “Said he might drop by
later. He said something about paperwork, but I suspect he just wants to check up on us.” He smiled
down at his plate, and then lifted his eyes, the curl of his mouth collapsing almost comically as his
gaze met Sherlock’s.

Sherlock had no idea what his face was doing, but it must have been something significant, John’s
face paling as his eyes widened with the fear of god, and then his stare dropped away, a swallow
bobbing down his throat as he lowered his fork back to the plate with a soft clink.

“I- Did I…say something, or-” John stammered, but Sherlock cut him off with a scrape of his chair
as he stood, and John leaned back, blinking up at him with wide blue eyes that didn’t hold a fucking
clue.

“No,” Sherlock spat, jaw shifting as his fingers clenched. “No, you didn’t say anything.”

John’s forehead furrowed, his stupid lips turning down in a stupid frown. “Did I…not say som-

Sherlock rolled his eyes, turning around with a huff as he started for the corridor, but John was hot
on his heels, his chair rattling against the linoleum as he launched out of it.

“Wait!” he cried, throwing his arm out to block the door, and Sherlock blinked, startled out of his
anger a moment to marvel at the superhuman speed. “What-What happened?” John entreated, eyes
lost as they searched Sherlock’s face. “What did I do?”

“Really?” Sherlock deadpanned, dropping the blond a flat look, and then pushed his way by,
buckling John’s arm with a precise prod at the inside of his elbow.

“I mean right now,” John pressed, following after him, drawing as far up to Sherlock’s side as the
narrow corridor would allow. “What did I do just then? In the kitchen?”
“Overcooked the bacon.”

“Dammit, Sherlock!” John trumpeted, and Sherlock jumped, too shocked to put up a fight when John grabbed him by the bicep, yanking him to a halt. “What do you want from me!?” he blustered, but there was an undercurrent of helplessness to his tone, a rippling over the sparkling surface of his too-close eyes. “I try talking to you, you’re mad at me; I try leaving you alone, you’re still mad at me,” he urged, hands stabbing through the air. “I mean, what!? What do you want me to do!?” John was still shouting, but there was no anger left in his face, no frustration in his voice. He stared up at Sherlock, desperation laid bare in his bloodshot eyes, and Sherlock had to look away, swallowing hard as he turned his face toward the bedroom door. “Sherlock,” John whispered, shuffling closer across the hardwood. “Sherlock, please, just- Just tell me what to do.”

Sherlock looked up as the man’s voice broke, finding John scant inches away, his eyes awash with a swirling mixture of agony and fear.

Gently, John shook his head, drawing in a jagged breath. “Tell me what to do,” he pleaded, and Sherlock flinched his gaze away.

He didn’t know. All his life, he’d had the answers, held logic and reason in front of him like a shield against the questions that drove ordinary people to madness, but that logic had abandoned him now, leaving him to puzzle out for himself how it was possible to hate someone with everything in you, and yet still love them more. Because he did love John—truly, he did—but he couldn’t sit in the same room, use the same sink, eat the same waffles, even just breathe the same air, and, suddenly, there wasn’t enough air, John’s eyes too big and too close and too broken for his lungs to continue operating unhindered, and Sherlock staggered back, pressing himself against the opposite wall of the corridor.

“Sherlock?” John asked, his voice far away, and Sherlock swallowed, striding back the way he’d come. “Sherlock, where are you going?”

“Out,” Sherlock replied, his voice rather calm for someone having trouble putting one foot in front of the other, but hopefully John would just think he was angry.

“Out?” John echoed, just far enough behind not to trip him as they thundered down the stairs. “You can’t go out!”

“No, you can’t go out,” Sherlock clipped, plucking his coat from its hook and shoving his trembling hands through the sleeves. “I can do whatever I like.”

“Are you mad!?” John bleated, moving to his shoulder, so Sherlock turned his back, catching the shaft of light that was Mrs. Hudson’s door opening in the corner of his eye. “Moriarty probably has people watching the flat!”

“Well, he’d be foolish not to.”

“Sherlock!”

“What’s going on?” Mrs. Hudson interjected, shuffling up to John’s side, her eyes wide and frantic as they fluttered between them. “Where are you going?”

“Nowhere, Mrs. Hudson,” Sherlock replied, his words overlapping John’s “He’s going out”, and he glared at the blond as Mrs. Hudson gasped, John stubbornly meeting his eyes even as his tan fingers trembled at his side.

“But you can’t!” Mrs. Hudson implored, stepping between them, the terror in her face smoothing the
sharper edges of Sherlock’s rage. “It’s too dangerous!”

“I’ll be fine, Mrs. Hudson,” he assured, dropping the woman a solemn nod, though his jaw clenched as he saw John shaking his head in the background. “Mycroft will have no less than four henchman following me at all times, and I’m sure there’s one tracking device in each of my shoes and at least two in the lining of this coat,” he added, and John blinked down to the ground, a swallow rolling down his throat as his hand clenched.

So, Mycroft had told him that too. And Sherlock had missed a tracker somewhere. Marvelous.

“Sherlock, I really don’t think-”

“I’ll be back within the hour,” Sherlock broke in, giving the woman a pointed look of censure, and, though she looked as if she were going to ignore it, John beat her to it, huffing out a frustrated snarl as he stepped past her.

“Sherlock, this is childish!” he snapped, and Sherlock quirked a brow.

“Wow, that’s really something!” he said, tone dripping with sarcastic wonder. “Who knew Mycroft could throw his voice into your mouth!?”

John’s jaw clenched, cheeks darkening as Sherlock sneered at him, and then he tried for the door again, getting only a few steps before John beckoned him back. “Sherlock, stop!”

For some reason he couldn’t even explain to himself, he did, sighing with building frustrating as he spun back to the blond.

John moved forward, directly in front of him now, but his body language was no longer aggressive, the irritation that had been sparking in his eyes replaced with simple concern. “This is dangerous,” he exhorted, his gaze sweeping Sherlock’s face, “and completely unnecessary. If-If you don’t want- I can stay at Mrs. Hudson’s for a while, or-or go downstairs. There are easier ways for you to avoid me than-”

“I’m not avoiding you,” Sherlock argued, and John huffed a mirthless laugh.

“Oh, really?” he scoffed. “Then, what are you doing? Taking up jogging?”

Sherlock narrowed his eyes, his patience for this conversation running lower by the second, and then looked clear over John’s shoulder, leaning to the side to make the slight even more apparent. “Text me if Lestrade arrives before I get back,” he directed to Mrs. Hudson, turning to the door without so much as a passing glance at John, but Captain Watson had apparently reported for duty that day, and John stepped forward, slipping his shoulder between Sherlock and the exit, one tan hand pressed flat against the door. Sherlock stared down at the fingers a moment, his vision blurring as it blazed red at the edges, and then slowly lifted his chin, fixing the man with the darkest glare he could muster.

“Move,” he growled, but John didn’t so much as flinch.

“No,” he replied, shaking his head, and Sherlock’s nails dug into the skin of his palms as he clenched his fists for a punch he’d never throw. “You can’t leave; it’s too dangerous. Or have you forgotten there’s a homicidal maniac out there who wants to mount your head on a wall?”

“Completely slipped my mind,” Sherlock muttered, making a grab for the door handle, but the few inches he managed to pull it open were quickly closed again by a thrust of John’s arm.

“Sherlock, please,” he begged, and it might have worked if Sherlock wasn’t already decided, might have tugged on his heartstrings if there were any left unbroken. “I know Mycroft will have people
following you and everything, but- Well, they can’t plan for everything; they can’t watch everyone. It’s safer in here.”

“Tell that to Moran,” Sherlock gibed, and John’s eyelids stuttered over a blink, the only hint of a chink in his armor.

“Sherlock-”

“As touching as your belated concern for my well-being is,” Sherlock cut in, and John’s fingers twitched against the door, “I am going out. Now, move- your- hand.”

“No!” John persisted, eyes blazing, and Sherlock had never wanted to want to hit someone so badly in his entire life. “For chrissake, Sherlock, can you stop being so bloody stubborn for five seconds and think! This is stupid; you could get hurt!”

“What a novel concept.”

“Dammit, Sherlock!” John shouted, his hand slamming back into the door as a fist, startling Mrs. Hudson into a small yelp. “This isn’t a fucking joke! He could kill you!”

“And I guess that’d make us even!”

Silence. Absolute silence, the kind of quiet that convinces you your heartbeat is footsteps racing toward you through the dark, and Sherlock felt a similar sort of terror as he watched the shockwave of his words roll across John’s face, leaving nothing but rubble in its wake.

John staggered back a step, his hand falling limply from the door as his eyes skated over Sherlock’s face.

Sherlock had watched John Watson stare down drug dealers, chase armed mercenaries, kill armed mercenaries, face his mother and all of her demons, not to mention the pain Sherlock himself had heaped on. He had seen John hurt, doubting, scared, insecure, and a thousand other things that still made his stomach twist thinking about them, but he’d never seen him defeated, never seen him broken. He wouldn’t have thought it was even possible, but, then again, he was Sherlock Holmes, always finding a way, even if he had to forge the path himself, and, as John dropped his eyes, lips closing as he blinked rapidly down at the foyer floor, Sherlock knew the gift he was cursed with had done it yet again.

“Sherlock...” Mrs. Hudson breathed, her damp eyes darting between the two of them, equal parts horrorstruck and heartbroken. She then fixed Sherlock with a pleading look, her gaze shifting pointedly to where John was still staring at his socks, but Sherlock wasn’t quite ready to apologize, wasn’t sure he’d even know how, so, instead, he twisted back to the door before John could recover, throwing it open and flinging himself through. “Sherlock!” he heard Mrs. Hudson cry, the word almost lost in the door slamming behind him, and then he was gone, storming past Speedy’s with a flick of his collar.

Pedestrians turned as he passed, their eyes widening with trepidation while they shuffled further out of his way, and he might have been offended if he wasn’t sure he looked just as frightening as their expressions would suggest, his mind racing and breathing ragged as he flew down the pavement. He was putting one foot in front of the other as fast as he could without calling it a run, but he had no idea where he was going, the only things clear in his mind being the black car following behind him and the look on John’s face when he’d left, and he tried to rattle the latter loose with a brisk shake of his head. It was no good though, blue continuing to blink at him wherever he looked, and he thrust his hands into his pockets with a self-directed snarl, shoes slapping the grey pavement as he stomped...
He didn’t realize he’d been heading to Regent’s Park until he was already in it, halfway over the bridge just inside the gate, and then slowed, looking off to the left where the shallow strip of water he was over opened up into the lake. He headed that direction when he reached the other side, following along the path for a time, and then moved onto the grass, walking toward the water’s edge to take shelter against the trunk of a large willow tree.

It was a brisk spring day, the fingertips of winter still clinging to the air, and the park was nearly vacant as a result, the only other people in sight an elderly couple walking arm-in-arm, but they quickly rounded a bend in the path, leaving Sherlock alone. Well, almost alone, two adult swans lingering some distance from shore in front of him, and half of Sherlock’s mouth curled up at the familiar sight, watching the birds ruffle their wings.

When he was a child and still had a family to come into London with, he would always insist on stopping by Regent’s Park to feed the swans. Although, truth be told, he was mostly concerned with one swan in particular, a small cygnet he had named Harold for some reason he could no longer remember.

Harold had been the smallest out of the four cygnets the mother had trailing behind her, and, when people would toss food their way, Harold was lucky to get even a single mouthful, his small body easily pushed aside by his siblings. Naturally, this filled Sherlock’s six-year-old body with the most potent outrage he had theretofore experienced, and he’d dragged his mother to Tesco to buy a fresh loaf of bread, and then sat on the water’s edge with her while Mycroft and Father complained, his mother tossing a chunk of bread one direction to distract the others while Sherlock threw a smaller piece the opposite way for Harold to grab. Of course, he was then clearly the sole provider for the cygnet, and made any excuse for them to go into London, realizing only looking back on it now that his mother had invented completely pointless errands on several occasions just to allow him to visit his charge.

Over the course of the following months, Harold had grown up, Sherlock taking all the credit for every inch of growth he had, and then, one rare sunny day in November, he’d been gone, Sherlock clinging to his mother’s hand as he’d scanned over the reeds and tried not to cry.

“It was time for him to go,” his mother had said, squeezing back against his quaking fingers, and Sherlock could smell her lavender hand lotion even now if he closed his eyes. “He had to find a new place, somewhere bigger with more swans.”

“But why?” Sherlock had asked, peering up at her, wisps of her dark hair turned gold in the fading sunlight. “There are swans here. And me,” he’d added, turning back out to the water as his mother smiled. “Why did he leave?”

“Sometimes people have to, Sherlock,” she had said, soothingly stroking her thumb over his hand where she held it firm in her grip. “Even if they don’t want to. People aren’t always given a choice.”

“But Harold’s a swan!” Sherlock had bleated, and his mother had laughed, bent double and laughed until tears glittered at the corners of her eyes, and then she’d pulled him into her arms, ruffling his curls with a pale hand.

“Come on,” she’d urged, nodding her head further down the bank, where another family of swans was bobbing for food near the shore. “I don’t think Harold would want that bread to go to waste.”

Sherlock had hesitated a moment, eyes shifting between the bread in his hand and the empty patch of lake in front of him, and had then nodded, dragging his mother by the hand toward the curious black
eyes of the waiting swans, determined that, yes, that is exactly what Harold would have wanted him to do.

The swan that approached him now, however, was not Harold—was, at best, Harold Jr. or Harold III—and probably didn't have any divine wisdom to offer about anything, but Sherlock quirked a brow at it regardless, meeting the beady black stare.

“Well?” he prompted.

The swan ruffled its feathers, turning its head around to peck at a spot on its back, but nothing more, and Sherlock sighed, leaning his skull against the bark of the tree as he peered up into the canopy.

Guess he’d have to figure this one out on his own.

“Did you not see the sign?”

Sherlock dropped his chin, nails grating against the bark as his hand clenched.

“No talking to the swans.” Mycroft moved into view around the tree, umbrella crunching against the ground one step ahead of him. “Don’t make me tell the queen on you,” he added with a mocking lift of his brows, and Sherlock spared a moment to glare at him before looking back out across the water.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw something white come flying toward him, and he spun around, stepping back as he lifted a hand to catch-

He blinked, turning the bread over in his hand, and then looked up at Mycroft, finding his brother holding the other portion of the loaf, his piece significantly smaller than Sherlock’s. He smiled, one shoulder twitching with a faint shrug, and then turned out to the lake, pinching off a piece of bread and throwing it out past the reeds.

The swans immediately moved in, but the one farther out in the lake had been closer, getting to Mycroft’s piece first, and Sherlock felt obliged to rip off his own piece and toss it away, pointedly aiming for the swan that had approached him earlier, Sherlock at least partly responsible for it not being further out in the water to have a chance at the first feeding.

They continued in silence for a time, alternating their throws until Mycroft was out, but Sherlock still had just under half of his remaining, and he was grateful for it as Mycroft drew closer, twisting off chunks providing him a welcome excuse not to look his brother in the eye.

“You shouldn’t have left,” he said, answering Sherlock’s questioning glance with a nod, confirming they could talk freely. “It’s much easier to protect you in a controlled environment.”

Sherlock flicked his wrist a little harder than before, the swans having to double back to fetch the morsel. “So now you’re concerned with protecting me.”

“Sherlock,” Mycroft sighed, pinching at the bridge of his nose. “Can we- Can we not do this? Please?” he added, and Sherlock nearly dropped his bread, staring wide-eyed at the downcast face of his brother, which he only now realized was much thinner than it had been last week, the skin pale except for dark rings around the eyes. “You know I was trying to protect you,” he continued, looking back up, the weight of the world carried across in his gaze, and Sherlock could almost feel proud for accomplishing the impossible task of felling Mycroft Holmes if he didn’t feel so sick about it.

Just because he wasn’t proud of it didn’t mean he was rolling over, however, and he set his jaw, tearing off another piece of bread and catapulting it aloft. “I’m not a child anymore, Mycroft,” he
snarled, watching the swans peck at the remaining soggy crumbs. “I don’t need a guardian CCTV camera watching over me.”

“That’s not what this is about, and you know it,” Mycroft countered, stepping nearer along the shore. “I’m not trying to spy on you, Sherlock; I just wanted to keep you safe.”

“I can take care of myself.”

“No, you can’t!”

Sherlock snapped his head up, mouth gaping as he blinked in affront, but Mycroft didn’t give him a chance to retort, charging forward, his umbrella swinging wildly as his arms swept and stabbed through the air.

“Not with something like this! And, even if you could, I wouldn’t let you!” He stopped just inside a meter away, a few strands of his slicked-back hair coming loose as he shook his head. “It’s my job to protect you, Sherlock, it always has been. And then, after Father died—”

“You thought you had to replace him,” Sherlock concluded, throat tight and jaw clenched. “I didn’t have much use for the first father, Mycroft; I don’t know why you’d think I’d want a second.”

Mycroft dropped his eyes, swallowing down at the ground as his hand tightened around his umbrella.

“Though, I must say, it’s an impressive recreation,” Sherlock added, glaring at the side of his brother’s turned face. “You might even be better at the lying through your teeth part.”

Mycroft didn’t say anything for a long while, Sherlock eventually returning to lobbing bread at the swans, and, when he did speak, it was soft, calm, and not at all conducive to the fight Sherlock wanted to start.

“I didn’t want to lie to you, Sherlock,” he murmured, and Sherlock’s hand clenched, his fingers leaving imprints on the bread. “Every day, I- But it was the only way,” he urged, shaking his head helplessly as he moved forward another step, but Sherlock only scoffed, wrenching off a strip of crust and whipping it into the water.

“The only way,” he echoed bitterly, shaking his head as he felt the embers of anger being stoked back to life in his chest. “Three days,” he hissed, turning a blazing glare to his brother, whose eyes widened as his approach stalled. “You let me- Three days!” He chucked the remaining bread into the water in one lash of his arm, his hands shaking at his sides as he watched the swans tear into the meal. “You were there!” he accused, turning back to where Mycroft still stood frozen at his side. “You saw everything, and you—you just—“

“Sherlock, please,” Mycroft attempted to soothe, lifting a hand, but Sherlock was having none of it, twisting on a heel and turning his back to the man as he paced a few steps away. “You know if there had been any other way, I would have—”

“Why does everyone keep saying that!?” Sherlock interjected as he spun back, startling honks from the swans as they beat their wings and scuttled back over the surface of the water. “Why do you think I know anything right now!? No one’s told me a damn thing!” He kicked at a stone on the ground, dirt and grass spraying out from the impact while the stone sailed through the air to drop into the water with a splash. “You’ve all just been sneaking around whispering to one another behind my back!”

“Do you think I wanted to keep this from you?” Mycroft demanded “That I enjoyed lying to you,
seeing you like that? Do you think John-"

“Don’t,” Sherlock growled, but Mycroft only rolled his eyes with an exasperated sigh.

“How long are you going to keep punishing him?” he pressed, and Sherlock’s jaw twitched, his eyes set stubbornly on the water. “You know he didn’t have a choice in the matter.”

“Put your nose back where it belongs, Mycroft,” Sherlock spat, but his brother, per usual, paid him no heed, brushing off his snarling with a frustrated rattle of his head.

“We literally dragged him out of Langley, and he was exceptionally uncooperative about being smuggled in,” Mycroft muttered, and Sherlock, in spite of himself, felt a corner of his lips twitch up. “I thought he was going to hit me when I told him he’d have to stay there, wait things out in the basement. Thankfully, we stopped short of anything quite that barbaric, but there were some rather colorful curses bandied about that I shan’t repeat for fear of divine retribution.”

Sherlock choked over a laugh, his throat so unaccustomed to making the sound, and had to cough into his hand a moment before crossing his arms and turning back out to the lake, his expression stoic once again. “Still,” he muttered, watching the swans making their way toward an island further out in the lake, and Mycroft sighed, moving to stand at his shoulder.

“He really didn’t have a choice, Sherlock,” he insisted. “None of us did. We all hated it, believe me,” he said, eyes dropping to the ground as he shook his head, hands slipping into his pockets, “but there was no other way to ensure your safety.”

“You told me he was dead,” Sherlock bit, glaring across at Mycroft’s eyes avoiding his. “You showed up at the crime scene and told me he was dead.” He tried to keep his eyes shooting daggers, but he could feel the knot rising in his throat, the fury finally giving way to the sense of helplessness that was never far from his side these past several days. “How could you do that?” he questioned, head shaking as his voice creaked. “Any of you? How could you-” He broke off, turning his face away a moment to swallow. “How could you let me think he was gone?” he whispered, watching in his peripheral vision as Mycroft’s fingers shifted on the handle of his umbrella.

“Sherlock,” he began, the click of his swallow audible as he lifted his chin, “believe me when I say that- that lying to you about this was the hardest thing I have ever had to do”—Sherlock’s eyes began to sting, and he blinked frantically to regain control of himself—“and, if there had been any other way, any possible alternative… I would’ve taken it in a heartbeat.”

Sherlock clenched his teeth behind tight lips, turning his face as far away from Mycroft as possible.

“But there wasn’t, Sherlock,” his brother continued. “There just wasn’t, and we were running out of time, and something- Something had to be done; a decision had to be made.”

“So you decided to kill John?”

“No!” Mycroft blustered, a vein bulging in his forehead, the usual reaction to extended conversations with Sherlock. “Haven’t you been listening? I didn’t get to decide anything; there was only one option, all I did was go ahead with it! And, though it appears to have escaped your notice, John isn’t really dead.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Sherlock snapped, looking back to the man. “Of course I’ve noticed he isn’t dead. He’s wandering around my flat, isn’t he?”

“Oh, so you’ve just been pretending you can’t see him,” Mycroft quipped, and Sherlock narrowed his eyes, turning his head pointedly back toward the water, but he couldn’t suppress the wriggling in
his stomach, a side effect of the nail Mycroft had hit right on the head.

He knew John wasn’t dead, of course—he wasn’t quite that useless—but… Well, maybe something else was. Some part of him, of John, of whatever they were and had. Maybe something had gone up in flames with that locker room, something they could never get back, any future they might have together eternally doomed to be that single piece short.

Maybe Moriarty had taken John from him after all.

“He lied to me,” was all Sherlock said, however, and Mycroft sighed, stepping forward to overlap his body with Sherlock’s, giving him little choice but to meet his brother’s eyes.

“Yes, he did,” Mycroft acknowledged, and Sherlock had to drop his gaze to their shoes. “He lied to you, I lied to you, and you’ve lied to us.”

“It’s not the same!” Sherlock started to argue, but Mycroft quickly lifted a hand.

“I know it’s not,” he assured. “I’m not trying to say this isn’t worse, because it is; what I am saying is that we all have our reasons to keep things from the people we love.”

Sherlock dropped his mouth open in shock, more flabbergasted by the implication that Mycroft loved him than anything, John having made that clear long ago.

“For example,” Mycroft continued, not noticing or ignoring Sherlock’s gaping expression, “why didn’t you tell John about Moriarty right away? Why did you try to wait until you could tie it up yourself?”

Sherlock closed his mouth, rattling his head and clearing his throat to shake off the remainder of the shock. “Because he’d have done something stupid,” he muttered, twitching a shoulder as he kicked his heel against the soft ground. “Gone off and gotten himself killed.” He looked up when Mycroft did not reply, finding the man smiling down at him, one eyebrow climbing as Sherlock watched.

“Well,” he said, a smug twinkle sparking to life in his eyes, “it would appear you have that in common.”

Sherlock opened his mouth to retort, and then found he couldn’t, opting to simply glare at Mycroft until he had to turn away to hide the smile needling at the corners of his mouth.

Suddenly, Mycroft turned away, opening his grey suit jacket and plucking his mobile from an inside pocket. “Yes?” he said, lifting the receiver to his ear, all business once more, and then his eyes widened, and he beckoned to Sherlock with a jolt of his head as he walked briskly back toward the path. “When? … Okay, send them some red lights; we’re on our way.”

“What is it?” Sherlock asked as he hastened to his brother’s heels, images of 221B blown out into the street flashing unbidden through his mind. “What’s happened?”

“That was Lestrade,” Mycroft answered uselessly, but he continued before Sherlock could tell him as much. “Molly Hooper, Mary Morstan, and Mike Stamford just stormed Scotland Yard.”

“They what?” Sherlock blurted, hardly able to imagine Molly and Mike storming anything grander than a pet shop, but with Mary leading the charge…

“It seems neither you nor John have been returning their calls and text messages,” Mycroft explained, glancing both ways before charging through the pedestrian crossing, “and they grew concerned. Constable Dimmock has been unable to provide them with any details, of course,” he added with a
tip of his head as they marched down Baker Street, the black car creeping along the street behind them, “and has, per Lestrade’s orders, been discouraging them from visiting. That is, until about ten minutes ago, when they showed up at headquarters _demanding_ he take them to your flat.” Mycroft tossed down a look of staunch disapproval, and Sherlock appropriately dropped his head, but it was only to smile at the pavement blurring by beneath his feet. “Seems they walked by the flat yesterday and noticed the increase in police cars patrolling the area; thought going straight to the source was the best way to get in.”

“Well, it worked,” Sherlock remarked, something buoyant bouncing around his chest at the thought of having friends who’d stage a coup in a building full of firearms—or friends at all, for that matter. “I presume they’re on their way here now?”

Mycroft nodded, bounding up the concrete steps and throwing the door open, waving Sherlock in ahead of him. “Yes, and we have very little time. We have to scrub the flat of anything that could hint to John’s presence.”

“Well?” Sherlock asked, pulling his coat off and practically tossing it onto a hook. “Wouldn’t we stage the scene if we were pretending he was still alive?”

Mycroft paused halfway through leaning his umbrella against the wall. “Good point,” he murmured, and Sherlock’s eyes nearly popped out of his head, not sure the universe could handle an implied ‘I love you’ _and_ a compliment from Mycroft Holmes all in the same day without imploding. “Leave out the usual things—cups, plates, shoes, the like—but make sure there’s nothing that shouldn’t be here. And _do not_ let them go up to his room.”

Sherlock whipped his head around, opening his mouth to tell Mycroft he wasn’t stupid, thank you very much, when a thunder of footsteps sounded above them, the door at the top of the stairs flinging open a second later.

John was just drawing in a breath to speak when his eyes found Sherlock, and the air blew out of him as his whole body slumped with relief, the spark of panic in his eyes a bit slower to fade, and Sherlock, for the very first time since John’s return, looked at him without the haze of anger and betrayal clouding his sight.

On top of the four pounds John had lost while pretending to be dead, another three were missing, his cheekbones more pronounced and wrists thinner where they protruded from the sleeves of his jumper. He looked exhausted, almost frayed, like a strained rope ready to buckle, and yet, when his eyes locked on Sherlock’s from atop the dim staircase, they were bright with a flurry of emotions Sherlock couldn’t hope to unravel, but he didn’t need to, already knowing that, whatever that feeling was, he felt the same.

Yes, things were a little bit broken, and, no, he didn’t know how long it would take to fix them, but they _could_ fix them, they were still salvageable; it hadn’t all gone up in conflagration. John wasn’t dead, he hadn’t left; Moriarty hadn’t taken anything! Not yet, anyway, the death blow now in Sherlock’s hands to deliver, but he’d be damned if he was going to give anyone that satisfaction, allow their machinations to be the engine that drove John away. No one but him was going to wield that kind of power, and, in spite of what he’d suggested to John, he never intended to use it.

They were going to figure this out. They had to.

“Dimmock is on his way here,” Mycroft pronounced, and John’s eyes widened as he stood straight again, “along with Molly, Mike, and Mary.”

John snorted, evidently involuntarily, as he looked horrified a second later, eyes flicking
apologetically between them. “Sorry, I- It’s just- Well, it sounds a bit like a sitcom, doesn’t it? Molly, Mike, and Mary?” he said with a feeble smile, licking over his lips and twisting his hands together when no one replied. “Or… not,” he mumbled, dropping his chin as he cracked his knuckles, and Sherlock bit hard at the inside of his lip to restrain a grin.

“We have to make it look like you’re living here,” Mycroft said, ignoring the interruption as he started up the stairs, Sherlock right behind him.

John quirked a brow. “I am living here,” he murmured, gaze diverting a moment to glance worriedly at Sherlock.

“No,” Mycroft huffed, rolling his eyes as he swatted at John to step back inside, “we have to make it look like we staged it to make it look like you were living here.”

John opened his mouth, closed it with a blink, and then opened it again, but Sherlock took pity, and answered before he could ask.

“We have to hide everything that wouldn’t be here if you were dead,” he said plainly, and John’s eyes bulged with surprise, though whether it was due to the content of the statement or Sherlock speaking to him at all was impossible to tell. “Mobile, keys, anything you were wearing that day. Cups and such can be left,” he added, waving a hand at the mug on the coffee table, “but they shouldn’t be used.”

“Well, I probably will be lying about most of it.” John replied sternly, and Sherlock closed the drawer, hitching up a smile
as he turned.

“It’ll be fine,” he assured with a nod, but John didn’t look convinced, his expression dripping with pity. “I’ve had plenty of practice,” Sherlock added, realizing his mistake before the words were even entirely out of his mouth, because he’d only meant with lying, but John’s flinch suggested a different interpretation. Sherlock swallowed, hesitantly opening his mouth as he shifted a half-step closer. “I-I didn’t mean-”

“John!” Mycroft barked from the doorway. “It won’t matter that the dishes are clean if they walk in and see you standing there!” he snapped, and John nodded, starting toward the stairs as Mycroft looked past him. “I put a receiver in the kitchen,” he said to no one’s surprise. “We’ll be listening downstairs.”

Sherlock nodded, Mycroft returning the gesture before stepping through the door and thumping his way down the steps.

John made to follow after him, but, just before disappearing around the corner, he stopped, turning back to Sherlock with a determined draw of breath. “Good luck,” he said, something infinitely more complicated than that passing across in his earnest gaze, but he was gone before Sherlock could even reply, let alone figure it out.

The basement door closed mere seconds before a knock sounded on the front one, Mrs. Hudson bustling to answer it, no doubt anxious for her deception debut, and Sherlock quickly made himself uncomfortable in his chair, folding his legs and placing a book in his lap, though he was careful to be looking listlessly out the window when the quartet stepped through the door.

“Sherlock!” Molly gushed, and he turned, feigning surprise as the girl rushed him, although the hug did catch him off-guard, forcing the air from his lungs as she pinned him to the chair. “Oh, thank god! We were so worried!”

Sherlock blinked into her hair, hands hovering awkwardly over her back as he used the time she was trying to suffocate him to scan over the group.

Mike was already frowning, searching over the living room before craning his neck back to look up the staircase, but Mary met his eyes briefly, giving him a soft smile before she too turned her attention to scanning the flat. Both of their gazes eventually landed on the cup set out in front of John’s armchair, Mike’s expression instantly shifting to relief, but Mary’s brow furrowed, her head stretching forward on her neck to get a better view of the nonexistent contents.

Dimmock, for his part, was still hovering by the door, both hands twisting at his keys, but he looked up to meet Sherlock’s eyes, as if sensing the gaze. He smiled, an apologetic twitch of his mouth, and a new kind of guilt writhed in Sherlock’s stomach at the thought of what the man must be going through. Dimmock was helping with the case, of course, so he was in on the cover-up, but it didn’t go any further than that. As far as Dimmock was concerned, John was dead, and he not only had to lie to his girlfriend about it, he had been required to bring her and her compatriots here, forcing Sherlock to put on what he would believe was a show.

Which it still was, Sherlock supposed, but a much less bleak one than Ryan thought, so Sherlock sent a small smile back, trying to assuage some of the guilt written on the man’s face before returning his attention to where Molly was leaning back to release him. “Worried?” he echoed, and Molly stepped back to allow him to rise to his feet. “Why were you worried?”

“Because you didn’t pick up your bloody phone!” she chided, swatting him a little harder than playfully on the arm. “No one had heard from you since the explosion.”
“Or John,” Mike added, stepping forward, and Sherlock didn’t even have to put on the wince, but he did add in a clench of his hand. “I got a text saying he’d be staying here, but then nothing.”

“Yes, well,” Sherlock muttered, twitching a shoulder as he skittered around the group, making his way toward the kitchen, “reception is rather unreliable here, and the Wi-Fi hardly merits the name.”

“My phone has signal,” Mary countered, Sherlock looking back over his shoulder to find her waggling the mobile in the air. “Full bars.”

Sherlock smiled, lifting his brows with an unconcerned shrug. “I suppose we have the wrong carrier then,” he remarked, and then turned his back on them again, moving to the kettle and flicking it on. “Any of you care for tea?” he asked, feeling a twisted sort of happy that everyone looked appropriately thrown by his offer, or perhaps it was the smiling. “We don’t have much variety to speak of, but the Tetley’s in date—which is marvel enough, to be honest.”

“No, we- We’re fine, thanks,” Molly said, her smile thin as she stepped to the threshold of the kitchen, Sherlock nodding at her before reaching for a mug in the cupboard.

“Sherlock,” Mary began warily at his back, and Sherlock waited, taking his time sliding the cup from the back of the shelf, “where- Where’s John?”

Ceramic fragmented across the linoleum, spraying out under the table and fridge, and Sherlock looked frantically between the mess and his guests, the picture of flustered horror. “I- Sorry, I- Sometimes the soap doesn’t wash off completely,” he muttered, dropping down to the floor to begin collecting shards. “Leaves a terribly slippery- Ah!” The glass clattered from his hand as he recoiled, leaning back against the counter, his bleeding right palm cradled in the opposite one, and Molly was instantly at his side, hoisting him to his feet while Mike and Mary drew up close behind her.

“Let me see,” Molly ordered, not that Sherlock was actually given a choice, the girl already pulling his arm up by the wrist, and Sherlock hissed at the sudden movement.

“Careful!” he snapped, but Molly hushed him, bowing her head low over the wound, and Sherlock glanced over her shoulder, scanning across Mike and Mary’s concerned expressions before finding Ryan’s miserable one loitering in the doorway, a sense of satisfaction that felt very much like nausea whirling in his stomach.

“It doesn’t seem too deep,” Molly assessed, releasing his hand back into his own power, “but you should wash it out, make sure there’s no glass.”

Sherlock nodded, turning his back to them again as he crossed to the sink. “To answer your question,” he said, turning on the water with his clean hand, fingers flicking through the stream as he tested it for warmth, “John’s not here.”

“No, we- We’re fine, thanks,” Molly said, her smile thin as she stepped to the threshold of the kitchen, Sherlock nodding at her before reaching for a mug in the cupboard.

“Sherlock,” Mary began warily at his back, and Sherlock waited, taking his time sliding the cup from the back of the shelf, “where- Where’s John?”

Ceramic fragmented across the linoleum, spraying out under the table and fridge, and Sherlock looked frantically between the mess and his guests, the picture of flustered horror. “I- Sorry, I- Sometimes the soap doesn’t wash off completely,” he muttered, dropping down to the floor to begin collecting shards. “Leaves a terribly slippery- Ah!” The glass clattered from his hand as he recoiled, leaning back against the counter, his bleeding right palm cradled in the opposite one, and Molly was instantly at his side, hoisting him to his feet while Mike and Mary drew up close behind her.

Let me see,” Molly ordered, not that Sherlock was actually given a choice, the girl already pulling his arm up by the wrist, and Sherlock hissed at the sudden movement.

“Careful!” he snapped, but Molly hushed him, bowing her head low over the wound, and Sherlock glanced over her shoulder, scanning across Mike and Mary’s concerned expressions before finding Ryan’s miserable one loitering in the doorway, a sense of satisfaction that felt very much like nausea whirling in his stomach.

“It doesn’t seem too deep,” Molly assessed, releasing his hand back into his own power, “but you should wash it out, make sure there’s no glass.”

Sherlock nodded, turning his back to them again as he crossed to the sink. “To answer your question,” he said, turning on the water with his clean hand, fingers flicking through the stream as he tested it for warmth, “John’s not here.”

“Not here?” Mary questioned, her shoes clapping closer. “Where is he?”

“At Bart’s,” Sherlock replied, grimacing as the water beat down on his hand, scarlet spiraling through the basin as it circled the drain. “One of those tedious tours for prospective students.”

“He went without you?” Mary pressed, a hitch of worry in her tone, and Sherlock closed his eyes down at the sink a moment, swallowing thickly as he collected himself.

“It was his aunt’s idea,” he invented, shrugging a shoulder as he turned off the tap, reaching to rip a paper towel off the roll and pat his wound dry. “She wanted them to take one of the guided tours,” he added with a roll of his eyes. “Libraries, cafeterias, all the usual rubbish. We’ll probably go ourselves some other time to find the actual important things.” He pressed the paper towel to his
hand, lifting his eyes to the group with a pained smile he didn’t even have to fake.

The tour at Bart’s had only come to his mind as a lie because he’d considered it in reality, one of the many things on the ‘What might have been’ highlight reel that had run nonstop through his brain while John was just-resting-his-eyes in peace. They would have found the best spots in the library, taking care to ensure the sun would never blaze into John’s eyes. They’d have auditioned the various cafeterias and restaurants to find the most tolerable food, the closest locations to the medical buildings, the ungodly crowded places to be avoided at all costs. John, of course, would have protested, would have muttered incessantly about the whole thing likely turning out to be a waste of time when he got rejected, and Sherlock would have rolled his eyes and dragged him along, calculating the quickest route to the underground. It was at that point he would have had to explain why he needed the Hammersmith & City line, which would have led into the nerve-wracking conversation about John’s lodgings for the following year, something he had no idea how to bring up now.

As much as he hoped it was a forgone conclusion, he wasn’t quite so ignorant to social customs to think he could get away with not formally asking John to move in with him. They’d never talked about it—not specifically, at least—but the fact that they’d both be attending university in London had come up, and Sherlock had made it abundantly clear with his forged application maneuver that he wanted John to stay close. Still, staying with him was something entirely different, toothbrushes side-by-side on a shared bathroom counter not the sort of thing one left to implication, but the only person who might beat him out for the worst-with-words award was the person he needed to talk to, and, with everything else that had happened...

Pushing that worry aside for the moment, the matter of four people staring at him in his kitchen a little more pressing, Sherlock hitched up another smile, checking that the bleeding had stopped before balling up the paper towel and tossing it in the bin. “You could always wait for him,” he offered, leaning back against the counter and surveying the group, “but it’ll be a while; his aunt wanted to make a day of it.”

Molly and Mike exchanged glances, Molly turning to try and include Dimmock—who continued avoiding everyone’s gaze—but Mary’s eyes never left him, narrowing slightly as they perused his face.

“Can you tell him to call us when he gets back?” she asked, and Sherlock could tell she was testing him, the tension building in their shared stare.

“I’ll tell him to text you,” he answered, not daring to even blink—at least, not until Mary did, “but he won’t be able to call. Used up all his minutes for the month talking to his mum and sister after the explosion.”

The trump card fell atop the deck, Mary averting her eyes with a flash of shame, but the exchange seemed to have gone unnoticed by Mike and Molly, who simply smiled, nodding their heads in eerie unison.

“Well, alright then,” Mike acquiesced, “but none of that group message lark!” He waggled a finger at him in mock scolding, and Sherlock laughed, pitching it a little higher than normal and cutting it short. “I want a personalized greeting.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Sherlock agreed, and Mike smiled, shuffling back out toward the living room, content with that goodbye.

Mary and Molly shared a fleeting glance, and then Mary approached, hovering in front of him a moment before stretching out a tentative hand to rest on his arm. “I’m glad you’re alright,” she said
with a soft smile, her fingers squeezing gently into his jumper, and then withdrew after Sherlock nodded, smiling back as feebly as possible.

Molly remained in the kitchen, eyeing him with a quiet intensity he was having difficult deciphering, but then she looked away, bobbing her head almost imperceptibly to Dimmock, who lifted his eyebrows, reading the cue.

“We’ll, er- We’ll just head down to the car,” he muttered, pointing toward the stairs, allowing Mike and Mary to go ahead of him as he looked back. “Take care of yourself, Sherlock,” he said, landing a few leagues short of casual, and Sherlock smiled back with similar significance, dropping a single deep nod.

With that, they left, leaving he and Molly alone in the kitchen, the brunette silently staring at him even after the front door closed behind the trio, and Sherlock’s hands curled and uncurled with entirely authentic discomfort.

“What?” he muttered, and Molly’s brows twitched, as if considering a frown, but her expression smoothed out with pity a second later, and she swept across the linoleum in a blur, crashing into his chest again as she clenched her arms around him. “Molly, what-”

“It’ll be okay,” the girl interjected, the words warm on his neck as her hands dug deeper into his jumper, and Sherlock felt his heart skip a beat, dumbstruck as he blinked down at the sheet of brown hair in front of him.

“What-What will be okay?” he stammered, and Molly pulled back just far enough to see his face, her eyes glassy as her palms moved to his shoulders.

“What ever you need to be,” she whispered, her grip tightening on his left shoulder in a show of solidarity, and, though all Sherlock could do was gape, Molly didn’t seem to mind, smiling with understanding as she let her hands slip away. “I’ll talk to you later,” she said with conviction, like Sherlock was going to text her whether he liked it or not, but, in truth, he probably would, and he nodded, his weak smile genuine at last.

“Alright,” he confirmed, and Molly nodded, giving him one last look over her shoulder before her footsteps were heard on the stairs, a muffled farewell to Mrs. Hudson drifting back up to his ears before the door closed yet again.

Sherlock leaned against the counter by the small of his back, folding his arms as he looked out the kitchen window toward the street, unable to see anything through the curtains, but he could hear a car door slam, wheels rolling a second later. He smiled, shaking his head as he huffed a laugh through his nose, kicking at an overlooked piece of glass on the floor.

And he thought Mary was perceptive.

Exactly one minute after their visitors had left, a veritable stampede of footsteps hit the stairs. Mycroft entered first, closely followed by Mrs. Hudson, but John was some distance behind, eyes following his socks as they moved across the living room rug.

“Do you think they suspect?” Mrs. Hudson asked urgently, her eyes flashing between Sherlock and Mycroft. “I tried not to make too much of a fuss, but my lines just flew right out of my head soon as I opened that door! It’s all such a blur, I honestly can’t even remember what I said!”

“Lines?” Sherlock echoed, Mycroft rolling his eyes at Mrs. Hudson’s back while she nodded.

“For what I was supposed to say when they came to the door,” she explained, and Sherlock quirked
a brow, looking over her shoulder to Mycroft.

The man sighed in his usual put-upon way, stepping up the woman’s side, and John crept closer along with the movement, nearly to the doorjamb now. “You did not have lines,” he muttered irritably, shaking his head. “You opened a door, said hello, told them Sherlock was upstairs, and then went back to your flat.”

For all of the 1.5 meters she had to her name, Mrs. Hudson glared like a giant, huffing with the dignity of a duchess as she pointedly turned her face away. “Well, we don’t all lie for a living,” she snipped, and Mycroft pinched at the bridge of his nose while Sherlock suppressed a smile, noticing John ducking his chin to do the same thing. “I don’t think it’s a bad thing I’m uncomfortable with it. Not the sort of thing anyone should get used to, really.”

“Occupational hazard,” Mycroft answered with a thin-lipped smile, and Mrs. Hudson shook her head at him, tutting as she started back toward the stairs.

“You three,” she sighed, turning over her shoulder in the doorway to sweep a glance across them all. “You’ll be the death of me one of these days,” she scolded, rattling a finger at them. “Mark my words.”

“Monday, March 30th, 1:49pm,” Mycroft recited, and Mrs. Hudson shot him a final stony glare before twisting on her heels, which then thumped down the stairs with audible ire. Mycroft, however unwisely, did not appear bothered by the woman’s wrath, however, and turned to Sherlock, his voice sharp. “What happened?” he asked, and Sherlock sighed, suddenly exhausted, his temples beginning to throb with the belated toll of his pantomime.

“You know what happened,” he replied, reaching under the center cabinet to twist free the bug Mycroft had placed there, an embarrassingly obvious spot. “You were listening the whole time.” He brushed past his brother, dropping the listening device into his hand as he made for the sofa, walking the long way around the coffee table so as not to cross directly in front of John.

“We had no video,” Mycroft explained, dropping the bug into an interior pocket of his suit and managing to repress all but a hint of annoyance. “One cannot live on tone alone.”

Sherlock dropped down onto the cool leather, leaning over his knees as he kneaded circles into his right temple. “Mike doesn’t have a clue,” he muttered, Mycroft nodding at the expected, “but Mary and Molly are suspicious. And Dimmock needs a raise,” he added, and Mycroft huffed a laugh, John smiling down at the hardwood as he shifted his weight between his feet. “Other than that, everything appears-” He broke off with a hiss, jerking his hand away from his head to see he’d somehow reopened the cut, a shallow river of blood winding its way down the delta of lines on his palm. Cursing under his breath, he made to get up, intending to go to the bathroom to fix the wound up properly, but his head swam as he started to rise, and he collapsed back into the sofa cushions, blinking blearily at the spinning living room John was suddenly no longer in.

“Sherlock?” Mycroft blurted, taking a few quick strides toward him, but Sherlock waved him off with his good hand, shaking his head.

“I’m fine,” he assured, turning his palm up on his thigh and curling his fingers to take stress off the cut. “Just…stood up too fast.” He closed his eyes, counting out his breaths as he tried to steady the rolling in his stomach, and he suddenly realized how hungry he was, the only thing solid he could recall hitting his stomach in the past two days being those few bites of waffle this morning, and he hadn’t had any water that hadn’t been brewed or percolated in-

The coffee table vibrated against his shin, two clunks in quick succession, and Sherlock opened his
eyes, lifting his chin fast enough to send another swell of bile up his throat. He wasn’t sure what looked more glorious, the plate with two miniature cherry bakewells or the glass of water, but they were both vying for second behind the paracetamol hovering in front of his face.

“Here,” John said, his tone gentle but brokering no argument as he bobbed the pill in the air in invitation, but Sherlock had no intention of arguing regardless, and merely lifted his unbloodied palm for John to drop the tablet inside. “Do you have any more questions?” John directed at Mycroft as Sherlock tossed the pill into his mouth, holding it on his tongue until he lifted the water to his lips and swallowed it down.

Mycroft looked between them, visibly hesitant, but then Sherlock caught his eyes, giving him a small nod of reassurance, and Mycroft relaxed, straightening his spine and facing John once more. “No,” he said simply, shaking his head, “not at the moment, but I’ll call if anything more comes up.” With a farewell dip of his head, he moved toward the door, but stopped on the landing, turning back to the blond. “I’ll have someone take care of those text messages,” he added, smiling with the closest thing to sympathy he could muster, and John nodded, his answering smile the closest thing to grateful.

“Thanks,” he murmured, and Mycroft bobbed his head in acknowledgement, giving Sherlock a last pointed look before descending from sight.

Sherlock watched the spot his brother had last occupied, not quite sure where else to look. John was still standing beside him, close enough to give rise to the hairs on the back of his neck, and he channeled his nervous energy into reaching for one of the pastries, nibbling at the crust to distract his mouth from saying something stupid.

“I’ll, er,” John mumbled, eyes on Sherlock’s injured hand rather than his face, “I’ll go…get something for that.” A swallow rolled down his throat, and he backed away, walking stiffly down the corridor before pushing through the bathroom door, and Sherlock stared at the white doorframe, a weight dragging his heart down into his stomach as he listened to John rummage through drawers.

He tried to make himself angry, to summon the bitterness and betrayal that had kept him going these past three days, but nothing came, the fury evaporated, exhaustion the only byproduct, and Sherlock supposed it had only been a matter of time.

Even he couldn’t run on spite forever.

A drawer closed with a muffled thump, the under sink cupboard creaking open right after, a gentle reminder that John would be back any moment, and Sherlock dropped his head to the floor as he took another bite of the bakewell, frowning in thought while he chewed.

If he wasn’t angry at John anymore, what was he? Something was there, a fog still clinging about him, the damp chill not quite burned away by the rising sun, but he couldn’t place it, couldn’t put a word to the tightness in his chest, the heaviness in his limbs. He’d almost think he was getting sick again, but this feeling wasn’t the same, his mind still perfectly clear, headache aside. No, he wasn’t sick, not in any way medicine could help, at least, he was just…just…

Sad. Defeated, low, broken, resigned. Hurt. God, did it ever hurt, but why, why was the question.

John had done a horrible thing, but a thing Sherlock could understand nonetheless. He’d apologized for it, Sherlock had been unforgiving for what he’d always consider to be a reasonable amount of time, and, now, as per protocol with human emotions, his anger had subsided.

So why could he still not look John in the eye?
John stepped out the bathroom door, a roll of first aid tape, half-spent package of gauze pads—Sherlock broke a lot of beakers—and tube of Dettol cream in his hands. He was looking down at the cream at first, eyes shifting as if reading the microscope print on the back, and then opened his mouth to speak, the sentence dying on his tongue with a hiss of breath as he lifted his gaze to Sherlock’s. He stalled at the mouth of the corridor, lips closing as he fidgeted with the gauze packaging, and then stepped forward with a swallow, eyes on the coffee table as he placed the materials on the dark wood. “There,” he muttered, flicking a hand down at the spread, “that—that should take care of it.”

Sherlock nodded, speech light years beyond him at the moment, and reached for the Dettol, too lazy to bother rewashing the wound. With his unmarred hand and only minor difficulty, he unscrewed the cap, squirting a dollop onto the center of the wound before rubbing it over the surface with a gentle index finger, and then tugged open one of the gauze packages with his teeth, taking care not to contaminate the pad inside as he lifted it free and pressed it to the ointment on his palm. The tape was next, necessary to secure the gauze pad, and he was just putting together a plan a Cirque du Soleil contortionist would be proud of when John moved from where he’d been pretending not to watch by the window, hovering at the arm of the sofa some three feet to Sherlock’s right.

“I can- I can do that,” he murmured, rolling a hand down at the tape in Sherlock’s fingers. “If you want. I mean, if you don’t.”

Sherlock hesitated, a strange fluttering feeling set loose in his chest, and then nodded, passing the tape across his body as John shuffled between the sofa and the coffee table, taking the bandage from him as he perched on the edge of the cushion, as far away from Sherlock as he could get without climbing onto the arm.

He peeled free a short tab from the roll, glancing at Sherlock through his lashes as he nodded down to his hand, and Sherlock lifted it toward him, holding it aloft as John leaned closer to start wrapping.

At first, he tried to avoid touching him, keeping the light pressure only to the surface the cloth bandage covered, but that quickly proved too difficult to maneuver, and he was forced to steady Sherlock’s hand, tentatively cradling it in his palm as he unfurled the tape with the free right hand.

Sherlock bit hard at the inside of his lip, trying to refocus the energy ricocheting around his body, but he couldn’t help the small shudder that slipped out, and John stopped halfway through the first revolution of the tape, looking up over his handiwork with wide earnest eyes.

“Too tight?” he presumed, and it took Sherlock a very long second to realize he wasn’t talking about the grip of his warm fingers on Sherlock’s pale skin.

“No,” he croaked, clearing his throat as he shook his head, dropping his eyes to the damage. “Just… stings a bit.”

John nodded, though it was hard to tell if he believed him or not, Sherlock’s deductive reasoning useless when it came to John Watson, or so recent circumstances would suggest. “Did you do it on purpose?” John asked, his disapproval thinly veiled in spite of a valiant effort. “Cut yourself, I mean?”

“In a way,” Sherlock replied, breathing through his mouth as John leaned closer to wrap the bandage around the far side of his hand, the scent of shampoo drifting up from his hair driving Sherlock to distraction. “I planned to cut myself,” he explained, muscles uncoiling as John moved back again, “just…not quite this much.”

John smiled, a hiss of a laugh passing through his nose, and then tilted his head with concentration as he started a second loop of the bandage, positioning it with delicate precision on some line only he
seemed able to see. “It’s not that bad,” he assured, rounding the tape over the curve of Sherlock’s palm with a grazing touch that made him shiver. “It’s long, but not deep. Probably won’t even need the bandage tomorrow.”

Sherlock nodded, nothing worth saying coming to mind, and silence settled between them as John stretched the bandage the final distance across his hand, tearing the section off and pressing down on the edge to seal it in place.

He lingered there for longer than they both knew was necessary, stroking back and forth across the wrapped surface of Sherlock’s palm, and then gently slid his hands away, turning his attention to sealing the first aid materials back up. “I, um- I talked to Mycroft,” he said, fingers slow as they twisted at the Dettol cap. “Downstairs. He, er- Well, I asked about…being moved.”

Sherlock’s eyes widened down at his hand where he cradled it in his lap, breath hitching as his heart stumbled over a beat.

“He said he was going to have to stop using the painters as a cover soon anyway—the neighbors are complaining, I guess,” he muttered, shrugging a shoulder as he resealed the package of gauze with trembling fingers, “so it wouldn’t be too much trouble to- to sneak me out with the gear.”

Sherlock could see John watching him out of the corner of his eye, but he couldn’t turn to him, couldn’t do anything but wish John could read his mind, and then perhaps explain to him what the hell was going on in it.

“I don’t- I mean, just to be perfectly clear,” the blond quavered on, body twisting on the sofa to face Sherlock more directly as his hands shifted in the air over his knees, “I don’t want to leave, but- Well, if it- If you- If you want me to go, I-”

“No,” Sherlock barely whispered, barely even breathed, his head shaking weakly as he stared down at the coffee table, the swirls and spirals of the woodgrain seeming to roll like waves in his exhausted, addled state. “No, I- I don’t want you to go,” he added, and John’s hands lowered to his lap, the silence tightening between them as the unspoken question Sherlock had no answer to plucked at the air.

*Then what do you want?*

“Well,” John answered, nodding at the side of his face, and then turned his eyes to the ground, Sherlock sneaking a glance at him until he lifted his chin again. “Well, I should…” he murmured, waving a hand at the supplies as he stood, and then gathered them up in his arms, Sherlock watching his back as he walked down the corridor to return them to the bathroom.

Once John had disappeared, Sherlock sighed, cradling his head in his hands as he breathed down at the floor between his knees.

They had to talk. He’d put it off as long as he could, and now, though he was still woefully unprepared, he was also out of excuses.

“Head still hurt?”

Well, *almost* out of excuses.

“A bit,” Sherlock replied, turning his face up as John returned, and the blond nodded, stopping closer to the kitchen than the sofa as he looked down at Sherlock across the coffee table.

“Maybe you should try and sleep,” he suggested, folding his arms over his chest. “At least until Mrs.
Hudson comes up with whatever she’s pretending to have made too much of today.”

“Beef wellington,” Sherlock supplied, having caught a whiff of it on the way in, and John chuckled, his eyes brightening as Sherlock smiled back, “and I suppose I should.”

John smiled, nodding as he started to back away toward the kitchen. “Alright,” he said, eyes sharpening with added alertness as Sherlock stood, no doubt expecting him to collapse somewhere between here and his bedroom, “I’ll just– Well, I’ll be out here.” He waved a hand out at the living room, Sherlock managing to suppress his smile before the blond looked back.

“Alright,” he acknowledged with a nod, and John ducked his head, taking his leave into the kitchen as Sherlock moved down the corridor. He stopped when he reached his bedroom door, bandaged hand stalling on the handle as he felt a prickling on the back of his neck, and turned just in time to see what he thought was the elbow of John’s jumper disappear from the side kitchen door. Biting his lip to keep his grin from becoming a snicker, he shook his head, shutting himself inside his room and heading straight for the bed, kicking his shoes off along the way.

Just a few hours of sleep to clear his mind, sort out what he wanted to say, that would be all he needed, and he pulled the duvet up over his ear, wriggling his cheek deep into the down pillow as he considered just how much Mrs. Hudson would overcook the beef today, but, four hours later, when she tottered up the stairs, platter and ‘yoo-hoo!’ s in tow, he didn’t hear a sound.

*****

John woke up with a tongue deserts would envy, coughing as he opened his eyes, reaching for his water on the bedside table. The glass was there, but it was empty, John belatedly remembering that he’d had to down the whole thing before bed to get rid of the sandpaper feel Mrs. Hudson’s beef well-over-done had left in his mouth, and he rolled back onto his spine, frowning up at the ceiling as he weighed whether it was worth getting up for a refill. Another coughing fit made the decision for him, and he snatched the cup from the table, groaning at the red 3:27 displayed on his clock as he hobbled toward the door, opening it slowly to avoid the squeak.

Sherlock had never resurfaced after retiring to his bedroom some 12 hours before, but John still didn’t want to risk it, knowing the detective had built up quite a sleep debt over the past several days, so he crept down the stairs on the pads of his feet, sticking close to the wall and dodging the groaning boards. It took him a while, but he made it to the bottom without so much as a single creak breaking the silence of 221B, and then it was smooth sailing to the kitchen, John navigating by the misty light of the moon through the curtains as he turned on the tap, letting it run cold before holding his cup out to capture the stream.

When the glass was about three-quarters full, he twisted off the faucet, turning to lean his back against the counter as he took a long draw of cool relief, gulping down three large swallows before lowering the cup from his lips, brushing a lingering drop from his bottom lip with the back of his hand. His eyes wandered aimlessly over the dimly lit kitchen, or, at least, he’d intended it to be aimless, but he found his gaze repeatedly drawn to the dark corridor in front of him, his fingers fidgeting against the glass as his mind wandered around the corner, pushing at the hinges of Sherlock’s bedroom door.

Was he awake, was he cold, was he having another nightmare? Did he need an extra blanket, less blankets, a glass of water?

John bit his lip, looking down at the moonlight captured in the rolling ripples in his glass.

Could he check? He didn’t want to overstep, to push where Sherlock didn’t want to give, but they’d
made a little bit of progress, hadn’t they? Enough for him to peek his head in?

Downing the rest of his water like a shot of liquid courage, he clicked the glass onto the surface of the counter, tiptoeing across the linoleum to the corridor, and then began shuffling his way to the door, leaning his head as far forward as he could to try to catch some hint of sound. Nothing met his ears, however, so he wrapped his hand around the doorknob, closing his eyes as he drew in a deep breath, just starting to turn the handle when a voice at his back sent him leaping out of his skin with a gasp.

“I believe this is the part where I make an unnecessary amount of noise to alert you to my presence.”

John clutched at his chest, steadying his breathing as best he could before he reached the mouth of the corridor, scanning the darkened living room for the owner of the sarcasm.

Sherlock was sitting in the center of the sofa, his legs crossed beneath him as he cradled a mug over his ankles.

“I didn’t know you were awake,” John said, still a bit breathless, and Sherlock chuckled, dropping his eyes to his cup as he lifted it to his lips.

“Clearly,” he mocked, looking up at John through his lashes as he smirked around a sip. “You were very quiet,” he added, still smiling, but it quickly grew subdued, his hands fidgeting with the handle of his cup as he lowered it again.

John swallowed, looking down at the holey toes of his socks where they protruded from the navy pajama bottoms. “Didn’t wanna wake you,” he murmured, and Sherlock shrugged a shoulder.

“You didn’t,” he assured, shifting his weight as he curled his legs in tighter. “I’ve been up since 1.”

“1?” John echoed, Sherlock nodding in reply. “You could’ve woken me,” he said without thinking, his groggy brain too slow to remember why that was impossible, but Sherlock only shook his head, smiling down at his cup.

“No need,” he replied, lifting his chin with a pointed shift of the mug. “I can make my own tea,” he quipped, and John hissed a frail laugh, moving to slip his hands into his nonexistent pockets as he rocked back on his heels.

The room grew quiet, filled only with the golden haze of the streetlamps outside, the day still too young even for birds, and John’s hand clenched at his side as he glanced back toward the stairs, fighting the impulse to run. Glancing back to Sherlock, he found the man had returned his attention to his mug, tapping at the handle with faint clinks of fingernails on ceramic, and John’s eyes caught on the strip of white wrapped around his hand, barely distinguishable from the surrounding skin.

“How’s your hand?” he asked, relieved to have something to say, though he wished it didn’t have to involve Sherlock slicing himself open.

“Fine, I imagine,” Sherlock answered, turning his palm over in front of his face to examine the bandage. “It doesn’t hurt all that much, at least, but I haven’t looked at it.”

John bit his lip, anxiously clasping his hands together at the small of his back before stepping forward. “I could- Do you mind if I-” he stammered, still worried his next word might be Sherlock’s last straw, but the detective shook his head, shrugging a shoulder as he shifted to his left to allow John room on the sofa. John swallowed, his heart hammering for the second time that morning, but the reason remained the same.
He was still fucking terrified.

Sherlock looked down at his hand when John sat beside him, twisting at the edge of the bandage, but, though he couldn’t seem to meet his eyes, he didn’t move away either, even shifting his hand a little over his thigh to make it easier for John to reach.

Gently, slowly, John stretched out his arms, practically holding his breath as his left hand slid beneath Sherlock’s to lift it, afraid that even a blink out of place would startle the man back to his room for another day they couldn’t get back. He started to unwrap the cloth, his right hand trembling with the forced slowness, and then froze as Sherlock twitched, the subtle spasm halting John’s heart. He took a few breaths, waiting for Sherlock to draw his hand away, but the retreat never came, and, after a moment, John continued his work, unwinding the remainder of the bandage without incident.

“Well, it closed up alright,” he assessed, gently shifting Sherlock’s palm side-to-side to catch the light. “No need to get another bandage.”

“Won’t have to cut it off, then?” Sherlock murmured, and John chuckled, lifting his eyes to the detective.

“’Fraid not,” he confirmed, and Sherlock sighed with faux dejection, looking back to the wound.

“Pity,” he said, and John grinned at his downcast face.

“You could’ve gotten a hook,” he teased, and Sherlock barked a laugh, eyes lifting up to John through his lashes.

“No,” he said with a shake of his head, “too common.”

John nodded, humming thoughtfully as he looked out over the living room. “Sword?” he offered, and Sherlock laughed, rocking his weight back against the cushions before resettling.

“Better,” he admitted, tipping his head side-to-side, and they both chuckled before the now-familiar silence descended onto their shoulders once again, but, at least to John, it didn’t feel quite so heavy now.

Eye contact remained out of his reach, however, so he dropped his gaze to his lap, noticing as he did that he was still supporting Sherlock’s hand on his palm, the backs of his fingers draped like a bridge between their knees. He stared at the point of contact, expecting it to prove to be a mirage with every blink, and then tentatively twitched his thumb up to reach Sherlock’s palm, his touch feather light as he brushed against the outer curve of the man’s hand.

Sherlock’s breath hitched, John unable to look up to see the matching facial expression, but he didn’t yank his hand away—or punch him with it—and, emboldened by that small success, John continued, skating the pad of his thumb in a line down the pale skin.

When he reached the hinge of Sherlock’s wrist, he shifted his grip slightly, stretching his thumb to sweep over the blue veins, but stopped when he felt the skin twitch under his touch, assuming it was an overture to Sherlock withdrawing. Sherlock didn’t move, however, and, after a moment and a frown, John pieced together why, pressing his thumb firmer into the skin to confirm his suspicion.

Sherlock’s pulse leapt up to meet his touch, growing quicker by the second, and John might have been concerned if he couldn’t feel his own heart beating in tandem, rattling his ribs so hard, he’d swear he could see impact tremors in the long-cold tea in Sherlock’s lap.

His own breath whistling in his ears, John slowly turned his face, looking up through his lashes at
first, and then lifted his eyes properly when he found Sherlock already watching him, his expression unfathomable.

He looked stranded, desperate, terrified, his wide eyes glinting like struck flint in the dark, and John froze, his mouth running dry as his body began to buzz at every point of contact he hadn’t even realized they had—a graze of a knee here, a tip of a toe there—and, all the while, Sherlock’s pulse pounded on, flinging itself against John’s fingers like a caged bird beats on its bars.

The silence trembled with tension, with expectation, with significance, and John wished, not for the first time, that he could see things the way Sherlock did, see Sherlock the way Sherlock saw others, because then he’d know what to do, know what Sherlock wanted him to do, but, as it was, he was only John Watson, and John Watson couldn’t help but lean forward, shifting his hand to tangle their fingers as his eyes flashed down to Sherlock’s parted lips.

Sherlock didn’t physically move very much, but John felt a chasm open up between them all the same, miles compressed into the centimeters Sherlock slid his hand away, leaving only the fingertips intertwined as he dropped his face.

John stopped, looking between Sherlock’s averted eyes, and then leaned back, withdrawing his hand completely as acid climbed in his throat.

“I’m sorry,” John initially thought he’d whispered, but the words had rolled off Sherlock’s lips, the man looking thoroughly miserable as he shook his head at the small stretch of sofa between them. “I- I don’t’” he stammered, and then broke off with a frustrated sigh, turning away as he lifted his hands to his face, rolling circles over his eyelids.

John blinked, glancing around the room for some sign that he’d drifted off to sleep and was now dreaming, but it all seemed real enough, however incomprehensible. “Sorry?” he questioned, frowning at the crumpled figure in front of him. “What- Why would you be sorry?”

Sherlock shook his head, his breaths trembling as he dragged them in and out. “Because, I- I don’t- I can’t-”

“You don’t have to,” John urged, leaning in again as Sherlock hung his head, pushing his fingers up into his curls. “I-I shouldn’t’ve- I wasn’t thinking, I just-”

“It’s not that,” Sherlock interjected, rattling his head again as he lifted his face. “I mean, not really, not-not entirely; it’s- I” He snarled, a sudden fit of irritation that sent John startling back, and then flung his head back into his hands, panting down at the floor.

John held perfectly still, watching the rise and fall of the man’s spine gradually level out to normal, and then Sherlock lifted his head, hands folded beneath his chin as the yellow light of the streetlamps rippled across his glassy eyes.

“I don’t understand,” he whispered, the watery syllables shaking along with his head as he stared across at the fireplace. “I don’t- I don’t know-” he warbled, and then pinched his eyes shut, swallowing down at the ground before dragging in a trembling gulp of air that smashed through John like a sledgehammer. “I understand…why you did it,” he said, clinging to his composure by his fingernails, but John’s was crumbling just as fast, a knot swelling in his throat as his eyes began to prickle, “and I know- I know you didn’t have a choice.” He swallowed again, blinking out toward the kitchen as a faint sniff hissed through his nose. “And that should be the end of it!” he blustered suddenly, rattling his head as he turned just short of John, looking at the stretch of coffee table in front of him. “It was the logical thing to do; it was what I would’ve done!” he railed, slicing a hand through the air before settling it on his sternum, but the fingers soon slipped away, falling to his lap
as his body wilted. “But it’s not- It’s not enough,” he breathed, watching his hands as he twisted his fingers together in his lap. “And I don’t- I don’t know why,” he added helplessly, the saltwater pooled on his bottom lashes flickering in the light as he shook his head. “I don’t know why it still hurts.”

John flinched as Sherlock’s voice split over the final words, his own vision blurring. “Because you trusted me,” he answered, watching as Sherlock closed his eyes, a tremor running through his bottom lip, “and I let you down.”

For a long time, Sherlock didn’t move, his face a mask of marble, nothing but the involuntary motions of his breathing proving he was still flesh and blood, and then, all at once, John saw the dam break, an invisible tidal wave cresting over him as Sherlock’s brimming eyes bored clean through his own. “How could you do that?” he breathed, shaking his head, and John felt his breath hitch in his lungs as a lightning bolt of agony split out over his heart. “How could you just leave?”

John had answers to that question, answers Sherlock already had, had already explained, but they weren’t the answers he really wanted, wouldn’t answer the question he was really asking, so John didn’t offer anything at all, just looked back at Sherlock as a tear broke loose from the man’s grey eyes, his hand lifting automatically to smear it away with a thumb. “I’m sorry,” he whispered, sliding his hand further back over Sherlock’s jaw, formality forgotten. “I’m sorry,” he heard again, feeling his lips move, but having no control over what they formed, his focus fixed on lifting his other hand to push a curl off Sherlock’s forehead, combing it back into the others as Sherlock’s eyelids fluttered closed, tears still leaking out from the stitches of his lashes. “I’m so sor-”

Sherlock’s cup hit the rug with muted thud as he lunged forward, his salt-soaked lips crashing against John’s like waves beating over rocks, and it felt like drowning, like being devoured, Sherlock eroding him with every slide of lips and pinch of teeth.

John’s hand tightened where it was still caught in Sherlock’s hair, the other moving to the man’s waist to steady him, but John couldn’t tell who was anchoring whom, his fingers twisting into Sherlock’s grey t-shirt to hold him flush to his chest, holding on for dear life as Sherlock’s tongue roamed over his own.

It wasn’t a kiss so much as a force of nature, a hurricane incarnate, and it was all John could do just to keep his head aloft, riding out the gale until the trembling he could feel building in the man’s limbs finally overtook him, Sherlock’s mouth quivering with a sob as it slipped free of John’s lips. His forehead fell to John’s shoulder as his fingers latched onto the white t-shirt over his chest, nails scraping at the skin underneath, and he wrenched at the fabric, weeping into the cotton as John leaned them both back across the sofa, his head propped up by the arm while Sherlock lay on his chest.

“I’m sorry,” he pressed into Sherlock’s hair with a grazing kiss, echoing the oath against his forehead, his cheekbones, his jawline, his eyelids. He spoke until his voice was hoarse and Sherlock’s tears dry, the man breathing with the steady sleep of catharsis as John continued to comb through his curls, apologies and promises intermingling as Sherlock’s heart beat against his through their chests.

“I’m sorry… I’m sorry… I love you… I’m sorry…”

Chapter End Notes
Got a Tumblr? Find me!
Chapter Notes

Let's finish this bitch, who's with me!??! Not that this is the last chapter, I'm just battle-crying. Sometimes also regular crying.

Seriously though, thank you to everyone who believed in me, pushed me, and supported me in the long and arduous journey to get back on the gargantuan horse that is this fic. This story means so much to me, as do all of you, and I'm so glad we're all back in it together.

Even those of you who were too excited to read this opening author note and just went for it. Or maybe especially you.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The corners of John’s lashes clung together as he peeled open his eyes, rubbing at the flaky film of dried tears. Grey light misted through the curtains, morning not yet broken to afternoon, and he hissed a sleepy breath through his nose, stretching his spine and wincing as a sharp pain spasmed up his neck. He lifted his hand to the base of his skull, rubbing at a knot in the muscle, and propped himself up on the opposite elbow, gingerly lifting his head from the arm of the sofa and surveying the room with a squint.

Nothing appeared out of place, but John was sure something was missing, scanning the cluttered tables and shelves with a hazy nagging at the back of his mind, and then a voice drifted up the stairs to his left, his eyes shooting wide as the previous night crashed over him like a bucket of ice water.

’How could you do that? How could you just leave?’

“People don’t call first anymore?”

“I did call; you didn’t answer.”

“Some might call that a hint.”

“Are you going to let me in, or would you prefer we both freeze in the doorway?”

A short pause later, John heard Sherlock’s signature sigh, the front door creaking open and thumping shut as footsteps began ascending the stairs.

John leapt to his feet, tugging at his shirt in a vain attempt to smooth the wrinkles, but could do nothing about the stains and smears across his chest, the sobs that put them there still wailing in his ears, and used his last few seconds to wrestle his sleep-rumpled hair into submission as Mycroft’s coiffed head appeared over the horizon of the stairwell.

“Morning,” he remarked with a nod, eyes lingering on John’s shirt a moment as he scanned him, but Sherlock swept around his shoulder, pulling his attention away.

“What’s happened?” he asked, voice firm, but no longer barbed, and John glanced between the brothers, wondering what miracle he’d missed.
“We’ve received more information about the…explosion,” he explained, pausing a moment before risking it, a brow lifting when Sherlock only nodded. “The trigger was in the radiator.” He placed his briefcase on the table against the wall, dialing in the combination and snapping open the locks, passing a yellow folder into Sherlock’s waiting hand. “The second someone”—his eyes flicked to John—“turned the dial, it sent a signal to the detonators. The PE-4 was in the lockers,” he continued, motioning for Sherlock to turn a page in the report he was leafing through, brow furrowed, teeth worrying at a corner of his lip. “Half that amount would’ve been overkill,” he said, watching Sherlock’s eyes widen as he scanned down the page, John unable to decipher anything but the odd number from over Sherlock’s shoulder. “The bomb we pulled out from under Parliament last year was smaller.”

“What!?” John interjected, but Mycroft rattled his head, hand swatting in the air to promise ‘another time’.

“Nothing traceable?” Sherlock presumed, seeming unsurprised when Mycroft shook his head.

“We were lucky to get even that much information,” he said, bobbing a nod down at the report, which Sherlock then closed, handing it back to him. “Nothing was supposed to survive that explosion.”

The words hung heavy between them, the click of John’s swallow snapping through the silence, his eyes locked onto Sherlock’s back as the man’s shoulders stiffened.

“What else?” he asked, eyes sharp as they fixed on his brother, and John frowned, watching Mycroft shift his weight between his polished wingtips.

“There was…a fire,” he murmured, twisting back to his briefcase to remove another folder, holding it aloft over Sherlock’s waiting hand, his gaze pointed as it lifted. “A house in Belgravia.”

Sherlock’s palm dropped a few inches, fingertips curling as a breath hitched on his lips.

“Belgravia?” John echoed, watching the side of Sherlock’s face as he took the folder, a swallow bobbing down his throat before he flicked it open with a determined snap. “Isn’t that where...” He trailed off, his question answered in the set of Sherlock’s jaw as he flipped through photographs of a familiar doorstep, the pristine white paint now charred and flaking.

John wavered on his feet, the room spinning as bile crested up his throat. “God...” he breathed, knees giving way as he fell to the sofa with a graceless thud, Sherlock spinning on his socked heels in alarm. “Did she- Is she-” He blinked up at Sherlock, desperately searching the steel blue gaze for a miracle, but there would be no reprieve, Sherlock’s eyes pinching at the corners before he turned his chin away, leaving John alone with his grief.

“How many?” he asked, turning to the last sheet of paper—a coroner’s report, John noted with another surge of nausea.

“Just her,” Mycroft replied, and John winced, hanging his head to bury his face in his hands, the rug blurring beneath him. “It appears she was trapped in an upstairs bedroom. They say it’s most likely she was unconscious before-”

A scalding swallow singed down John’s throat, but the rest of him grew cold, hollowed out and exposed to the creeping frost of guilt. “I-I should’ve-” he croaked to the floor, shaking his head between his palms. “After what happened, I-I should’ve thought -”

“We all should have,” Sherlock interjected, something in his tone making John lift his face, a certain
steadiness that seemed at odds with the subject, and, sure enough, Sherlock’s eyes were bright as they darted over the coroner’s report, a corner of his mouth curled up in a comma, “but I think Irene would rather beat us up over it herself.”

“What?” Mycroft stepped forward, yanking the folder back, but Sherlock held on to the coroner’s report, lifting a smug brow at his brother’s glower.

“It’s not her,” he said, spinning the paper between his fingers for Mycroft to read, and John leapt up, rounding Sherlock’s shoulder to scan the page himself, but it all looked accurate enough to him, a quick glance at Mycroft’s furrowed brow proving he was not alone in his confusion. Sherlock rolled his eyes, John’s heart lifting in spite of the circumstances, a snarky detective always preferable to a sullen one. “The measurements,” he explained, fluttering the sheet, and Mycroft took it, holding it out between them for John to get a closer look. “They’re all wrong. Irene’s at least an inch taller than that corpse, and much more narrow through the torso. You could fit two of her in that bust!” He scoffed, flicking a hand at the page, Mycroft pulling it closer to his face while John tilted his lifting head.

“Her bust?” he parroted, Sherlock forehead furrowing in an oblivious frown. “How do you know the size of her bust?”

The man blinked, tipping his head with a confused quirk of his lips. “Because I pay attention?”

“To her bust?”

“And her height.”

“When did you even see her bust?”

“When did I- She’s a prostitute, John; she’s always half naked.”

“And you snuck a peek at her bra size while she was finishing the job?”

“Ladies, please,” Mycroft interrupted, voice flat with equal parts exasperation and disinterest, and Sherlock’s eyes turned away, John’s narrowing on the impassive face as he wondered if he’d been wound up on purpose, the prospect almost comforting in its normalcy. Mycroft looked up over the top of the page, fixing Sherlock with a shrewd gaze. “You’re certain?” he asked, and Sherlock tipped his head, unamused. “Very well,” he said, slipping the coroner’s report back into the folder and returning it to his briefcase. “I’ll have them run DNA when this is all through. In the meantime, if she felt she needed to fake her own death”—John blinked between them, leaping the usual few steps the Holmes brothers skipped—“she’ll be in need of protection. Do you have any idea where she’d go?”

Sherlock chuckled, shaking his head over shrugging shoulders as he stepped back to lean against the arm of the sofa. “If she needs protection, she’ll find us,” he said, folding his arms over his chest. “No one can find Irene Adler when she doesn’t want to be found.”

“No one?” Mycroft prodded, lifting a brow, but Sherlock only twitched a shoulder, seemingly conceding the point, though John suspected it wouldn’t take long for Irene to surface if Sherlock were the one searching. “Well then,” he snipped, locking the briefcase and sweeping it off the table in one smooth motion, “keep me informed.”

“Always do!” Sherlock chirped, smirking up at Mycroft’s rolling eyes, expression crinkling with distaste as the man began descending the stairs, the door swinging open and shut a moment later.

It was a mark of how dark the times were that John found himself missing Mycroft’s presence, the
man a tweed bulwark against the oppressive awkwardness that resettled in the air around them, a toxic cloud corrupting John’s lungs with every strained breath, and he stepped forward, fingertips twitching against his thigh as he made to brush past Sherlock’s averted frame. “I’ll just put the-”

Sherlock’s arm snapped out in front of him, a frail barrier John nevertheless froze in the face of, though Sherlock’s face was still directed at the door, what little John could see of his eyes cold and far away. “Sit down,” he ordered, not unkind, but not to be argued with, and John took a wide step back, tucking himself firmly into the far corner of the sofa. Sherlock folded his arm back into his lap, spine ramrod straight, and then his shoulders slumped with a heavy sigh, head hanging as a hand raked back through his curls. “I have questions,” he said simply, chin turning toward his shoulder, a single stony iris peering out from the corner.

John nodded. “Okay,” he said, holding Sherlock’s eyes as long as he was allowed, the man blinking away as he stood, turning to address the sofa cushion to the left of John’s shoulder.

“What happened?” he began, hands brushing at the hips of his low-slung pajama trousers in search of phantom pockets before he settled on crossing his arms. “At Langley? After I left?” His eyes flickered to John’s a moment before he dropped his chin, watching his socks wriggle against the carpet.

John’s eyes held on his downcast face, watching the long black lashes blink in shadow beneath the overhang of tousled curls. “I-I was going back to the dorm to change,” he said, frowning at Sherlock’s knees as he thought, the memory of those moments hazy and disjointed, like shards dragged from a murky past life. “I went the long way, around the residence halls, and saw Moran coming out of the locker room.” His gaze drifted across the room, marking the spot on the new rug as clearly as if the blood still pooled there, the gunshot ringing clear in his mind, but still could not summon any emotion but relief, and blinked back to Sherlock, grey eyes a heartbeat too slow in pretending they’d never lifted at all. “I knew I didn’t have much time,” he continued, bracing his arms on his thighs and lacing his fingers between his knees. “The team would be heading down any minute, so...I called Mycroft.”

A muscle twitched in Sherlock’s jaw, eyes fluttering over a blink, and then he nodded, chest rising and falling with a steadying breath.

“I knew he had people closeby,” John explained anyway, knuckles popping as he twisted his hands, “and, I thought, if anyone has a plan for this-”

“What did Mycroft tell you to do?” Sherlock interjected, impatience sharpening his tone, and John swallowed, continuing with a barebones approach.

“Stay in the room until his people got there.”

“How long did that take?”

“A minute, tops.”

“Passable,” Sherlock remarked with a flick of his brows, and John frowned, wondering what would’ve merited an ‘impressive’. “And when they arrived?”

“They dragged me out to a car.” John said, rolling his shoulder at the memory, the indignity still stinging a bit. “Threw me in the back and told me to stay down. We were a couple minutes away when-” He stopped, eyes dropping to the carpet as he forced a swallow through his tightening throat.

It was still so fresh—the flames, the smoke, the sirens—still waiting every night in the silent darkness
of his room, but he knew it could never compare to the terrors haunting Sherlock’s dreams, specters summoned by John’s own hand. He hadn’t wanted to, hadn’t so much as been offered a choice in the matter, but good intentions were only worth so much, and they certainly couldn’t fix anything.

That was up to him.

“Where did they take you?” Sherlock asked, his tone softening, but somehow that cut even deeper, John the last person deserving of his sympathy.

“I’m not sure,” he admitted, shaking his head. “Some old warehouse, I think. Just outside London. We were there...maybe an hour and a half? Then Mycroft showed up.” He kept his eyes fixed on the floor, feeling Sherlock’s eyes boring into the top of his skull. “He didn’t say much”—he shook his head, Sherlock’s socks wobbling in and out of focus—“just went through my cover. I tried to—” He stopped, lips falling closed over sentiments that neither mattered nor excused. “He told me about the painters, about me posing as an agent. Then he left and a van came in—the painting company one they’re keeping out front—and we all got changed and climbed in the back. They rolled me up with the tarps to get me inside,” he grumbled, still quite certain that hadn’t been the only option, “and then I just...stayed.”

“In 221C?”

“Yes.”

“The whole time?”

“Yes. Well, until—”

“Until you ran up here to save me, yes, that goes without saying,” Sherlock snipped, flicking a hand through the air as he turned to pace toward the door, leaving John to blink at his retreating back, surprised Sherlock was talking about this at all, let alone crediting him, “but did you leave before that?”

“No.”

“Not at all?”

“No,” John echoed, shaking his head, frowning at the boy’s stiff spine where he stopped just inside the doorway, arms folding over his chest. “Why?”

It was a long moment before Sherlock answered, fingers shifting against his biceps as he tightened his hold on himself. “Did you hear anything?”

John blinked his eyes to the ground, the quiet question nevertheless striking deep. “No,” he said, a half truth that didn’t answer what Sherlock was really asking, and he took a breath, watching Sherlock’s back as he continued, “but Mycroft- Mycroft told me you...talked to me.”

Pale fingertips pressed divots into Sherlock’s arms as his hands clenched, head dipping a fraction of an inch.

“He-He didn’t say anything else though.”

“But you’ve surmised,” Sherlock stated, a naked fact bereft of any emotion but exhaustion, and John held his breath, watching as the man hung his head with a sigh.

He hadn’t thought much of Mycroft’s confession at the time, or maybe he’d just tried not to think
about it at all, comforting himself with the assumption that it was only the usual absentminded mutterings as Sherlock puzzled his way through the cases Lestrade had brought over as a distraction, but he’d known better, even then, Sherlock’s first broken words confirming a dark suspicion he could no longer hide from the light.

‘You’re...real?’

“I’m not crazy,” Sherlock muttered, a little frantic, and John stood, a distant show of solidarity.

“I know,” he assured, and Sherlock huffed a jagged laugh.

“No,” he breathed, shaking his head down at the floor, “you don’t.”

It was said without ire, without implication, a simple acknowledgment of an inarguable truth, and that, more than anything, made John uncertain how to proceed, his weight shifting back and forth between his knees as he debated his approach.

“I...saw you,” Sherlock whispered, and John hissed in a breath, dropping his eyes to the hardwood.

“Just a few times, and-and I was half asleep for most of them, but...” His breath trembled as he steadied himself, shoulders rising and falling before he once again lifted his chin. “I don’t know what would’ve happened,” he said with a gentle shake of his head, “if-if you hadn’t- If you’d really-” He faded away, an audible swallow forced through his throat as his hands shook against his arms, and John took a tentative step forward, the floorboards announcing his approach.

“But I didn’t,” he said softly, pausing a moment to allow Sherlock the chance to bolt before venturing closer. “And it’s not- You were”—he dropped his head, stopping a few feet short of Sherlock’s back, guilt prickling hot at his throat—“grieving.”

“For nothing,” Sherlock clipped, John wincing as it cut to the quick, and then sighed, John lifting his head to see him wipe a pale hand down his face. “I’m sorry, I-I don’t mean-”

“You don’t have to-”

“Yes, I do,” Sherlock interjected, turning halfway back toward him, eyes urgent before they blinked down to the floor between them. “I don’t- I don’t want to be angry anymore.” He shook his head, shoulders slumping. “I still am,” he admitted with a tip of his head, “but I-I’d like to try- Not going back to normal, but—” He huffed an exasperated sigh, fingers pushing back through his curls to scratch at the base of his skull. “I need...time,” he said, grimacing over the strained word, “but it’s not... It’s just making me feel worse.” His shoulders rattled with a shrug, eyes flicking up through his lashes for a blink. “Holding onto it. Like something—living in me, and-and the more I feed it, it just...gets bigger and bigger until—until I can’t breathe!” A sharp breath rattled over his teeth as he turned his face away, John watching the swallow roll down his throat, not daring to so much as blink lest he shatter the tenuous peace. Sherlock’s shoulders rose and fell with steeling breaths, a final sigh hissing out as he hung his head to the floor. “I dunno,” he whispered, shaking his head. “That probably doesn’t even—”

“No,” John interrupted, stepping within arm’s length of Sherlock’s shoulder, if he dared, “it—it does.”

Silence fell around them, Sherlock’s slow breaths mingling with the sound of John’s heart as it thumped in his ears, and he stepped closer, fingers trembling as they crept across the space between them.

Sherlock neither stiffened nor pulled away as John’s hand ghosted against the wrinkled fabric of his shirt, fingers curling around the sharp blade of his shoulder as he grew more confident. Pressing the
pads of his fingers into the taut skin over Sherlock’s collarbone, he ran his thumb in slow strokes at the crest of the man’s back, trying to read Sherlock’s mind through his skin, holding his breath and hoping he hadn’t taken one step too far, but Sherlock’s shoulder sank with slackening tension under his touch, foreign fingertips sliding hesitantly against his own.

“It’ll be okay,” Sherlock said, a fearful question wrapped in a transparent shroud, and John stretched his hand farther over the man’s shoulder, wrist straining as he locked their fingers together over Sherlock’s chest.

“Yes,” he answered the unasked, close enough to smell yesterday’s shampoo in Sherlock’s hair, to see the blood drumming within his neck, “it will.”

Sherlock drew in a stilted breath, lungs twitching beneath their clasped hands as his grip tightened. He said nothing, dipping his head in a somber nod, and then slipped his fingers free, lingering at John’s fingertips a moment to soften the withdrawal. “We should go,” he said, stepping away and turning to face him, though he still seemed more comfortable meeting John’s neck than his eyes. “Mrs. Hudson will summon us any minute.”

John frowned, tipping his head. “For what?”

A single brown brow lifted. “Can’t you smell it?”

John sniffed, heart jumping in his chest as his mind leapt to the most sinister possibilities. “Smell wha-”

“Boys!” came a call from downstairs, growing louder as footsteps moved to the bottom of the stairs. “Come down and try some of these scones! I’m working on new recipes, and I need a second opinion.”

“John will be right there,” Sherlock replied, twitching a smile as John blinked and Mrs. Hudson’s huff carried up through the door.

“I need two second opinions,” she clipped, feet slapping back toward her flat. “Smartass,” she added in a muffled mutter, Sherlock raising his brows while John ducked a smile to the floor, and then the door thumped shut below them, the clang of a baking tray following thereafter.

John watched the side of Sherlock’s face, the man’s grey eyes fixed on the door they should be walking through soon if they knew what was good for them, but Sherlock made no move to leave, so John made no move at all.

“Maybe-” Sherlock murmured, eyes dropping to the floor, his pale fingers plucking at the side seam of his trousers. “Maybe later we could…pick up where we left off”—John blinked, eyes flashing to the sofa—“with Doctor Who.”

“Oh,” John muttered, that making much more sense, though still surprising. “Yeah, if-if you want.”

Sherlock smiled, eyes flicking up to John from the corners, and then nodded, turning away to head for the door.

John stared after him, a sentiment he wasn’t sure he had permission to say thumping in his chest, but Sherlock turned in the doorway, cutting off his opportunity with a tilt of his head.

“Well?” he snipped, quirking a brow. “Are you coming?”

John nodded, slightly dazed, but smiled when Sherlock rolled his eyes, stomping down the stairs
away from him as John—still and always—followed.

**********

Sherlock clenched his jaw, tilting his head away and suppressing a yawn as another episode reached its end.

“Tired?” John asked from where he’d sequestered himself on the opposite side of the sofa, waiting for explicit permission Sherlock was trying to subtly give, inching toward the center with his hand lying open on the cushion beside him.

“No,” he lied, and John chuckled, lifting the remote from the armrest he was trying to fuse with.

“It is late,” he excused, the screen returning to the main menu as he muted the circuitous music, “and you never know how early Mycroft might barge in.”

Sherlock bit the side of his lip John couldn’t see, eyes unfocused on the rolling images before him. John had been tiptoeing on eggshells all day, following two steps behind like some sort of lady in waiting, and, though Sherlock knew he was only trying to be respectful, he didn’t know how to tell John it wasn’t necessary, that, in fact, it was driving him mad and would he just put a fucking arm around him already!

“I suppose,” he murmured, John’s silent stare pressing against the side of his face.

“Is there something else you wanted to-”

“No,” Sherlock interjected, standing in a rush and shaking his head. “No, I’m just...not particularly tired. Might go over a few more cases,” he muttered, nodding down the corridor at his bedroom door.

“Oh.” John nodded at the floor between his knees as he stood, scratching up the back of his neck. “Alright. Sounds...fun.” He tipped his head, frowning at his own choice of words, and Sherlock chuckled, their eyes meeting in the shifting blue light of the television.

John dropped his gaze first, Sherlock’s skipping heart growing cold at the loss, and shuffled backward around the armrest, waving a hand at the cleared path. “After you,” he beckoned, and Sherlock did his best to smile, swallowing hard as he passed, his neck prickling as John’s footsteps fell in behind him.

He passed the base of the stairs and stopped, turning around, eyes flicking between John’s face and his chest.

“Well, er...goodnight,” John muttered, fingers twitching at his side, and Sherlock nodded, forcing himself to hold John’s gaze.

“Goodnight,” he echoed, the gaze lingering a long moment before they both twisted abruptly away, Sherlock fighting to regulate his breathing as he feigned a calm retreat down the corridor.

He turned the handle of his door with quaking fingers, pushing halfway into the room before indecision stalled his stride, breath seizing in his lungs as he listened to John’s slow footsteps climb the stairs behind him. His heartbeat throbbed in his ears, lips trembling with false starts, and then he sucked in a determined breath, closing his eyes and spinning on his heels. “Would you mind-”

“Do you want-” John blurted overtop of him, thumping down a step to see around the wall between
them, both of them stopping to blink at one another before dropping their chins with shy puffs of laughter. “Well then,” John murmured, lifting his eyes, the timid smile illuminated in the soft yellow light of the staircase knocking Sherlock breathless, “your place or mine?” A corner of his lips twitched higher, reassurance of the jest, and Sherlock looked back over his shoulder, considering a moment before pulling the door shut behind him.

“Yours,” he reaffirmed, not quite ready to tackle overwriting the miserable memories of his room, and walked back up the corridor, John starting up the stairs ahead of him.

John moved quickly through the door, getting out of his way and bending down over a suitcase lying open in front of the dresser, the sight striking hard against Sherlock’s already battered heart.

He hadn’t unpacked. Why wouldn’t he unpack?

“I’m just gonna...change my shirt,” John said, standing up with a pale blue t-shirt clutched to his chest, eyes shifting between the main door and the closet.

Sherlock smiled, shaking his head to dismiss the unnecessary propriety, but he did turn around, crossing to his side of the bed and perching on the edge to pull off his socks. He heard the rustle of fabric over his shoulder, and chanced a fleeting glance, ensuring John’s back was to him before looking fully.

John’s grey t-shirt ruffled his hair as he discarded it, adding it to the small pile of dirty clothes beside his suitcase, the muscles in his back shifting with the movement. There was a stiffness in his shoulders as he slipped his arms into the sleeves of the pajama shirt, tan skin pulling over taut muscle, and Sherlock’s eyes stroked down his spine, pulse quickening until he reached John’s exposed hips, the bones jutting out more than he remembered.

He turned away as John pulled the fresh fabric over his head, hoisting his naked feet onto the mattress and tugging up the duvet, lying flat on his back with his head tipped toward the wall. Out of the corner of his eye, he watched John lean out the door, flicking off the staircase light and plunging them into darkness, and Sherlock blinked, trying to hurry his eyes’ adjustment to the lamplight washing in from the street.

The bed compressed beside him, duvet curling down and back up as John climbed in, mattress bouncing as he flipped onto his side, facing the door and away from Sherlock. He couldn’t have had more than a couple inches of space left, balancing on the side of the mattress like a coin on its edge, and Sherlock suppressed a sigh, nibbling his lip as he stared up at the stripes of yellow light streaking across the ceiling above them.

He wriggled against the mattress, the pretense of adjusting bringing him a few inches closer to John’s taut back, and he could hear the man breathing—wobbly exhales he was struggling to keep even. Sherlock drew in a breath at the ceiling, subtlety not going to get him anywhere fast, and then flipped onto his side, bringing his face within a foot of the back of John’s head.

No one was breathing anymore.

Slowly, his heart thumping against his ribs so hard, he was sure John would feel the vibration through the springs, he lifted a hand, fingers sliding out from the cool linen to hover at John’s back, and Sherlock swallowed, a lump of fear rolling down his throat.

There was no going back now.

He caught a scrap of John’s t-shirt between his fingertips. And tugged.
John’s shoulder twitched toward him, the beginning of a turn, but then stopped, doubt etched in the rigid lines of his back.

Sherlock dragged in a breath, stretching his fingertips to brush John’s spine through the thin cotton, a wordless confirmation, and John slowly turned toward him, Sherlock pulling his hand back to bridge over the pillow gap between them.

John’s eyes were bright beneath his lashes, looking across at Sherlock with cautious curiosity, and Sherlock buried his face in the pillow, ducking his head and focusing on John’s chest as his fingers twitched closer of their own accord.

“Tell me something,” he murmured, the only thing that came to mind, and John sniffed with fleeting amusement.

“Like what?” he whispered, rocking on his shoulder as he settled, bracing his hands on the pillow just beyond Sherlock’s splayed fingers.

Sherlock swallowed. “Something I don’t know,” he replied, an echo of a kinder time, John’s answering smile blurred by his lashes.

“What sort of something?”

Sherlock shrugged against the mattress, the shift of his shoulders lifting his hands to brush John’s, and he left them there, stretching the digits to rest the ridges of his fingerprints against John’s knuckles. “I don’t know. Something about you.”

John drew in a slow, thoughtful breath, catching wisps of Sherlock’s curls in the exhale. “When I was about 7 or so, I got invited to a birthday party for this kid in my year—Henry...something or other.” He rattled his head, and Sherlock tipped his up, John’s eyes looking past him to the wall beyond. “My mum had taken me out the weekend before to get him a present, and I’d found this Nerf gun at Argos—one of the smaller pistol ones, ya know?” He glanced down when Sherlock nodded, quirking a skeptical brow, and Sherlock’s lips twitched, blood pooling in his cheeks as he burrowed into the pillow.

“So I decide to wrap up a few toy cars instead and keep the Nerf gun for myself. Mum wasn’t coming to the party or anything; nobody would know. But I ended up feeling so bloody guilty, I never used it,” he chuckled, shaking his head against the pillow. “Donated it to the Christmas toy drive at school later that year.”

Sherlock smiled, curling his fingers to slide between John’s. “Even out your karma?” he mocked, and John huffed a laugh.

“Something like that.” His hand stopped, overlaying Sherlock’s, their fingers loosely slotted together.
“Now you tell me something,” he said, nudging Sherlock’s shin with his foot.

Sherlock bit the inside of his cheek and dropped his chin, index finger scraping over the rough edges of John’s skin. “I’m not positive I know what a Nerf gun is,” he muttered, gripping tight to rattle John’s hand as the man laughed. “I have an idea,” he insisted, the excuse doing nothing to bank John’s amusement, “I just...couldn’t pick one out of a lineup.”

“It’ll be the one that says ‘Nerf’,” John teased, chuckling as Sherlock kicked his leg beneath the duvet, catching his foot tight between his calves.

Sherlock wriggled his toes, a token struggle, and looked up, a sneer half-formed on his face before it was drowned in the blue of John’s eyes.

The movement had been gradual, the distance closing inch by inch, but it had added up to a mile, Sherlock’s lashes fluttering as John’s breath puffed over his face.

John licked his lips, Sherlock tracking the nervous tick with his eyes, and then swallowed, blinking away to gaze unfocused over Sherlock’s head. He pulled his legs back, releasing Sherlock’s foot as his mouth opened, but Sherlock held fast to his loosening hand, silencing whatever excuse or apology he had planned. John frowned, squinting at his captured fingers before meeting Sherlock’s eyes, brow furrowing with a question Sherlock couldn’t find the words to answer.

So he didn't use any, bending his knees to slot against John’s legs and shuffling closer, heart vibrating all the way to his toes as he drew near John’s chest, arms pinned between them.

“Sherlock,” John said—a question, a warning, a plea—his grip tightening over Sherlock’s hand, and Sherlock took a deep breath, lifting his chin, the helplessness in John’s wide eyes steadying him somehow, “what-what are you-”

“John,” he sighed, exasperation always easier than sincerity, but pulled it back with a deep breath, a meeting in the middle long overdue. “Please,” he whispered, lips trembling around the foreign word, and a startled hiss whistled through John’s teeth.

His free hand moved between them, thumb pressing to Sherlock’s bottom lip like a brand, and Sherlock’s body shuddered with a ragged breath. “Sherlock, I—” he said, the words ghosting over Sherlock’s face, his eyes fluttering shut as John’s thumb swept to the corner of his open mouth, “I’m not sure-”

Sherlock grabbed John’s hand by the wrist, pulling it away, his other hand untangling from John’s fingers to latch onto his hair, pulling him down and leveraging himself up, swallowing John’s gasp as their lips collided, because good god did he have to do everything around-

John’s hand cupped the back of his neck, fingers catching in his hair as they curled, and Sherlock’s irritation left him in a moan, giving birth to frustration of a very different kind, nails scraping John's scalp as his other hand tangled in the t-shirt John shouldn't be wearing.

He tugged on the shirt to indicate as much, and John’s lips slowed against his, that particular request apparently still a step too far, and Sherlock would’ve rolled his eyes if they weren’t closed, gathering a fistful of the fabric and giving it a pointed yank.

John wrapped an arm around his waist and pulled him tight to his chest, a compromise and a distraction, but there were worse things, the muscles beneath John’s heated skin leaping under his fingers as Sherlock splayed a hand over his abdomen.

He could feel the control in John’s body, tendons twitching as movements were considered and
arrested, the taste of hesitation heavy on his tender lips, as if Sherlock was a fragile, newly-mended thing that would break anew if not handled with care, but, though the former may have been true, the latter was severely misguided, the tip of his tongue tracing the curve of John’s lip to prove it.

Tension rippled through John’s limbs, his arm tightening around Sherlock’s waist, and Sherlock summoned all his restraint to move slowly, sliding his palm up to rest over John’s hammering heart, because this wasn’t last night, wasn’t a clumsy thing born from pain and desperation, it was a choice, and one he was making, their demons his to exorcise, and he leaned away, lips brushing John’s as his mind chased the right words.

“A dog,” he said, and John stilled, head straining back on his neck to raise a skeptical eyebrow down at him.

“What?” he asked, mouth already quirking with anticipated laughter, and Sherlock ducked his head, plucking at John’s shirt as nervous energy pulsed through his fingers.

“I-I always wanted another dog,” he expounded, watching his fingertips twist and tangle in the blue fabric. “When I was settled someplace. I thought that wouldn’t be for ages, but...but maybe we could get one,” he said, putting added emphasis on the plural, John’s breath catching as his chest ceased its steady rise and fall. “Here. After graduation. Mrs. Hudson would put up a bit of a fuss, of course, but she’s talked about getting a cat before, so I don’t think she’d be too-

“Sherlock,” John interjected, sparing him further rambling, but Sherlock bit his lip just in case, “are you- You want me to...move in?”

Sherlock swallowed. “Most of your things are already here.”

“That’s not a good reason to-”

“It’s not the reason,” Sherlock muttered, and John’s grip softened with a sigh.

“Sherlock, it’s- It’s been a rough week, alright?” He pulled his arm away, bending his elbow back to rest a chaste hand on Sherlock’s waist. “Maybe now’s not the best time to-”

“Oh, for christ’s- Will you stop!!!” He roared, pushing up on the mattress and snapping to sitting, glaring down at John’s wide eyes. “I don’t need this...this... coddling ! I’m not a child!”

John shook his head, propping himself up on his forearms. “I never said-”

“You didn’t have to,” Sherlock snapped, and John fell silent, dropping his eyes to the bed. Sherlock sighed, running a hand through his hair, the initial rush of righteous fury abating to frustrated exhaustion. “I know you’re just...trying not to overstep,” he said, a corner of John’s mouth twitching at the delicate phrasing, “but I don’t- I don’t need you to do that. I don’t want you to do that. I’m not some...wilting flower you have to protect.”

John snorted, twinkling eyes peering up through his lashes. “Wilting flower?” he echoed, and Sherlock rolled his eyes.

“You know what I mean,” he huffed, and John chuckled, lips settling into a smile as he dipped a nod.

“I didn’t- I didn’t mean to make you feel like a...wilting flower,” he muttered, Sherlock’s glare half-hearted and short lived.

“I know,” he assured, small smiles exchanged before they both dropped their gaze to the bed
between them.

“Well,” John chirped, flashing up a smile, “this feels weirdly mature.”

Sherlock chuckled, and then swallowed, scratching at the back of his neck as he worked up the courage to finish the job. “Er, before we go back to being im mature...about you...moving in-”

“Shhh!”

Sherlock blinked, mouth agape as he stared down at John, who was now turned away, shoulders squared and eyes darting over the wall. “I beg your-”

“Sherlock, be quiet!” John hissed, swatting a hand at him as he sat up, leaning forward over his knees.

Sherlock’s jaw clicked shut, eyes narrowing in a blazing glare, lips parting in preparation for a verbal lashing John would feel for weeks when he heard it.

A scrape. A gentle thump. Coming from his bedroom below.

A corner of the duvet hit Sherlock in the face as John threw it off, feet landing soundlessly on the floor as he gently scraped open the drawer of his nightstand, lifting out a flashlight and the gun Mycroft must have somehow slipped back to him.

“Stay here,” he whispered, but the order was firm. “Text Mycroft; he’ll alert the team downstairs.”

“What? No!” Sherlock scrambled up onto his knees, wobbling to the edge of the mattress. “I’m not ‘staying here’!”

John glared over his shoulder, creeping toward the door. “It’s not safe! Whoever it is, they’re probably after you.”

“Then I’m better off with the person with the gun, aren’t I?” he snipped, stepping onto the floor, hands planted on his hips.

John held his gaze, eyes narrow and jaw shifting, and then huffed, rattling his head in defeat and twisting open the door. “Stay behind me,” he commanded, a reasonable compromise, and Sherlock nodded, following a few steps behind as they made their way downstairs, picking around the creaky spots.

Moonlight streaked through the open living room windows, illuminating the corridor, the doorknob of Sherlock’s bedroom glittering in the light as the shuffling continued beyond. John pointed the gun toward it, the safety flicking off with a soft click that seemed deafening to Sherlock’s adrenaline-addled brain, his palms beginning to sweat as he kept tight to John’s shoulder, trying to control the frantic drags of his breath.

John lifted the flashlight astride the gun, pointing both at the door as he tilted his aim down to center mass, and Sherlock’s heart lodged in his throat, eyes frantic between the back of John’s head and the door he suddenly didn’t want anything to do with, but then John turned around, eyes steady and determined, and the terror eased its grip. John bobbed his head toward the bathroom door, left ajar enough for Sherlock to slot himself behind the doorframe, an added barrier between him and their uninvited guest.

Sherlock shook his head, a silent protest, John being in danger difficult enough to abide without him being alone, but John’s eyes were unrelenting, his hand hard where it pressed to Sherlock’s chest,
pushing him back, and Sherlock reluctantly obliged, though only with the left half of his body, the rest peering around the frame to monitor John’s progress.

John took a step. Another, now within striking distance of the door. He shifted the flashing to his right hand, settling it in the crook of his thumb and tucking it to his palm as he reached for the doorknob with his fingertips, gun at the ready. He looked over his shoulder, checking Sherlock’s position, and Sherlock shuffled a step back into the bathroom, lungs burning for lack of breath as John held his eyes, silent reassurance in the moonlit blue, and then nodded, turning back and pushing the door open as he leapt into the room, Sherlock’s heart more vibrating than beating.

“DON’T MOVE!” John shouted, Sherlock ducking his head as the flashlight beam temporarily blinded him, lifting his hand in a shield to search the scene, bile rising in his throat as he anticipated the shot.

But it never came, John’s silhouette whole and unharmed as it stood against the beam of white light, and Sherlock stepped out, peering around John’s shoulder at the figure on the other end of the gun.

They were crouched in front of the now closed window, a large grey hat on their bowed head, the rest of their body obscured in an oversized black trenchcoat, but, as their hands lifted, rising toward their shoulders in the universal gesture of surrender, Sherlock caught a glimpse of red nail varnish, his mouth already dropped open before the intruder lifted their chin.

“No, please,” Irene Adler said, tone bored and eyebrow raised as she squinted at them in the light, “don’t shoot.”

Chapter End Notes

I don’t have the free time I used to, but I am determined and no longer writer's blocked, so trust that I am plugging away and will get you an update as soon as it's up to snuff, but it will definitely be shorter than the last gap! ............too soon??
Sherlock blinked, staring dumbstruck at the woman caught in the beam of John’s flashlight, a beat of silence echoing around them.

“Irene!?” John sputtered, flicking the safety on as he dropped the gun to his side. “What are you- Are you **insane** !?”

“I don’t think so,” Irene replied, rising to her feet, “but I **am** going blind.”

John dropped the flashlight beam to the floor, shaking his head as Irene scrunched and stretched her eyes, adjusting to the shift. “I could’ve killed you,” he scolded, placing the gun on the nightstand, and Irene huffed a laugh, looking between them as Sherlock stepped into the room at John’s shoulder.

“Wouldn’t be the first time someone tried. But I suppose you’d know all about that.” She tipped her head with a wry smile, the back of Sherlock’s neck prickling at the renewed tension. “Awfully spry for a dead man, aren’t you?”

“ Took up Pilates,” John deadpanned, Irene lifting her brows with an agreeable hum, but a commotion on the stairs behind them cut off any further conversation, Sherlock turning to find Lyle bursting into the corridor, gun at the ready.

“We’re fine,” he preempted, lifting his hands, and Lyle slowed, frowning between them, his gun lowering toward the floor until his eyes found Irene.

“Who’s she?” he asked, resettling his grip on the weapon, and Sherlock turned to find Irene rolling her eyes, though she did have the good sense not to move.

“A friend,” Sherlock explained, and John cleared his throat, earning a sidelong glare. “Irene Adler.”

“Charmed,” Irene purred with her most innocent grin, and Lyle quirked a brow, slowly stowing his gun back in the holster on his hip.

“I have to call your brother,” he said, pulling a mobile from his pocket. “He’ll have seen there was a perimeter breach.”

“Damn,” Irene hissed behind them, turning over her shoulder to glare at the window. “I thought I got them all.”

“There’s a pressure sensor under the carpet,” John supplied, nodding at her feet, answering Sherlock’s frown with a shrug. “They gave all the agents a rundown so we didn’t accidentally trip anything.”
“Are we going to stand here chatting all night,” Irene interjected, sharp eyes darting between them, her hands on her hips, “or is one of you going to make me a cuppa?”

Sherlock glanced down the corridor to where Lyle had paced away, mobile to his ear, but the other one must have been listening, as he turned his head and dipped a single nod. “Fine,” Sherlock grumbled, beckoning with a flick of his chin. “Come on.”

“Such hospitality,” Irene muttered, moving to follow, John stepping aside to collect his gun and allow her to go first. “Oh, wait, before I forget,” she said idly, which was why Sherlock was shocked to turn over his shoulder and find a varnished hand whistling toward John’s face.

Crack!

The air shook with the slap, John’s head curled out of sight around the doorframe as Irene crossed her arms in front of her, even Lyle’s conversation gone quiet as he stared, slack-jawed, at the scene unfolding before them.

John lifted his face with a small hiss, a grimace curling his mouth as his fingers lifted to the cheek Sherlock couldn’t see but was sure would be red. He then dropped his hand, regarding Irene with a calm tip of his head. “We good?” he asked, like one might inquire about the weather, and Sherlock’s eyes bulged, searching between their faces in hopes of finding something that made sense.

Irene quirked an imperious brow, and then nodded, sharp and final, her arms unfolding as she twisted on a heel and started down the corridor, passing into the kitchen without so much as a glance at Sherlock’s frozen form. “I hope you have milk,” she scathed, dropping down into a chair and crossing her legs as she scanned the kitchen with a disdainful frown.

“Mrs. Hudson does,” John said, massaging his jaw as he shifted it side-to-side, stopping in front of Sherlock to peer into the kitchen, giving him a birdseye view of the rising red palmprint on his cheek. “I’ll go grab some.”

Irene bobbed her head in thanks, and John smiled, turning his eyes to Sherlock as he passed, placing the gun on the side table and grazing a hand down his arm in silent reassurance of a quick return.

Sherlock watched him disappear down the stairs, exchanging a perplexed glance with Lyle before the man retreated to the living room, and then turned back to Irene, fists balling at his sides as he stomped into the kitchen. “What the hell was that!?”

Irene blinked up at him, frowning like he’d spoken another language. “What was what?”

Sherlock’s mouth dropped open with a splutter, a hand waving back and forth between Irene and the corridor. “You and-and John! Why would you- Why did you do that!??”

Irene lifted a brow. “Because he pretended to be dead,” she said, voice slowing as if he’d been hit on the head. “I had to do something.”

“I had to do something,”

“I had to do something,”

“I had to do something.”

Irene blinked up at him, frowning like he’d spoken another language. “What was what?”

Sherlock’s mouth dropped open with a splutter, a hand waving back and forth between Irene and the corridor. “You and-and John! Why would you- Why did you do that!??”

Irene lifted a brow. “Because he pretended to be dead,” she said, voice slowing as if he’d been hit on the head. “I had to do something.”

“Why?” Sherlock bleated, shaking his head, but Irene only rolled her eyes, flicking a dismissive hand in the air.

“Doesn’t matter now; we sorted it,” she said, stretching up in her chair to scan across the counter. “So, do you have Tetley, or...?” She lifted her chin with a blithe smile, and Sherlock shook his head, walking toward the cupboard in something of a daze, but, in its own way, he supposed it made sense.

Of course the two people he found incomprehensible would understand each other.
“Your brother says he’ll stop by tomorrow morning with Lestrade,” Lyle said, stepping through the open glass doors from the living room, fingers flying over his mobile, “unless you want him to come now.”

Sherlock sniffed, shaking his head. “No, tell him to go back to his midnight buffet,” he said, Lyle ducking his head with a smile and typing out no such thing.

“Well, I’m gonna head back downstairs,” he sighed, exhaustion pulling at the shadows under his eyes. “Try to keep the Truth or Dare down, eh?” he teased with a wink, and then disappeared around the corner, footsteps creaking down the stairs a moment later.

Sherlock popped open the electric kettle, hovering it over the sink while the tap spluttered to life, bicep working as the water level climbed. He could feel Irene’s eyes on the back of his head, following him as he returned the kettle to its base and flicked it on, a red LED light illuminating as loose water droplets hissed into vapor. Opening a cupboard overhead, he grabbed one of the larger mugs, placing it beside the box of Tetley on the counter, his face pointedly averted. “Sugar?” he asked, unsurprised at Irene’s answering huff.

“Are you really going to make me ask?”

Sherlock smiled down at the mug before turning around, leaning his tailbone against the counter’s edge and folding his arms. “Ask what?” he inquired, genuinely enough, Irene’s answering eyeroll not making it any clearer.

“John,” Irene hissed, waving a hand toward the corridor, and Sherlock quirked a brow, the one-word explanation still leaving much to be desired.

“What about him?” he asked, and Irene’s hand dropped to her lap with a fwump, shoulders slouching as she looked at him as if he were the most obtuse toddler on the planet.

“What about him?” she echoed, leaning forward as muffled voices rose through the floorboards. “He faked his death!”

Sherlock frowned, tipping his head. “So did you.”

She rolled her eyes again. “Yes, but you didn’t believe mine.”

“How do you know?”

“Because you didn’t burst into tears and rush to my bosom when I climbed in your window.”

“Our usual greeting.”

“Sherlock!”

“What?” He lifted his hands in the air, half laughing with befuddlement as he shook his head. “Irene, honestly, I have no idea what you’re getting at.”

She blinked, regarding him a long moment, a thoughtful frown creasing her forehead. “You’re not...angry with him?”

Sherlock’s arms unfolded, Irene’s concern for his emotional wellbeing catching him by something more than surprise. “No,” he answered, shaking his head and pulling out the chair across from her. “I mean, not really. Not anymore.” He shrugged, watching his hands fold on the table between them, and Irene puffed a laugh, crossing her legs and shaking her head out over the kitchen.
“Well, I sure hope you gave him hell when you were mad.”

“All nine circles,” he assured, and Irene chuckled, glancing back at him with a smile. “Wait,” Sherlock said, straightening up as a small corner of the jigsaw puzzle that was the past ten minutes of his life came together, “is that why you hit him? Because you thought I was angry?”

“No,” Irene snorted, leaning back and folding her arms, “I hit him for me. I was angry.”

Sherlock lifted a brow, suppressing a twitch at the corner of his mouth. “Because he faked his death?”

“Exactly.”

“And made me think he was dead?”

“Kind of a package deal.”

“And that bothered you?”

“Well, of course it did, you’re my-” She stopped, snapping her face to him, eyes narrowing as he smirked. “Ass,” she grumbled kicking him under the table, and Sherlock laughed, curling his shins away.

“I’m your ass?”

“You should be so lucky,” Irene retorted, but smiled along with him, cradling her chin in her palm as she propped an elbow on the table, eyes looking past him to the gurgling kettle, and Sherlock took the quiet moment to look at her properly.

She was pale, as always, but there was a sallowness now in the hollows of her cheeks, her eyes red and shadowed with unrest, fingers vibrating faintly against her cheek like a strummed string not yet stilled.

Sherlock swallowed, glancing down at the table as he plotted his words. “I didn’t know immediately,” he said, and Irene turned the corners of her eyes to him. “About the fire.”

A corner of her lip curled. “Aw, I’m your ass too,” she crooned, chuckling when he rolled his eyes, shaking his head and leaning back in his chair as footsteps started up the stairs below them.

“Well, I have a bit more than milk,” John said, rounding the corner with an armful of sheets, a covered tray of scones balanced on top as a sealed coffee carrier swung from his pinky.

Sherlock stood, unhooking the mug from its precarious position as he crossed to the counter, John lifting a small smile of gratitude before placing the rest of his burden on the table.

“Mrs. Hudson made these earlier. Well, yesterday, I guess,” he muttered, sliding the tray off the sheets, but Irene stopped him as he moved to take the blue floral bundle back in his arms.

“If there’s one thing I know how to do, it’s make a bed. Rare to find a spare room in London these days.”

Sherlock bit his lip down at the steaming cup, controlling his blush as he took the handle. “It’s still steeping,” he warned, dropping the mug in front of her, and Irene smiled, framing the ceramic with her hands.
“I’ll sip,” she answered, hovering her fingers near the cup like hands warming by a fire, unfocused eyes dropping to the liquid within as it shifted against its confines. “Actually,” she sighed, tucking the sheets under her arm, “I think I’ll take it to bed.” She stood, stepping around the chair and hooking her cup by the handle. “Tell Mrs. Hudson I ate a scone, would you?”

Sherlock smiled, but it was John who answered, dropping his arms to his sides as he nodded.

“We’ll hide one,” he assured, and Irene chuckled, shuffling into the corridor, her body drooping more with every step.

“Goodnight, boys,” she bade, a faint twinkle sparking in her tired eyes. “Don’t have too much fun without me.” And, with a lopsided smile, she was gone, the wood creaking with her retreat before Sherlock’s door shut with a soft click.

They were quiet a moment, John staring at the doorway while Sherlock stared at him staring at it, dropping his eyes to the table as John turned to him.

“Do you think she’s alright?” he murmured, Sherlock opening his mouth to reply when another voice broke in.

“Oh, one more thing!” Irene called, and they exchanged a curious glance, stepping out into the corridor to see her head peeking out from Sherlock’s door. “Make sure to knock,” she advised, tipping her head with a devilish smile. “I forgot pajamas.” She winked, pulling her head away and snapping the door shut, leaving them blinking at the flat paint.

“Yes,” Sherlock said, meeting John’s curious glance, “I think she’s fine.”

John chuckled, stepping back into the kitchen and plucking a scone from the tray, waggling it in the air before starting ahead of him toward the stairs, grabbing his gun on the way. “She’s gotta be scared, though,” he said, dropping his voice, alternating between checking the steps ahead of him and turning his mouth back over his shoulder. “People don’t just fake their deaths for nothing.” His foot faltered over a step, climb slowing almost to a stop as the words crackled in the air around them, but Sherlock, to his own surprise, was unbothered, and shifted his hand upward on the railing, encouraging John on.

“I suppose,” he said just to say something, stepping around John as he stopped to hide the gun and scone in the nightstand. He crossed to his side of the bed, tossing the tangled mess of a duvet to find the appropriate corner, and then climbed onto the mattress, tucking the blanket up to his chin as John flicked the light off for hopefully the last time that night.

The springs creaked as John settled in beside him, whistling out a heavy sigh as he pulled the duvet up to his chest, folding an arm back behind his head and staring at the ceiling.

“Not tired?” Sherlock presumed, rolling onto his side, but John shook his head.

“I will be in a bit, just...coming down from the adrenaline rush.” He turned his face as Sherlock chuckled, smiling at him through the darkness. “Not every day a woman climbs through your window.”

“Speak for yourself,” Sherlock muttered, laughing as John kicked out at his shin, and then the room grew quiet, Sherlock tracing circles over the sheets as he watched John’s chest rise and fall, the man’s blinks growing longer with every flutter of lashes.

“Where would we sleep?”
“Hmm?” Sherlock lifted his chin to meet the side of John’s face, John’s eyes still fixed on the ceiling.

“If I moved in,” he clarified, Sherlock’s heart catapulting into his throat. “Which room would we use? Assuming we’d—”

“We would,” Sherlock interjected, John’s cheeks pink as he turned his head with a smile. “I don’t know,” he murmured, shrugging against the mattress. “Downstairs, I suppose. Closer to everything. This could be a...study or something.”

“You mean a lab,” John did not ask, chuckling when Sherlock tucked a smile into the duvet. “Wouldn’t you need water for that though?”

“I could carry it up.”

“I meant to put out the fires.”

Sherlock sneered, revealing his mouth to stick his tongue out at the boy’s smirk. “I’ll get a fire extinguisher.”

“Two,” John insisted, rolling onto his side, fingers brushing Sherlock’s as he clasped his hands over his chest. “At least.”

Sherlock smiled, staring at their hands as he hooked a pinky through John’s, swallowing down the lump compressing his voice. “So you—you’d want to, then? Move in?” He was grateful for the darkness, sure his face was well on its way to burgundy, not daring to look up as John shifted closer, his face fuzzy through Sherlock’s lashes.

“Of course I would,” he said, twisting Sherlock’s wrist to take his hand properly, their fingers lacing together over the pillow. “It’s close to transit,” he began, curling a finger against Sherlock’s with every point, “has in-building laundry, it’s right by the park, and, ya know, once you clear out, there’ll be plenty of storage space.”

Sherlock huffed, his retort-ready mouth opening to a yawn instead, and John chuckled, squeezing his hand.

“We should sleep,” he said, and Sherlock nibbled his lip, hesitant.

“I suppose,” he murmured, and John puffed a laugh, bowing his chin to press his lips to Sherlock’s knuckle, a tiny gesture that nevertheless stole Sherlock’s breath, John’s comfort with casual intimacies never ceasing to amaze.

“We can talk more about it tomorrow,” he assured, and Sherlock smiled, exhaustion coming up suddenly now that he gave it permission.

“Mmkay,” he mumbled in sleep-slurred syllables, John’s breath of laughter ghosting over his face as he burrowed his head into the pillow, forehead resting against their clasped hands.

“Goodnight, Sherlock,” John whispered, a soft thing that said so much more, Sherlock’s throat too tight for repeat sentiments, so he simply nodded, humming agreeably into the duvet. John sighed, wriggling himself a divot in the mattress, and then stillled, his steady breaths tickling the hair on Sherlock’s fingers.

When John’s breaths had lengthened and the muscle spasms in his limbs subsided, Sherlock felt safe to lift his chin, mind not quite settled enough for sleep, however much his aching eyes demanded it.
John’s lips were parted slightly, body shifting with the slow rise and fall of his chest, a strand of hair slipping away from the pack to catch in his brow, and Sherlock lifted his free hand, slipping out from under the duvet and gently tucking it back into place. John’s lashes fluttered against his cheeks, but he did not stir, his grip on Sherlock’s hand soft and pliable, but Sherlock wouldn’t disturb it, however uncomfortable it was bound to become.

It was easy, in that moment, to forget where they’d been, what had happened, and what was yet to come, shadows circling the edges of their fragile happiness like a taut bow trembling to release. It was easy to imagine a simple future, hauling suitcases up the stairs and bickering about where to hang artwork, —or whatever civilized people put on their walls to incite conversations with strangers —but that was not a future Sherlock could provide, not a life he could ever live, and he wondered, not for the first time, if it was unfair to drag another person to the brink with him, but John had fastened the shackles himself, and Sherlock now knew better than to struggle against them.

Watching John’s lips shift around his breaths, the light from the street dancing in his tousled hair, Sherlock felt something sweep through him, like a star forming in his chest, drawing in every doubt and fear to form one blazing truth that radiated out to the tip of every hair standing on end.

“I love you,” he whispered, not to be heard, but to say it, to speak it into the universe and so make it true, a solemn oath sworn to the darkness. He gripped John’s hand as an understanding washed over him, the little ember of anger he’d been breathing life into snuffed out by its wake, because there was nothing, nothing he wouldn’t do —no risk too great or price too steep—to keep John as safe as he was right now, and he wrapped his other hand around John’s fingers, curling his knees up as a shuddering breath vibrated over his teeth. “I love you,” he echoed, this time a hope against all hope that it would be enough.
Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

Welp, it's a cliffhanger again, but the next bit got a lot longer than I expected, and I didn't want to make you wait that long. Enjoy a whole lot of my only daughter: the incomparable, illustrious, sometimes inappropriate Irene Adler.

Get updates, playlists, excerpts, and too much information about my personal life on my tumblr.

John’s eyes flew open, awakened by something that had since stopped, the spike of adrenaline leaving him woozy, and it was several seconds before the dark mass in front of him formed a decipherable shape.

Sometime during the night, Sherlock had rolled over, the unruly curls on the back of his head tickling John’s nose, and he leaned away, careful not to move the arm that had found its way around Sherlock’s waist. He bent up his knees, curling tighter to Sherlock’s body, the boy’s limbs warm and soft with sleep, and had just closed his eyes to sneak in another few minutes when a frustrated voice sounded up the stairs.

“Son of a bitch,” a woman snarled, confusing John a moment before he remembered their guest.

“Wazzit?” Sherlock murmured, turning to blink a bleary eye over his shoulder, and John chuckled, running a hand up and down Sherlock’s bare arm.

“Irene,” he replied, Sherlock already seeming to lose focus, lashes lounging on his cheeks between blinks. “I’m gonna go check on her.”

Sherlock hummed, rolling back over and pulling the duvet up to his cheek, and John smiled, shaking his head at the man’s back before sliding out of bed.

He pulled his slippers out from under the bed, tugging them on, and then crept out the door, irritable huffs and muttered curses greeting his ears as he descended the steps.

Irene was in the far corner of the kitchen, crouched on her hands and knees behind their deconstructed sugar bowl, a wall of white granules and glass shards cutting off her escape. She had picked up a few of the larger fragments, forming a small pile by her knee, but it looked like slow work, her thin fingers poking and sifting through the sugar for other lurking hazards, and she looked up at him with a sigh, eyes narrowed. “I don’t think staring at it is going to help,” she snapped, and John shook his head, taking note of her bare feet.

“Just stay there,” he advised, lifting a palm. “I’ll get the vacuum from Mrs. Hudson.”

“And leave me here?” She pushed up to standing, crossing her arms and trying to look menacing in a pair of toothpaste-stripe boxers and a baggy grey t-shirt—borrowed from Sherlock’s dresser, no doubt. “I just made tea!” She waved a hand toward the living room. “It’ll be cold by the time you mop everything up.”

John frowned, looking down at the mess at her feet. “You can make another one,” he suggested,
Irene only rolling her eyes. “You’ll trod sugar everywhere if you walk through that.”

“Well I wasn’t suggesting I walk through it,” she muttered, nodding down at his slippers, and John quirked a brow, Irene heaving an exasperated sigh before lifting her arms out toward him. “Sweep a girl off her feet?” she said, shoulders lifting with an impish grin, a pout quickly replacing it when John scoffed. “But my tea,” she whined, petulant and grating, and John glanced back up the stairs, sure the inevitable stamping of feet would wake Sherlock from his much-needed rest.

“Fine,” he snarled, rattling his head in exasperation while she clapped her hands beneath her chin. He picked his way through the debris, avoiding the worst of it as sugar and glass crunched under the hard soles, Irene beaming at him when he stepped into the small clearing around her feet.

“My hero,” she crooned, and he rolled his eyes, starting to turn for her to climb onto his back when she slung an arm around his shoulder, his arm instinctively swiping under her legs to catch her as she leapt up toward his chest.

He wobbled a moment, shifting his feet to steady the sudden addition of weight, and then glared at her, Irene’s feet kicking lightly at the air as she wrapped her arms around his neck.

“So strong,” she teased, flicking at the collar of his shirt, somehow a harmless gesture when dealing with Irene Adler, and John forced down a smile.

“I will drop you,” he warned, lifting his brows at Irene’s protruding tongue, and then tucked her tight to his chest, looking over her body and picking a path back to the door. It took a little longer with another person draped over him, but they made it through unscathed, John lifting his chin to say as much and coming face-to-face with Sherlock’s smirk.

He was leaning against the doorway, arms folded, a brow lifting as he looked up from the broken bowl. “Mazel tov,” he said, startling a giggle from Irene while John’s face fell flat.

He tightened his arm around her waist, releasing her legs to land on the ground, and she righted herself with a satisfied huff, flipping her hair back over her shoulders.

“Don’t worry, dear,” she assured, patting Sherlock on the cheek as she passed. “He means nothing to me.” She flashed a wink at John over Sherlock’s shoulder, and then disappeared, Sherlock shaking his head after her as her footsteps moved into the living room.

He padded into the living room, Irene already on the sofa, legs crossed in front of her, a steaming cup cradled in her lap. “Still hot?” he grumbled, and she smiled, lifting the drink to her lips.

“Mhmm,” she hummed, taking a sip. “Could use a little sugar though.” She smiled, bobbing her head in invitation, and he sat down beside her, careful not to jostle her drink too much. “So,” she murmured, “how’s the afterlife?”

John tipped his neck over the back of the sofa, puffing a laugh at the ceiling. “Bit livelier than I imagined.”

Irene smiled, looking down at her tea as she tapped her nails against the mug, a question forming in the furrow of her brow. “Do you- Does your family- ...Do they think you’re dead?”

John shook his head. “No. We’ve been...keeping up appearances.”
She lifted a fragile smile, her eyes far away. “Don’t suppose there’ll be any appearances to keep up with mine,” she mused, a swallow clicking down her throat. “Do you know if they were...notified?” She flicked a glance up at him, furtive and vulnerable, and John was reminded just how young she really was, how unfair life had been to them all.

“I don’t think so,” he said, some of the tension in her shoulders easing. “Mycroft brought the report straight here, and Sherlock told him it wasn’t you. Doubt there would’ve been time.”

Irene nodded, distracted, her eyes drifting to the living room window, the late morning light seeking out the shades of auburn in her dark hair. “Eight years,” she murmured, and John went still, his eyes locked on the side of her face. “I don’t- I don’t even know if I’d recognize them anymore. Or they me.”

He shuffled a couple inches closer on the sofa, support by proximity. “Do you...talk to them at all?”

Irene hung her head, shaking it. “I send a postcard on my birthday. Blank.” She turned the cup between her hands, pointing the handle out to the room. “I don’t want them to worry,” she added, the silence saying for them that they would worry anyway. “I don’t- I don’t know what to do now,” she whispered, as if in disbelief at her own uncertainty, and John moved closer still, draping a hand over the back of the sofa behind her in unobtrusive invitation.

“What do you want to do?” he asked, and she huffed a humorless laugh.

“I don’t know. With the insurance money, I can reopen the house. Assuming I’m allowed to rise from the ashes,” she added, tipping a glance at him. “But lately, I-I’ve been thinking… Well, I can’t do this forever,” she said, waving a vague hand over her body. “Well into my forties with the right moisturizer”—John tucked a smile—“but not forever, and...well...I thought I might try going to school.” She swallowed, tilting a sheepish smile up at him as she rocked her hips against the cushion, readjusting the cross of her legs. “Play at being a respectable adult. During daylight hours, anyway.”

John smiled, turning his knees toward her. “That’s a great idea,” he said, and she blinked up at him, her lips parting in surprise. “What would you study?”

She stared at him a moment longer, and then closed her mouth, a softness in her eyes as a corner of her lips quirked. “Promise you won’t laugh?”

“No,” she stressed, “I was thinking psychology.”

“I think you’d be great at that,” he said, instant and sincere, and he’d swear her cheeks darkened, if only for a moment. “Would you want to practice?”

“Eventually,” Irene shrugged, wriggling backward on the cushion to rest against his arm, the devilish grin settling on her face a sure sign of trouble. “Thought I’d specialize in sex therapy.”

John gave her grin a flat look, and then shook his head, pulling his arm away in a slow, exaggerated motion as she laughed.

“Sorry to interrupt,” Sherlock scathed from the top of the stairs, lifting a brow and stepping into the room, “but Mrs. Hudson will be up in a minute. She didn’t trust me to do a ‘thorough job’.” He curled his fingers around the words, rolling his eyes as he came to perch on the arm of the sofa.

“Actually, you’re right on time,” Irene said, hopping to the edge of the sofa and placing her tea on
the coffee table before crossing her legs and folding her hands on a knee. “I was just telling John about my career goals.”

“Whipping a member of the royal family?” Sherlock mocked, but Irene didn’t reply, lifting a brow and regarding him coolly until he grew unnerved, flashing John a speculative glance.

“Psychology,” she corrected, Sherlock’s only outward reaction being a blink. “Sex therapy, specifically.”

He tilted his head. “Going for a one stop shop?” he said, and John bit his lip, dropping his face to his lap and trying not to take sides.

Irene unfolded her hands, propping an elbow up on her knee and placing her chin in her palm, fingers curled thoughtfully against her cheek. “All this hostility, Sherlock,” she mused, clucking her tongue, her tone dangerously gentle. “Are you sure you’re not just... frustrated.”

Sherlock’s eyes bulged, mouth dropping open, narrowed eyes shooting to John when he couldn’t help but snort. “What are you laughing at?” he spat, cheeks pink, and John shook his head, lifting his hands in pleading.

“I’m not, I’m...having a stroke?” he muttered, and Irene laughed, John giving Sherlock a sheepish shrug he only shook his head at.

There was a thunk on the stairs, followed by a huff that might have been a four-letter word, and Sherlock skittered from the room, standing at the top of the steps and looking down.

“I can take it,” he offered, moving down a step, but backed up as a head of mousy brown hair broke the horizon of the floor.

“No, no, I’ve got it, dear,” Mrs. Hudson assured, shaking her head as she heaved the vacuum up the remaining stairs. “I’m used to doing it on my own.”

Sherlock rolled his eyes at her back, following after her as she sat the vacuum down in the corridor and moved toward John and Irene.

“You must be Irene,” she said, extending a hand, and Irene stood, a charming hint of pink gracing her cheeks as she tugged the boxers down to cover more of her legs. “I’m Mrs. Hudson.”

“Irene Adler,” she replied, smiling as their hands bobbed and fell away. “It’s so nice to finally put a face to all of Sherlock’s stories.”

“And don’t you believe a word of them, dear,” Mrs. Hudson teased, flapping a finger at her with a wink, and Irene’s smile cracked to reveal a strip of teeth.

“I rarely do.”

Mrs. Hudson chuckled, and then her forehead creased, eyes panning up and down. “You must be freezing in those old things,” she fussed, waving a hand over the borrowed ensemble. “These windows are useless, and Sherlock keeps the heat far too low.”

“I’m saving the whales,” Sherlock chimed in, earning a tut and a glare.

“I’ll bring you something suitable when I’m done cleaning up after these two,” she assured, reaching out to pat Irene on the arm, and the woman looked down at the tender touch with blinking surprise.
“I- Thank you,” she stammered. “You’re very kind.”

“When it suits me,” Mrs. Hudson chirped, turning away and moving back toward the corridor. “Sherlock, can you get the broom out of the cupboard? Best to sweep up the worst of it.”

Sherlock sighed, shoulders slumping as he rolled his eyes, but did follow, though with slightly heavier footfalls than necessary.

Irene watched them disappear, and then watched the empty doorway, John’s eyes fixed on the side of her face.

“Are you alright?” he asked when the silence had started to get scary, and Irene blinked, turning to him with a startled hiss of a laugh.

“Of course,” she said breezily, and then closed her mouth, dropping her chin as she swallowed. “I’m just...not used to warm welcomes.”

John smiled, and she followed suit, bending to pick up her tea.

“Suppose we should keep them company,” she said, nodding toward the sliding glass door. “Moral support and whatnot.”

“We’ll start a cheer,” John added, and Irene laughed, the two of them moving to the chairs by the fireplace to join in the good-natured bickering already drifting out of the kitchen.

~~~~~~~~~~~~~

They managed to delay Lestrade and Mycroft’s visit until the afternoon, citing Irene’s fatigue, but, come 2pm, the doorbell rang, Mrs. Hudson letting them in while Sherlock lifted off the sofa beside him to go rap on his seized bedroom door.

“Your suitors are here,” John heard him say as Lestrade’s head appeared at the top of the stairs, frowning at Sherlock’s back as the boy stomped past him, collapsing onto the sofa with a flourish that bounced John on the cushion beside him.

“Sherlock,” Lestrade greeted, stepping into the room and unzipping his jacket, Mycroft’s sour expression not far behind. “You’re looking...well.”

Sherlock quirked a brow. “Should I look any other way?” he goaded, and John spiked an elbow into his side.

“Anything new with the investigation?” John diverted, and Lestrade shook his head at the carpet. “‘Fraid not. But we’re hoping Miss Adler”—his tongue snapped over the name, eyes roving the ceiling—“will have some information we can run with.”

“Miss Adler?” John pressed, glancing around the room to find Mycroft and Sherlock looking equally puzzled, but Lestrade was not given time to reply.

“Good afternoon, gentlemen.” Irene stepped through the doorway wearing one of Mrs. Hudson’s robes tied tight around her waist, and seemingly nothing else, the usually modest pink wrap folded just so to dip dangerously low down her chest.

John turned to Sherlock, their eyes rolling in exasperated unison.

“Mycroft, I presume?” she asked as she passed, the man quirking a brow before nodding. She then
approached Lestrade, face breaking into a broad smile. “A pleasure, as always, Gregory,” she crooned, Lestrade rolling his eyes at her back before she spun around to drop into Sherlock’s chair, the robe falling open around her legs as she crossed them, covering the barest of minimums. “How are things with—oh, what was her name?—Sophia?”

“Silvia,” Lestrade snapped, flipping open a page in his notebook, oblivious to their open-mouthed stares, “and it’s still none of your business.”

“Ah, over then.” Irene sighed with faux commiseration, shaking her head at the ground. “Oh well.” She shrugged, pressing her spine back into the chair and draping her arms over the armrests. “Plenty more fish in the sea, as they say. You know, I have a friend—well, I say friend—who recently got out of a relationship, and she’s always had a bit of a thing for handcuffs.”

John’s draw dropped open, Sherlock mirroring the expression while Mycroft’s eyes blew wide, all three of them exchanging looks to confirm this wasn’t a joint hallucination.

“Oh, yeah?” Lestrade scoffed. “How many times she been in ‘em?”

Irene’s smirk had a knife’s edge. “A lady never tells,” she purred, and Lestrade rolled his eyes, clicking a pen and lowering the point to his notepad.

“Why don’t we stick to the fire for now?” he said, and Irene sighed, rolling a hand to prompt him onward. “When did you first become aware-”

“Woah, wait, hold on!” John interjected, lifting his hands over the coffee table as he bounced to the edge of his seat. “You’re not gonna explain...any of that?” He waved a hand between them, Irene’s brow lifting while Lestrade only frowned.

“Explain what?” he asked, incredulity slapping John silent, his hands falling to his sides.

Mycroft cleared his throat, his eyes shifting and unfocused. “I believe John is referring to the matter of your... acquaintance with Miss Adler,” he stressed, ever the diplomat.

Lestrade blinked, but Irene got there first, her low chuckle drawing the attention of the room.

“Gregory and I have...exchanged pleasantries,” she said, and the whole room seemed to hold its breath, John’s eyes darting from Irene to Sherlock to Lestrade, who was looking back at them with growing bewilderment, his head beginning to shake.

“At the station!” he bellowed, glaring them all into shame, three scolded faces dropping to the floor while he returned to his task with a huff.

“When did you first become aware your life might be in danger?”

“When I met him,” Irene said, bobbing a nod in Sherlock’s direction, the boy rolling his eyes while Lestrade sighed.

“I meant -”

“Alright, fine, no foreplay.” Irene lifted her palms in surrender, lowering her arms to tug the robe closed a few inches over her knees, her version of business attire. “When I heard about what happened to John”—she waved a hand in his direction—“I figured it was only a matter of time before Moran came around tying up loose ends.”

“Unlikely,” Lestrade muttered, making a note before glancing up at Irene’s furrowed brow.
“Moran’s dead,” he explained, and John swallowed, shifting on the cushion, the palpable effort of everyone not looking at him almost worse than if they’d just done it.

Irene’s eyes narrowed, searching their faces in the taut silence. “When?”

“Last week,” Lestrade said simply, trying to move the conversation along. “Now, did you receive any-”

“How did he die?” Irene pressed, leaning forward over her knees.

Lestrade and Mycroft exchanged a fleeting glance.

A swallow clicked down Sherlock’s throat.

John sighed. “I shot him,” he said, ignoring the trio of wide eyes turning to him in favor of Irene’s, which only blinked, her head tilting with curiosity more than surprise. “He broke in to kill Sherlock”—he bobbed his head to the left—“and I killed him.”

Irene’s eyes glanced between them, a wrinkle forming between her brows, but it smoothed when her gaze settled on the rug beneath their feet, head dipping a slow nod. “New rug,” she murmured, a corner of her mouth lifting when she looked back to him. “Last time I sneak in your window.”

A laugh hissed through John’s nose, and then Lestrade cleared his throat, calling the group to attention once more.

“As I was saying,” he snipped with a pointed click of his pen, “had you received any threats recently? Noticed anything unusual—strangers lurking about and whatnot?”

“Strangers ‘lurking about’ would hardly be unusual in my line of work, Sergeant”—she leaned back in the chair, folding her hands in her lap—“but no, nothing that stood out. And I didn’t receive any threats other than the ones Moran delivered himself. Prior to his untimely demise, of course,” she added with a nod to John. “I simply assumed I was next on the list.”

“You probably were,” Sherlock interjected, shifting to match John’s perch on the edge of the sofa, legs brushing through their jeans. “Moriarty would’ve just sent someone else.”

Irene lifted a brow. “You mean I’d have gotten taken out by...the help?”

John turned, watching Sherlock’s mouth curl.

“I’m sure Moran would’ve been honored to kill you, were he still with us.”

Irene snorted, and then they all looked back to Lestrade, who was staring at them with something between respect and horror.

“You do realize all three of you have almost been killed in the past fortnight?” he blustered, pointing his pen at them.

Irene shrugged. “Technically, no one tried to kill me.”

“Because you faked your own death.”

“Still counts,” Irene insisted with a grin, and Lestrade sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose as he hung his head over his notepad.

“Alright,” he muttered, rattling his head, “let’s leave your collective death wish for another day. How
“Did you get into the flat?” He waved a hand around the room. “This place is locked up tighter than the Tower of London.”

“Ah, now that was tricky,” Irene said, the glint in her eye and shift in her stance telling John to settle in for a story. “I knew you’d have some security around the flat, but I wasn’t expecting it to put the Russian embassy to shame. Don’t look too proud of yourself, Chuckles.” Her eyes—and everyone else’s a moment later—shot to Mycroft, whose smug smile immediately collapsed. “I still got in.”

Mycroft narrowed his eyes, tugging his jacket tighter around his waist and looking expectantly at the back of the Lestrade’s head.

Irene smiled, also moving her gaze back to the Sergeant. “I watched for a couple days—tracking shift changes, patrols, what have you—and then I realized.” She rolled a hand in the air, tipping her head with a smirk. “Nowhere to go but up.”

A beat of silence, John scanning Lestrade’s face to see if it made any more sense to him, but Sherlock—per usual—won the race to fill in the blanks.

“The roof,” he said, and Irene clicked her tongue, tipping a finger gun at him with a wink.

“But we had sensors on the roof.” Mycroft stepped up to Greg’s shoulder, scowling as Irene waggled a finger at him.

“No, you had sensors on the fire escape,” she corrected, and a swallow moved down Mycroft’s throat, cheeks bypassing red to land in purple territory. “Cameras on the roof, I’m sure,” she allowed with a flick of her fingers, “but, middle of the night, all those alarms rigged up? Who’d have their eye trained on the roof camera?”

“But how’d you get on the roof in the first place?” Lestrade asked, folding his notebook shut and stowing it away in his pocket, the conversation moved beyond things he could officially report.

“Shut down the sensors?”

Irene huffed a laugh. “I have many talents, Sergeant, but black ops isn’t one of them.”

Greg narrowed his eyes, but said nothing, Irene continuing after a brief smug smile.

“I called in a few favors, told a few lies”—her brows waggled—“and found a penthouse down the street that wasn’t owned by an old man. I mean, I was desperate, but a girl’s gotta have standards, ya know?”

“So you found a penthouse,” Mycroft urged on, and Irene rolled her eyes, the barebones approach not seeming to suit her theatrical sensibilities.

“The owner was about 30, made it big with some internet startup, I think; I wasn’t really listening,” she muttered, dismissing it with a flick of her fingers. “But people like that tend to like throwing their money around, so, I followed him. He was dreadfully boring the first day”—a long-suffering sigh whistled over her lips—“but, last night, he went bar hopping with some friends. Ended up at one of those trying-to-be-trendy-so-it-isn’t-clubs.” She crossed her legs the opposite direction with a shrug, exposing more of her legs. “Easy enough from there to get an invite back.”

“So you, er,” Lestrade began, clearing his throat and wiggling his hand in the air to indicate the more sensitive parts of the evening, “and then waited for him to fall asleep and—”

“Really, Gregory, I thought you knew me better than that,” Irene interjected, shaking her head with almost motherly disappointment. “He suggested a nightcap and I drugged it. I didn’t sleep with him.”
“Course not,” Lestrade muttered, syllables stretched with sarcasm. “That’s only for the paying strangers.”

John snapped his head around with wide eyes, catching Sherlock sharp glare of disapproval, but Irene’s good humor appeared unaffected, her laugh chiming through the air.

“Well, you know what they say,” she shrugged, rising from the chair, John looking away just in case as the robe swirled around her legs. “If you’re good at something, never do it for free.”

Sherlock snorted while John just smiled, Mycroft giving them both a disapproving glance before following after Greg, who was hot on Irene’s heels as she sauntered into the kitchen.

“Wait, so how’d you end up on the roof?” Greg asked, all three of them disappearing around the door.

“Climbed across from his roof. Obviously.”

“Obviously !?”

“Don’t suppose she’ll make us a cuppa too, do you?” John asked, turning to Sherlock, who chuckled, shaking his head.

“Unlikely,” he muttered, smiling when John sighed, “but I can.”

“No, I wasn’t-” John spluttered, but Sherlock only laughed, waving him to stay seated as he weaved around the coffee table.

“I know,” he assured, “it’s fine,” and John smiled, slouching back into the sofa cushions as Sherlock too vanished into the kitchen.

Lestrade was still peppering Irene with questions John couldn’t be bothered to listen to, sure Irene wasn’t giving straight answers anyway, and he sighed out at the room, clapping his hands together and looking for something to occupy them with. His laptop was on the other end of the coffee table, the blinking light on the side indicating Sherlock had once again left it to sleep rather than turning it off, and John reached for it, flipping it open and greeted with the login screen.

He typed in the password—Iwant221believe, one of John’s few joys in life being changing his password to something Sherlock had to work to remember—and waited for the previous session to load. Several tabs were open, John gleaning from the titles that all of them related to stages of maggot development, and he quickly minimized the one left on the screen, shouting across the room with a grimace.

“Sherlock?”

“Yeah?” A tousled head appeared a moment later, leaning disembodied out the door.

“Do you still need all this...dead stuff?” He waggled his fingers down at the screen, and Sherlock shook his head with a chuckle.

“No, you can watch your cat videos in peace.”

“I don’t-” John started, but Sherlock was already gone, ducking back into the kitchen with the last word. John huffed, and then closed the window, opening another rather than playing Russian roulette through the individual tabs.
He went to his email, scanning the bold unread titles for anything from Bart’s, but there was no such luck, and he sighed, staring at the inbox number as if he could will it to go up just the one he needed. A new message in the Social column caught his eye, and he clicked through, finding an alert for a comment on Sherlock’s blog, the first one in well over a month, his updates few and far between even before he became one of the living dead. Curious, he opened the email, scrolling down to the preview of the comment, and then gasped, blood frosting in his veins, his heart rattling with a single shiver before stopping altogether.

He read it through again. Once more. And then leapt from the sofa, scooping up the laptop with a hiss as his shin slammed into the coffee table in his haste.

“Lestrade!” he cried, lunging through the kitchen door and hitting a wall of already raised voices, Greg, Mycroft, and Irene facing off in the clearing between the table and fridge as Sherlock tucked himself against the counter, trying to pour water into two cups without attracting attention.

“You mean to tell me you climbed across seven rooftops without anyone seeing? What are you, Batman?”

“Catwoman seems the more obvious choice, but I applaud your gender neutrality.”

“Greg!” John shouted again, stepping forward, but the only person who heeded him was Sherlock, turning from his work to scan John’s face with a curious frown. “Mycroft!”

“It does seem highly improbable that my people didn’t-”

“Look, I’m sorry I damaged your already fragile masculinity, but I did get into this flat. That is definitely a thing that happened.”

“I’m only saying it seems more likely you had help from someone on the inside.”

“Why, because a woman can’t break and enter on her own?”

“No, because a civilian -”

“Mycroft, maybe you’d better sit this one-”

“I want the truth!”

“You can’t handle the truth!”

“OI!”

The room fell silent, four sets of wide eyes turning to him as his chest heaved against the pressure of building terror.

“Sherlock got a comment on his blog,” he said, scanning between them, Sherlock’s expression shifting to concern while everyone else blinked at him like he was coming unhinged.

“And?” Lestrade murmured after a beat, and John snarled through a sigh, slamming the laptop onto the table and spinning it toward them.

“And it’s from Carl Powers.”
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!