“I love you.”

Sherlock sees the words hit John with almost physical force. He reels back a little, jaw twitching and eyes filling.

“I love you,” he repeats, a little softer, a little more gentle, as earnest as he possibly can. Because they’ve been teetering on the brink of this thing for years, and it had become painfully obvious over the last few months that they were at a tipping point. This had to happen. Now it has. Now they can see where they end up.

The tears in John’s eyes spill over, and he wipes at them angrily. “Do you even know what
that means?"

Notes

Please heed the tags on this. This is not an easy story. That being said, if you are familiar with my writing at all, you know that I always, ALWAYS seek to end on a happy, or at least hopeful note. This story is no different.

This story is S4 compliant up to the end of TLD, and takes place 2 years later. John and Sherlock still live apart, though they are co-raising Rosie for all intents and purposes. Though Rosie is in this fic, and John struggles with fears about his ability to be a good parent, she is not the focus. The focus of this fic is on Sherlock and John's relationship and emotional healing.

Mary is mentioned on occasion, and John's feelings about her death and his relationship with her while she was alive are complex over two years after her death. It is what it is, and what it is is complicated. However, Mary is not the focus here.

There are several mentions of past abuse which John suffered at the hands of his father, and of the sort of unhealthy family dynamic that existed in the Watson home. There is mention of past alcoholism in the Watson home, as well as John struggling with his drinking in the present.

John's Complex PTSD is front and center here. He is not coping, and all of his long-standing psychological issues are coming to a head. Fortunately he is surrounded by good people, who love him, and who want to help him heal, Sherlock included.

Hopefully, at its root and core this is a fic about love, and family, and healing, but just please be aware that there are some heavy roads to walk to get there at times.

I apologise for the extensive warnings up front, especially since I know they may be a little spoilery, but I do like for people to be aware of what they are getting into when reading a fic that is a little heavier going than my usual fare.

Note: The title is a reference to the Japanese art of fixing broken pottery with a special lacquer dusted with powdered gold, silver, or platinum. The end results are often even more beautiful than the original, unbroken vessel.
Chapter 1

“I’ve decided to take you up on your advice.”

“Mmm?” John’s sitting on the carpet, cross-legged. He’s trying to put together a plastic barn for Rosie’s birthday. Half the instructions are in Chinese, which John doesn’t speak, but he’s soldiering on.

“Your advice that I should pursue a romantic relationship.”

“Oh.” John’s head snaps up. “Oh?” He looks stricken for the briefest of moments, before his usual facade of barely-maintained control snaps back into place. It gives Sherlock the courage to say what he knows must come next.

“Yes.” He takes a deep breath. “You spend most of your time when not at the surgery here at this flat. Rosie’s set up camp in your old room. 70% of your belongings have migrated back here, and so…”

John jerks his chin in a stiff nod. “You want me to move my stuff out. Right. Only fair. Don’t need toddler things about when you’re bringing a woman back to the flat. I’ll just…”

“A man actually.”

“What?”

“A man. Not a woman.”

John’s brow wrinkles, and then his eyes widen. “Since when?”

“Since always. I told you the first night we met.”

“You did not!” John actually sounds angry, and it’s rather encouraging.

“I did. I said, ‘Girlfriends—not my area.’”

“You… No. No. I thought you meant—relationships. You said. You said, ‘married to my work!’”

“Yes, you thought. Clearly you thought wrong. Now moving on…”

“No.” John scrambles to his feet. “We’re not just moving on.” He’s crowded up under Sherlock’s nose now, chin lifted in defiance, mouth tight. “You’re gay?”

“If that’s how you want to frame it, then…”

“Are you, or are you not interested in men—romantically, sexually?”

“I am interested in men. In what capacity… Well, that is a little less clearly defined. But, we’re getting off track. As I’ve said, I’ve decided to take your advice, and so…”

John’s face does so many things at once Sherlock is at an utter loss to define it. For a moment he thinks John is going to hit him, and then he thinks he might cry, and finally he feels a deep, aching regret when John’s shoulders drop and he steps away, turns away, drops to his knees and starts gathering up the pieces of the half-assembled toy from the carpet.
“Yeah,” tight and raw. “Yeah, I’ll get my stuff out of your way. If you can just give me until the end of next weekend. With Rosie’s birthday, and…”

“John, I’m not asking you to move your things.”

“No.” John is violently stuffing pieces of bright red plastic into the half torn box they came in. “It’s only fair. I don’t want to be under foot. Want you to be able to get off on the right track with…”

“You.”

John freezes.

“I’ve rather bungled this it seems, but what I have rather artlessly been trying to suggest is that perhaps you and I might…”

John sucks a sudden breath in through his nose, sets the box down on the carpet. His head drops. “Don’t.”

Sherlock’s stomach twists. “I—I’m sorry, I thought after everything the last few years…”

John stands up and spins around, and Sherlock takes a small step back as he advances on him. His eyes are red-rimmed, his jaw clenched tight, fists white-knuckled and trembling at his sides. He pushes his face mere inches from Sherlock’s. “Just what do you think you’re playing at, hmm?”

Sherlock forces himself to remain calm. “It’s not a game, John.”

“Too right, it’s not,” ground out between clenched teeth. He sounds like he’s choking on every word.

“I love you.”

Sherlock sees the words hit John with almost physical force. He reels back a little, jaw twitching and eyes filling.

“I love you,” he repeats, a little softer, a little more gentle, as earnest as he possibly can. Because they’ve been teetering on the brink of this thing for years, and it had become painfully obvious over the last few months that they were at a tipping point. This had to happen. Now it has. Now they can see where they end up.

The tears in John’s eyes spill over, and he wipes at them angrily. “Do you even know what that means?”

It stings, and Sherlock knows he sounds defensive when he replies. “Yes.”

He can see John unravelling. Perhaps he had been wrong in his assessment. Perhaps John wasn’t ready for this. Perhaps he has been selfish today, pushing, forcing the issue just to get John to stop talking about Sherlock deserving someone, needing someone, to stop talking about how he’s done with marriage, with relationships, how it’s just him and Rosie now, how he’s content with that, to stop saying it like it’s a life sentence.

“I don’t…” John shakes his head. He’s pale. He’s panicking, clearly panicking.

“John, I have no experience with these sorts of things, and I have no expectations. Nothing has to change, or everything can. I…”

“And if I can’t—“ John chokes on the question, and Sherlock feels his heart sink. “If I can’t love
you back, then…?”

He tries not to let the disappointment show. “Then things go on as they have. Though, if you are going to find yourself another wife at some point, I would prefer advanced warning. I don’t particularly relish the thought of you leaving again.”

“Sod wives! There aren’t going to be any wives. But you can’t just…”

“So you say.”

“Do you want me to leave?! ” John shouts, voice breaking.

Sherlock blinks. “Rather the opposite. I thought that was clear.”

“Then, why are you doing this?! ” He makes it sound like Sherlock is forcing his hand, like he’s hurting him, manipulating him, and it’s not at all what Sherlock intended.

“I’ve wanted to tell you, needed to tell you for a very long time, and now I have. As I’ve said, nothing need change. If…” Sherlock feels his throat tighten and his eyes bite. He swallows it down. “If I’ve offended you in some way, then—I’m sorry.”

John huffs, and looks away. “You haven’t offended me. Christ, you… Sherlock, you deserve so much, and I can’t—I can’t give you that. I can’t. I don’t do relationships, at least not well. You know that. I can’t be what you need, be what you deserve for me to be. And I—I’m not…”

Sherlock nods. “Alright. I’m sorry.”

“No.” John’s head snaps up, and his eyes are full. “Don’t. Don’t—don’t be sorry for that. I’m sorry. Jesus Sherlock, I’m so sorry.” He walks out. He leaves everything sitting in the middle of the floor and he walks out.

Sherlock hears him meet Mrs. Hudson on the landing, hears her ask him if he’s alright, hears him ignore her. He goes to the window and watches John rush down the street toward the car park one street over. He’ll go pick up Rosie from nursery in an hour. He’ll go back to the haunted, echoing flat he insists on keeping even though he can’t bear to be there, and he’ll make Rosie something simple from a box or a tin, and he’ll put her to bed, and he’ll drink until he’s drunk enough to sleep.

“Oh. Sherlock.”

He doesn’t turn around, doesn’t reply as Mrs. Hudson putters into the flat with the box of special farm animal-shaped biscuits he’d asked her to get for Rosie’s party.

“Is he alright? He looked frightful.”

“Now is not a good time.”

She ignores him, as she always does, moves into the kitchen, puts the bag on the counter, putters about clearing the table of the dirty dishes from that morning’s breakfast. “Have you two had a little bit of a row? Don’t worry. He’ll come ’round, he always does.”

“Not this time.” John’s form disappears around the corner at the end of the street. It starts to rain.

“What’s happened?”

He jumps at the sound of her voice, much closer than he’d anticipated.
“I’ve ruined it.” There is more sentiment in his reply then he would have liked, and he knows she’s heard it, because she comes up beside him at the window and gives his arm a squeeze.

“I doubt that. He’s been coming back to you for years.”

“Not this time.”

“You told him, then?”

Sherlock looks down at her in surprise.

She offers him a sympathetic smile in return. “It’s about time. Give him space, Sherlock. He needs time to accept it. And not just what you feel for him, but what he feels for you, what he’s always felt for you, by the way. You’ve just asked him to put a label on it, and if there’s one thing that man’s good at, it’s running from the obvious.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of.”

She squeezes his arm again. “Don’t be. I’m an old lady, and I’ve seen a lot of love in my time, and what he feels for you…” She smiles. “You have nothing to worry about.

“Now, come have tea with me. I’ve brought you some of those lemon-ginger biscuits you like.”
Chapter 2

The next week is interminable and painful beyond belief.

John doesn’t come round, he doesn’t text, he doesn’t ring.

Sherlock fights long battles with himself in the wee hours of the morning. Wednesday night he gets all the way to the front door of the flat, and is shrugging into his coat, about to hit send on a text to Bill Wiggins when Mrs. Hudson comes out in the foyer and says she can’t sleep, says she’s made some cocoa and won’t he come help her drink it.

He buys her flowers the next day.

Lestrade shows up Thursday with a case. It’s nothing too exciting, but it’s enough to keep him distracted. That night, he admits to Sherlock, while they’re standing over a corpse in a damp alley, that he’d been out for drinks with John earlier in the week. Sherlock has to will himself not to ask how John is. But Lestrade must know more than he lets on, because as Sherlock turns to go hail a cab in the wee hours, he slaps him on the back, and smiles, and says, “It was time. You two will get it sorted.” And then walks off without another word.

On Friday afternoon Rosie’s nursery calls. Rosie’s fallen and cut open her knee, and they can’t reach John at work. There is a residence order his brother had rushed through for them just a few months prior, so Sherlock is John’s alternate. He races across town and totes a screaming toddler into the A&E for stitches. She’s exhausted by the time they’re done and falls fast asleep against Sherlock’s ribs on the cab ride back to Acton.

It’s a relief to have her in his arms again. He’s lost John, that’s true, and horrible, and almost overwhelming at times, but he’s lost Rosie, too, and he’s missed her more than he’d realised. The smell of her sweaty curls, and the weight of her sleep-lax body against his side, grounds and calms him in a way he hasn’t felt in days. Or perhaps it’s just that she’s worn him as well as herself out with all her screaming.

John isn’t home when they get to his flat. Sherlock uses the key under the mat and lets himself in. He makes Rosie her tea, and texts John at work to tell him what happened and not to go to the nursery to pick her up.

He gets no reply, but at 18:20 a key turns in the lock, and John comes in looking ragged, and tired, and at least 10 years older than he had the week before. Sherlock aches to gather him up, but he’s lost that right now (if he’d ever had it at all).

“Ahh, wee girl. Show Daddy what happened?”

John tuts over Rosie, lets her show him her wound, tell him all about it. He pats her on the head, and then walks to the pantry and pours himself a half glass of scotch. He downs the whole thing, refills the glass, and then leans back against the counter and runs a hand over the stubble along his jaw.

“Thanks. They must have called when I was with a patient.”

Sherlock wipes Rosie’s face, and urges her to go into the lounge to play. “Of course. It’s fine.”

John takes another long pull of scotch, and grimaces. “You didn’t have to feed her.”

“She missed her lunch. There’s more in the oven, if you’re hungry.”
“‘M fine.”

John finishes his second scotch and refills the glass. Sherlock determines to stay long enough to see Rosie to bed.

“I’ll bathe her, and put her down.”

“Mind the stitches.”

“Yes.”

John pushes away from the counter, snatches up the bottle of scotch and heads upstairs to his bedroom, glass still in hand.

Sherlock turns off the oven, packages up the leftovers. He plays with Rosie, eventually bathes her, and then reads her a bedtime story and puts her to bed. John never reappears.

He stops in front of his bedroom door, hand hovering over the door knob. In the end he decides against it. “I’m leaving.”

There’s no response.

“Rosie’s bathed and put down to sleep. Don’t forget about the party tomorrow. You’d said you were bringing the cake. If you need me to get one instead, call Mrs. Hudson in the morning.”

More silence. He’s not sleeping, and he’s not passed out. He’s sitting on the edge of the bed ignoring everything that comes out of Sherlock’s mouth. Or perhaps he’s just not really heard him at all.

“I’ll see you tomorrow.”

He dips his head in once to check on Rosie, who is already asleep. He goes downstairs, and puts the leftovers in the fridge, before shrugging into his coat and scarf, locking the door behind him, and heading down the street toward the main thoroughfare where he can catch a cab.

He’s halfway down the street when he hears the hurried pad of bare footsteps racing up behind him.

“Sherlock.” John is breathless and pale. His hands are shaking.

Sherlock takes in the whole of him, eyes pleading, body trembling, a thin line of sweat along his hairline, and frowns. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

John stops short, looks around himself as though surprised to find himself out on the dark street in his bare feet and pyjamas, and then back up at Sherlock’s face. “I think—I think I am.”

It takes a moment for Sherlock’s brain to process it. “You are?”

John nods and weaves a little on his feet. “I…”

Sherlock reaches out to steady him on instinct. “John, it’s cold out, and Rosie’s back at the flat alone.”

“Yeah. I should…”

“Come.” He steers John back around and then lets go of his arm and let’s him follow in his wake, which of course he does. When they get back inside, Sherlock motions for John to sit on the sofa,
while he heats up the leftover casserole in the fridge.

John picks at it mostly, but he does eat. Sherlock sits down beside him and turns on the telly. He flips through the channels until he finds some inane sitcom, and then turns the volume down low, leans back, and lets his eyes slide shut.

When John finishes eating, he leans back beside him. “Sherlock?” It’s barely a whisper.

“Mmm?”

“I’m sorry.”

Sherlock lolls his head to the side and opens his eyes.

John looks shattered. “I’m sorry. I—I didn’t…”

“It’s fine.”

“It’s not.”

Sherlock nods, because he’s right. It’s not. It’s not fine at all. “About this, or last week?”

John shakes his head. “Both.”

“For tonight, there’s no need. And as for last week, if you feel I’m forcing your hand, please know that wasn’t my intention. I meant it when I said things could remain as they are.”

“I know. But they can’t, can they. Last week I didn’t know. Now I do. It’s different. I can’t unnow it.”

“Did you really not know?”

John stares down at his lap. He’s taking his time, sitting with it, truly considering his answer, and it makes something warm bloom in Sherlock’s chest, something almost like hope.

When he finally looks back up, it’s with a furrowed brow. “I think—I think I didn’t want to know.”

“Why?”

John’s eyes fill. He’s not really drunk anymore, but he’s still buzzed enough that his defences are down. Sherlock briefly considers shutting the conversation down, but he wants to know, he wants to hear John say it.

“Because I can’t.”

“Can’t what?”

The look John turns on him is desperate. “Be what you…”

Sherlock just shakes his head.

“Be what you need me to be!”

“And what’s that?”

“Don’t.”
“John. Please.”

A single tear spills from John’s left eye, to run down his cheek unchecked. His hands are trembling. “I’m not gay,” he finally whispers, sounding for all the world that he’s fought the most epic of battles and come out the loser. Another tear follows the first.

“Oh.”

John goes pale at Sherlock’s easy acceptance. His face crumples, and Sherlock can see beads of sweat break out along his hairline.

“John, it’s alright.”

John sucks in a deep, desperate breath, like a man drowning. “It’s not, though. I—I want, and I can’t, and…” He sucks in another breath, and then another and another. “I—I can’t.”

“It’s alright. Breathe, John.”

John moves like he’s going to bolt, but then seems to decide against it, and turns back, eyes wide and desperate.

“John. Breathe.” Sherlock reaches out tentatively, takes hold of his upper arm. “You know what to do. Just breathe.” He models the deep in-and-out, watches John struggle and fail to match him, sees John’s panic escalate into something that can hardly be sustainable.

Sherlock squeezes his arm and gently nudges it toward his chest. “Come here.”

If John resists at all, he’ll let go, let him struggle through it on his own. John’s used to it. He’s terrified and overwhelmed in the moment, but he’ll make it through. To his surprise, John yields instantly, practically collapsing against his chest.

He watches John’s head rise and fall against his chest, borne up on the ebb and flow of his breath. He places a hand tentatively on John’s head, and feels John shudder and then relax. “Just breathe.”

“S—sorry.”

“It’s okay.”

It takes a good quarter of an hour, but eventually John’s breathing returns to normal, and then deepens, slows, as he slips into a fitful sleep. Sherlock doesn’t let go. He’ll sit up all night if he has to.

The telly continues to natter tinily in the close stillness. Rosie’s soft breathing echoes on the baby monitor. John’s breath wafts against his chest through the thin cotton of his shirt.

He wants this. He wants desperately to hang on to this. It’s the closest thing to belonging he’s ever known, and he’s fairly sure he could say the same for John. But moments like these have seemed all too fleeting the last few years. An early morning dance lesson, with the soft hum of traffic outside and the play of dust motes in the beams of sun shining through the curtains; John’s hand in his as he lay recovering in a hospital bed; John in his arms, grieving the dissolution of his life and at a loss at how to move forward; rare Saturday morning walks in the park with Rosie; late night takeaway picnics by the hearth—brief moments of warm, domestic calm in the midst of a hectic and often violent day-to-day.

The intertwining of their lives has always been made up of small moments, secret, stolen things in the
midst of a reality that seems too bleak to comprehend. And perhaps that is part of what had so terrified John tonight, a part of what he had grieved: the seeming impossibility of what Sherlock is suggesting, to John’s mind the abandonment of ‘happily ever after’, and instead the conviction that what he wants is not something so easily won, something that instead lies at the end of a long road that John feels too weary and worn down to traverse.

It’s something Sherlock can appreciate. He’s been there—for years he’d been there. But sometimes the inaction, the paralysis becomes harder than just choosing to try.

At some point he sleeps.

He wakes to John shifting against him, to the sound of rain outside, and some obnoxious, late night talkshow flashing across the television screen. He stares down at the top of John’s head, and John tilts his chin up to look at him. His eyes are bloodshot and red rimmed. It’s clear he has a raging headache. But the way he’s looking at Sherlock is… It’s…

“Hi,” John whispers.

“Hello.”

And still John looks.

Sherlock can see things settling, behind John’s eyes, in the lay of his body, in the way his fingers stir at the placket of Sherlock’s shirt. “I want to come home.”

“Then do.”

John shakes his head. “I’m getting older, Sherlock. Sometimes I feel like I can barely keep up with you when it matters. Bloody shoulder hurts all the time. Damn leg sometimes, too. I have Rosie.”

“I know.”

Sherlock waits, as John looks away, looks over at the telly, and hooks a single finger into the gap between two of Sherlock’s shirt buttons, the tip of his finger brushing lightly against the scar Mary left over both of their hearts over three years before.

When John looks back up, there is a sureness in his gaze that Sherlock has never seen before.

“You’ve always been home to me.”

Sherlock’s eyes fill. He nods.

“And I love you…” John breathes out like it’s a revelation, like some ancient, overwhelming weight has just dropped from his shoulders. “‘Course I do.”

Time stops.

The rain patters softly against the windows. Sherlock’s eyes spill over. John smiles, soft and fond.

“Last week, I wasn’t expecting what you said, I—I didn’t know what to do.” John bites hard at his lip to keep it from trembling. “I’ve never let myself… And I never thought you’d want me, so it wasn’t ever something I thought I’d have to…”

“I’ve wanted you since the moment we met.”

John huffs out something between a laugh and a sob, and Sherlock forces a smile for him. “It terrified me.”
John’s brow wrinkles, and Sherlock forces himself to continue. “John, I have no experience with this. Do you understand? None.”

John’s face softens. He sits up, sits back a little. “No boyfriends, then? Girlfriends? Not even—fooling around?”

Sherlock shakes his head. “Some fleeting infatuations as a boy, but beyond that…”

He watches it sink in. When John looks up again, the corner of his mouth twitches upward. “Then—why me?”

Sherlock shrugs, shakes his head. “You were you.”

John’s eyes flit away, but there’s a soft smile playing about his lips. He stares at the telly for awhile, and then leans back, stretches out his arm behind Sherlock on the sofa. “What I said before, about not being… It’s not completely true, I don’t think.”

Sherlock wants to tell John that he knows, but he’s smart enough to know it might derail things, and so he keeps quiet, waits, barely dares breathe in the fear of stopping John now.

“I don’t—I don’t know what I am. I loved Mary. At least I did before…”

Sherlock nods.

“And sometimes I wonder if I really loved her for her, or if I loved us, her and me, you know—everything that meant to me, everything we were supposed to be.” John reaches up and rubs a hand over his eyes.

Sherlock waits.

“What I feel for you is different. It’s always been different.”

“From what you felt for her?”

“From what I’ve felt for any of the women I’ve been with.”

“And the men?”

John’s head snaps up. “I told you, I’ve never…”

Sherlock holds his gaze and watches John’s cheeks colour slightly. He exhales, a long quivering breath. “I meant what I said the night we met, you know. It is fine. Whatever you like, whoever you want to be with. It’s fine. But it’s never been fine for me.” He looks down, and fiddles with a loose thread on the leg of his pyjamas before looking back up again. “Why is that?” Like Sherlock will somehow know, somehow have the answer for something like this.

“I don’t know.”

John leans back, deep in thought. His fingers graze Sherlock’s shoulder, and Sherlock thinks that John has finally said enough that he might just dare…

“Have you ever told anyone any of this before?”

John nods. “Tried to.”

“Your therapist?”
“No. God no.”

“Mary.”

John nods.

“And?”

“She told me I was in love with you. Told her what I told you, that I’m not… So she told me I was an idiot.” He huffs out a laugh. “Told me to pull my head of my arse.”

Sherlock fights back a grin. “Ahh.”

John goes quiet again. “Sometimes I wonder if that’s why she shot you.”

The words hang heavy between them.

“What?” Sherlock asks without meaning to, and instantly regrets it.

John sighs, strokes his thumb along Sherlock’s shoulder. “Listen, I—I know you saw her as a friend, and I think she saw you the same, she loved you in her own way, but…” He sucks in a breath and lets it out again, slow and weary. “Doesn’t mean she wouldn’t feel just a little… That given half a chance, she wouldn’t…”

Sherlock doesn’t know what to say.

“She loved me as much as you do, I think. The difference is how. You could let me go. She couldn’t.”

“John, I…”

“You don’t have to say anything, and we don’t have to talk about this ever again, but I’ve had a long time to sit with this, and I know what I know.

“That should have been it, her shooting you. It would have been it, if not for Rosie, but I thought…” John looks up at him, and he can see the guilt written all over him like an epitaph engraved in stone. “It was what I was supposed to have, her and me, Rosie. I thought—I needed to at least try to make it work.”

Sherlock nods. “Of course. They were your family.”

“You’re my family. She was my wife. You’re my family.”

Rosie whimpers, and John’s eyes snap to the baby monitor. They sit in silence listening to her until she settles again.

“John…” Sherlock finally dares. “What I said last weekend, all of it was true, but it was mostly because I couldn’t imagine the flat without you, couldn’t bear to remember all the months you weren’t there. Things have felt different lately, you’ve seemed—anxious that perhaps you’ve outworn your welcome, and I worried that—that we were reaching a place where something had to happen, and so I suppose that behind it all was simply the hope that…”

“I’d move back in with you.”

Sherlock nods.
John leans in a little, his hand cups Sherlock’s shoulder, warm, and firm, and anchoring. “I want to.”
Rosie’s third birthday is a blur. There are children, too many children in Sherlock’s estimation. He’s grateful for Mrs. Hudson and her table full of food, for Molly and the games she’s organised, and some of the other parents, whose names he didn’t bother to catch, who seem used to herding large numbers of toddlers. And he’s grateful for Greg, who seems to have a way with two and three year old boys he he never would have guessed at.

John is quiet, and withdrawn, so Sherlock is left to make attempts at socialisation which, though passable, are hardly endearing him to the parents of Watson’s nursery mates.

One particularly useful woman kindly informs him that Rosie’s mishap the day before had been down to a certain little boy in the class who’s known for such behaviour, a detail the nursery had declined to add when he’d picked her up. Sherlock files the child’s name away for future reference should the issue become a pattern.

They are nearing the end of the time indicated on the invitations, and Mrs. Hudson is bundling up children and handing them bags of sweets before sending them off, when Sherlock looks around and realises John is nowhere to be found.

Molly appears at his elbow. “Upstairs. He went up there about a half hour ago.”

“Ahh.”

“Is everything okay?”

Sherlock looks down at her, at her eyes clouded with genuine concern, and her blouse stained with icing, and some strange toddler yanking at her trouser leg, and he smiles. “No. But, I believe it will be. Thank you for today.”

She smiles, her eyes dropping to the child stomping all over her shoes. “It was my pleasure. You know I’d do anything for Rosie.”

“Yes, I do. Thank you for that, too.”

She nods, and then motions towards the landing. “Maybe you should…”

“Yes, I think so.”

“Mrs. Hudson and I can finish seeing everyone out.”

John is sitting in the rocking chair in the corner of the nursery. He looks up when Sherlock taps lightly on the door and pokes his head inside.

“Everyone’s leaving.”

“Yeah, I guess I should probably…”

“It’s fine. Mrs. Hudson and Molly are saying our good-byes. Whose idea was it to invite eight
children and assorted carers? Was that really necessary?”

John grins, but it looks weary. He lifts his hand. “Guilty as charged, and noted for next time.”

Sherlock chuckles, and steps inside, leans against the wall beside the door. “Are you okay?”

“Just realising there’s not really room for me.”

“There’s always room.”

John huffs. “Where?”

“I can sleep on the sofa.”

“No. You’re not doing that.”

Sherlock shrugs. “I hardly sleep anyway. You know that.”

“Not exactly true. I think you sleep more than I do these days.”

Sherlock feigns mortification, and John laughs. “You know it’s true!”

“Mmm… More a sign of lack of sleep on your part, rather than a preponderance of it on mine.”

John smiles in acknowledgement, leans back in the chair and lets his eyes slide shut. “Seriously though, Sherlock. Where are you going to fit me?”

Between these walls. In my bed. In my arms. Under my ribs. There are so many answers to the question that Sherlock doesn’t dare voice. “We can fit a bed in here.”

“Barely, and she’s getting older. She needs her own room.”

Sherlock swallows, stuffs his hands in his pockets, and toes at a scuff in the hardwood. “My room is always on offer.”

“So you’ve said, but you need to sleep.”

Sherlock fights the urge to roll his eyes, and tries to deduce if this is more of John’s wilful ignorance, or if he’s sincerely just missed the point.

“I doubt your presence would impede sleep the whole night through.”

John cracks an eye open.

His other eye joins the first. “Are you inviting me to share your bed?”

“Consider it—an open invitation.”

“Sherlock.”

“John.”

John sniffs. Stares, like he’s waiting for Sherlock to back down, speak first, and when Sherlock doesn’t budge: “I’m not comfortable with that.”

It’s the plainest John’s ever been with him.
“Is it the bed?”

John’s brow furrows. “What?”

“You were fine with it last night on the sofa. Is it the fact that we would be in a bed?”

“Wait. What are we talking about?”

“You sharing my bed.”

“Right, but do you mean—sleeping, or…”


John clears his throat, looks away. “Right.” He starts to rock in the rocking chair. “Right, well that might be—okay, actually.”

“Really?!” Sherlock clamps his mouth shut, but it’s too late. His eagerness is all too apparent.

John grins crookedly, half amused, half confused. “If it doesn’t work out, we can think of something else, yeah?”

“Of course.”

“And you won’t…” He stops rocking, tucks his knees up under his chin, heels resting on the seat. It’s an oddly boyish gesture, and not something Sherlock’s ever seen him do before. He rests his chin on his knees. “You won’t mention it to anyone though, yeah?”

“Mention it to anyone?”

“Well you know, wouldn’t want people talking.”

And so they’re back to this…

“I hardly go around discussing my sleeping arrangements with complete strangers, John. And you do realise that Mrs. Hudson is bound to figure it out.”

“I think she already thinks we’ve been shagging for years.”

“Mmm.”

John lets go of the hug he has around his calves, and drops his feet back to the floor. “Flat’s bound to be a mess after everyone leaves, yeah?”

“I’m sure Mrs. Hudson will tidy.”

“She’s already done so much.”

“True.”

“Maybe I should stay? Help you set things to rights?”

“If you’d like.”

John picks at a non-existent loose thread on the sleeve of his jumper. “Oh. Well, not if it’s going to inconvenience you, I…”
Mrs. Hudson does tidy, as do Molly, and Greg, and the single mother who had tipped Sherlock off about the nursery bully earlier in the day.

Rosie seems content to play with her new toys, and then to collapse in exhaustion on the lounge floor at 17:00. Sherlock puts her to bed, and when he comes back downstairs it’s to John sitting in his chair with a glass of scotch in one hand, and a book in the other.

Sherlock lights a fire in the hearth and then sits down across from him, picks up the journal on the table beside him, and proceeds to pretend not to observe.

John is chewing on his lip, occasionally rubbing a hand down the thigh of his bad leg. He drinks the glass of scotch and goes into the kitchen to fetch another.

“You want anything while I’m up?”

“No, I’m fine.”

John comes back with two glasses, and hands one down to Sherlock. “I said I was fine.”

“Come on,” John grins crookedly. “It’s a celebration. Drink with me.”

“What are we celebrating?”

John’s smile flickers. He shrugs. “Rosie’s birthday. Me coming back here.”

Sherlock reaches out and takes the glass, and tilts it up to clink against John’s. “To family, then.”

“To family.” John smiles in earnest and drinks.

John seems to relax when he sits back down. Partly it’s the alcohol, but there’s more to it than just that. He sets the glass down on the tea table beside him. “Missed this. Guess you were right, really. I haven’t been myself lately. When was the last time we did this?”

“Five months ago.”

“What? Really?”

“Mmm, the day after we closed the Carfax case. You had a long bath. I ordered takeaway. Mrs. Hudson had Rosie. It was the wee hours. We talked until the sun came up.”

John reaches for his glass again, stares down into it for a moment, and then sets it down again without taking a drink. “I’m sorry if I’ve been—”

“It’s alright.”

John takes up his glass again, and takes a long pull. He chuckles. “Remember my stag do?” Just like that, out of the blue. He’s smiling at the memory.
“It was all a bit hazy by the time we got back here.” It’s a lie but it’s easier than the truth—for both of them.

John laughs. “We were so drunk. And you with your calculations, and that app thing.”

“Which were accurate, and which worked, and which would have ensured a prolonged and enjoyable evening if not for your meddling.”

John arches a brow, and for a minute Sherlock thinks he’s going to deny spiking his drink, but then he just grins and laughs. “Fair point.”

“I still can’t believe Mrs. Hudson left that client here, given the state of us.”

“Too right! I almost considered not inviting her to the wedding over that.”

*Interesting.*

“Perhaps we should be thanking her. God knows what might have happened if we’d been left to our own devices.” Sherlock both does and doesn’t know what exactly is he’s suggesting, but he’s said it now, and it’s left hanging between them, ball in John’s court.

John takes another drink, draining the glass and stares at him over the rim. He puts the glass down, and continues to stare. It’s the sort of gaze that sparks heat beneath Sherlock’s skin, pricks his cells into tiny points of fire.

Sherlock cocks a brow in response.

John’s eyes flicker back down to his lap. “Probably would have passed out. Mrs. Hudson would have found us in a heap in the morning.” He gets to his feet.

“Instead that pleasure was left to Lestrade.”

“Aww, Greg…” John moves toward the kitchen. “You should have invited him, you know. He still gets after me about that.”

Sherlock nods. “Yes, in retrospect, I suppose I should have done.”

John is pouring himself another glass of scotch. It’s become a problem the last few months, but Sherlock is in no position to judge, and he’s not up for starting that sort of conversation tonight.

They sit in silence, both reading while John finishes his third glass of the evening.

When John gets up to get a fourth, Sherlock follows after him, and puts the kettle on.

John leans back against the counter for support, watching him, drains the glass in one smooth motion, thumps the glass back down on the countertop and stares and stares. “You wanna go t’bed?” His words run together, loose tongued, loose limbed, a lock of hair has come loose and is hanging over one eye.

Sherlock focuses on making the tea. “Not yet.”

“I wanna.”

“Mm, it’s been a long day. Tea first?”

John just shrugs.
Sherlock can feel his eyes on him, as he takes down two mugs from the cupboard, brews two cups, quick and simple, builder’s tea more than anything else. John likes it that way—mediocre, bracingly strong and hot, chased with a bit of milk.

Sherlock brings both cups to the table, and the left-over box of biscuits. Sit’s down, and motions for John to join him. John rolls his eyes, but comes, sits, dips a biscuit in the tea, sloshes a little over the side of his mug onto the table when he finally takes a sip, hands unsteady, head clouded.

“’M not drunk.”

“Mmm.”

“’M not!”

“Perhaps a little,” Sherlock offers.

John huffs and takes another nibble of biscuit. “Yeah.” It’s a mere whisper.

“Finish the tea, then bed.”

“Yeah, okay.” John sips at his tea, stares into it. Sherlock watches him slowly deflate. “It’s to sleep.” He finally says.

“The scotch?”

He nods. “No dreams.”

“Perhaps the company will help?”

John looks up, eyes bleary. “You.”

“Mm, waking alone must be…”

John nods, swallows dryly. “Used to like it when you played something. Back before… You always seemed to know, and you’d always play something. Missed that.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

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Sherlock changes in the bedroom, and John takes the loo. They switch places, and then meet again in the dark of the bed. John smells of peppermint toothpaste, and whiskey. It’s medicinal, almost astringent. He lays on his back, arms straight at his sides like he’s laid out on a slab awaiting autopsy.

Sherlock wonders if he wants it really, wants Sherlock to do what he does so well, and take him apart, stand as mirror, show him who he is, all the disparate pieces, even the broken and bloody ones. But then what? Sherlock is just as broken, and he’s hardly the one to try and stitch anyone back together. To dissect for the sake of dissection hardly seems wise.

But still—John is dying. It’s a slow psychological bleeding out, but it’s plain as day, and Sherlock feels helpless to stop it. He aches. He burns. And he loves with a love that is killing him too.
It’s swiftly become something bigger than himself. It sits inside him, and grows, and grows, and has nowhere to go. It’s stretching Sherlock to his limit, and there have been days when he has felt that if something doesn’t happen soon, it will tear him apart and leave him raw, and bloody and beyond repair. They love one another from either side of an impassible divide and it’s killing them both.

“Be careful if I start dreaming.” John sounds weary.

“Yes.”

“Talk to me, but don’t try to touch me.”

“Alright.”

“Just—don’t want to hurt you.” The words sound forced, like each one pains to speak.

“Yes. I’ll be careful. Just sleep, John.”

“Yeah. Yeah, okay.”

He does.

Sherlock lies quiet and listens to him slowly slip into a fitful sleep, and then he sleeps himself.

The dreams come just before dawn.

Sherlock wakes to the sound of John’s whimpers, the sight of him curled up tight, foetal, trembling at the far side of the bed. He does what John told him to do, sits up, takes a bit of distance, and says John’s name calm, and sure, and just loud enough to wake and not startle. He has to speak several times before John jolts up with a small cry and a scramble. He actually falls out of bed, and Sherlock hurries around the side of the bed, only to find he’s stuffed himself in the small space between the bed and the nightstand.

Sherlock stops. He’s not entirely sure he’s awake.

“John?”

He doesn’t respond. He’s folded in on himself, arms hugging his legs close to his chest, forehead pressed to his knees. He looks all of four years old. Sherlock has never seen him like this in all the time they’ve known one another (not true—Baskerville, and it then it was your doing, your fault). He’s reminded of the similar gesture he’d seen in Watson’s nursery earlier in the day, and he wonders what it is he’s been missing, if maybe this thing he’s been feeling as ‘off’ between them all this time has been something else entirely—John struggling, holding back, holding in, as he always does.

He aches to touch, to shelter and soothe, but it all seems too intimate. John is too vulnerable, too raw. He tries to think of what he would want him to do. Leave? Let him preserve some of his dignity? But if he wakes to find Sherlock gone he will know something happened. He may get the wrong idea. He may think Sherlock left because he wanted to leave, needed to leave…

Sherlock sits down on the floor a few feet away, crosses his legs under him, and waits. After a few minutes during which John doesn’t move an inch, he tries again. “John?”

“I hate you.” It’s barely a whisper, but vehement and anxious, and it cuts through Sherlock like a knife.
“I’m sorry.” He says without thinking. He is and he isn’t. He’s said his apologies again, and again, and again, and he doesn’t know what more he can do to make things right.

“I hate you. I hate you.” Whispered like a mantra on trembling breath.

“Would you like me to leave?”

He gets no response. John’s fingers knot in his own hair, he presses back like he’s willing the very walls to absorb him.

“Leave us alone.”

“You and Rosie?”

“Please…” John is trembling again, and Sherlock’s heart twists, and aches so much he thinks surely it must be breaking.

“If it’s what you want.”

“Just leave us alo…”

A police car flips its sirens on in the alley. Sherlock’s bedroom window is open a crack and it is loud, and sudden, causing both of them to jump. John sucks in a gasp, and then unfurls all at once, visibly confused about where he is, lashing out. He overturns the nightstand, sends the lamp crashing to the floor.

“John.” Sherlock holds his hands up, unfolds his legs to kneel before him. “John, you’re alright. You’re at Baker Street, in my room. You’ve fallen out of bed.” He feels around in the dark until he finds the upended lamp, sets it upright. “I’m going to turn on the lamp, alright.” He flicks it on, and John blinks up at him, hands held up as though still trying to ward off whatever horrors had been haunting his dreams. His face is pale, hair plastered to his forehead with sweat. “It’s alright now.” Sherlock schools his tone as gentle as he can. “It’s alright.” He holds out a hand, palm up.

John is panting hard, he still looks confused.

“Your safe now. The dreams have been bad lately, remember. You told me before you went to sleep.”

He sees realisation dawn, a look of something half relief half mortification rushes across John’s features all in an instant. “Yeah, sorry I… Sorry.”

“It’s alright. Are you hurt?”

John reaches up and wipes at his damp forehead and cheeks, stares down at his shaking hands, and then looks back up at Sherlock. “What?”

“You fell out of bed. Then you carried on dreaming I think. Are you ok?”

“Yeah, I…” John looks himself over in a swift assessment, and Sherlock holds out his hand again.

“Come on.”

John takes it, lets himself be hoisted up from the floor. He hops a little, favouring his bad leg when he gets to his feet.
“Sit.” Sherlock nods toward the bed. “Is it your ankle?”

John shakes his head, rubs his hand down his thigh. “It’s nothing. Just happens sometimes. I’m fine.”

“What helps?”

“I’m fine.”

“Alright.”

He stands looking down at John perched on the end of the bed, shoulder’s slumped, and feels utterly helpless.

John’s head follows his shoulders, dropping low. After a moment, he brings a hand to his eyes.

Sherlock sits down beside him, and does the only thing he knows to do, the one thing that has been allowed in the past. He wraps an arm around John’s shoulders, and sits. He sits and bears witness, and hopes beyond hope that it’s enough.

John’s tears are silent and contained, but he doesn’t push Sherlock away.

“Sorry.” He finally manages.

“Apologies aren’t necessary.”

“Should have told you, I—I didn’t mean for you to have to…”

“You did tell me. I knew what to expect. It’s alright.”

John sniffs and wipes at his eyes with the heels of his palms and shudders. “I’ve been thinking about Rosie getting older, more mobile at night. Thinking about what happens if she finds me some night, what happens if I…” John swallows loudly, presses his palm against one eye. “I could hurt her, and I wouldn’t even wake up.”

“You’re here now. We’re together. That’s not going to happen.”

“I’m not okay.”

The raw honesty and desperation in it stuns Sherlock.

“I’m not okay, and I’m getting worse, and I’m not fit to look after her.”

“Your therapist? Does she…?”

“Stopped going. None of them help, not really. Put a plaster on it, but it doesn’t stick.”

“We don’t need to talk about this if you’d rather not.”

John looks up at him, eyes bloodshot and red rimmed, long lashes still wet and clumped together. “It’s okay.”

“The dreams…” Sherlock risks.

John’s lips tremble for a moment, before he clamps his mouth tight and looks away. “Yeah.”

“They change? Or have changed?”
“Yeah.”

“Do you remember when?”

He nods. “Started when we found out about Rosie. Got worse when—when you were shot, better when Mary left, worse after she died.”

“What was it about them that changed?”

John looks up at him, holds his gaze for the briefest of moments, and then drops it again with a shake of his head.

“Perhaps a new therapist might…”

“No. No more therapists.”

Sherlock lets it go.

“When you wake. Do you know what helps?”

“Nothing helps.”

Sherlock’s arm is still around John’s back. He removes it.

John’s eyes snap up. “No, it’s… That’s okay. It’s okay.”

But now it seems awkward to return to their former position, and so Sherlock merely nods. “John.”

“Mmm?”

“If you discover something that helps, tell me.”

“Yeah, I… Okay.” He sighs and rubs a hand down his thigh again. “Don’t think I’m going to go back to sleep now. Think I’ll get up. You want breakfast?”

“Alright.” Sherlock watches John struggle to his feet, and limp toward the loo.

“Fry up okay?”

“Fine. Yes.”

“Okay. Fry up it is.”
Chapter 4

Two days later Harry Watson appears.

John is at work, and Rosie at nursery.

Harry and Sherlock stand in the centre of the lounge facing one another. She holds a box in one hand and a bottle of wine in the other.

After a moment she thrusts a small wrapped gift toward him. “ Didn’t get an invite to the party on the weekend, but she’s still my niece. Thought I’d give it to you and you could give it to her.”

Sherlock strides forward and takes it. “What is it?”

She grins crookedly. “A plush cat. Don’t worry, I’m not going to rub off on her. The wine is for you. Well, you and John if he’s not drinking too much again.”

Sherlock hasn’t seen Harry since before John’s wedding, when he had met her at a cafe to determine if he should try to convince her to come to the wedding, and she had refused for reasons which, in retrospect, seem more than sound.

“The thought never occurred.” He takes the small box wrapped in paper with penguins in earmuffs and coats, and the bottle of pinot noir, and heads for the kitchen. “Tea?”

“Yeah, that’d be nice. Cold out there for March.”

“Still two sugars?”

“And cream. Good memory.”

“Of course.”

She laughs. It’s loud, raucous, wholly unencumbered. She’s so unlike John in some ways. She’s more frank, more open. She takes up space and doesn’t apologise for it. He’s often wondered if that is why she and John don’t get on.

He enjoys her company, if he’s honest, and she’s always full of stories about John which he finds enjoyable too. Today she might be useful.

She pulls out a chair at the kitchen table and plops down in it, yanks another toward her with one booted foot, and then proceeds to prop both feet up on the seat, before dropping her handbag in a heap on the floor. “Christ, I’ve missed you. He moved back in here yet?”

“It’s a work in progress.”

“I bet it is.”

“How’s the wee bab?”

“Not a baby anymore.”

“She got the Watson temper, then?”

“Not that I’ve observed.”
“No? Well probably for the best. And how’s my brother?”

Sherlock hots the teapot. “He’s…”

“Seems a bit better than he was right after the Missus died.”

“Yes.” Sherlock frowns, pauses a moment before spooning the tea leaves into the pot.

Harry sits up, feet clomping to the floor. “You’re worried about him.” She’s as hyper aware of a person’s emotional tells as her brother is wilfully ignorant. Two equal if different reactions to a very similar upbringing, he imagines. But he’d forgotten how observant she could be.

“Perhaps, a little.” He pours the tea into the pot, and brings it over to the table

“He okay?”

“I’m not sure.”

“You going to tell me?”

“I’m not certain that’s my place.” He returns to the counter for the teacups.

She huffs and collapses back into her chair. “So loyal.”

“You needn’t worry. I have it in hand.” He sits down, sliding one cup across the table toward her, and then lifting the pot to pour.

“Let it brew then.” She scowls. “No weak tea for this bird. We’ve got time, yeah?”

He sets the pot back down, and she stares across the table at him until he has to look away. “Are you okay?”

It’s blunt, and kind, and totally unexpected. Sherlock just shrugs. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Just checkin’. I do watch the news, you know.” She doesn’t have to say anything more. He knows exactly what she’s talking about. It was two years ago, but she remembers. Of course she does. The Culverton Smith business had been on the television for weeks, along with his and John’s involvement, and everything that had come with it.

“Is that why you’re here then? A check-in?” It sounds more defensive than he intended, and he wonders at it.

Her eyes are everywhere. She’s assessing him for signs, for tells that he suspects she is more than qualified to recognise. After a moment she reaches over and pours herself some tea, seemingly satisfied.

“Told ya. A wee visit, that’s all.”

“Mm.”

“He’s stopped talkin’ to me altogether, you know.”

“I didn’t know.”

“Mmm. I suspect it’s because I’m sober.”
“Are you?”

“A year next week.”

“A fair accomplishment.”

“Ta.” She lifts her teacup in his direction in a one sided toast before taking a sip. After a moment of silently observing him again, she sets her teacup down with a clunk, and sits back with a sigh. “Go on and ask.”

“What?”

“It’s something about John, I can tell. You get a look. So go on, ask.”

Sherlock hesitates, teapot hovering over his cup.

“I’m an open book. Ask you daft man.”

He sets the pot down and considers things carefully. “Things were difficult for him when he got back from overseas.”

“A fair time before that, I’d say, but yeah, I gathered.”

“Post Traumatic Stress—that’s what the military appointed therapist said.”

“Probably. Still don’t know why he insisted on going over there at all. Dad expected the military bit, I suppose, but… I’ll be fucked if I know why he gave a shite what dad wanted.”

“And before Afghanistan?”

He sees her catch on. The corner of her mouth twitches wryly. She nods and takes another sip of tea. “My therapist says, Complex PTSD, Depression, the addictions of course.

“I left home when I was seventeen. Went to live with my first girlfriend, Fran, in a dingy little flat in Edinburgh. Left John by himself at fifteen ’cause I couldn’t deal with it all anymore. Still wonder if maybe I was wrong in that. Jo—that’s the therapist—says it wasn’t my responsibility to look out for him like that, that I was a kid myself, but you know…”

Sherlock nods.

“Around a year later Mum rings one night, screaming into the phone that he’s killed him.” She picks up the cup again, and Sherlock watches as the tea sloshes up and over the rim with the trembling of her hands. She sets it down again.

“If you’d rather not…”

“No. Listen. If you two are going to try to… You need to know. Christ knows he’s never going to tell you.” She balls both her hands into fists on the tabletop, squeezes hard, takes a deep breath and then let’s go.

“When I got her calmed down enough to understand what the hell she was on about, she tells me that John and Dad got into it, never found out ‘bout what, could never get that out of Mum, but they got into it, and there was an all out brawl, John getting bigger, starting to talk back, starting to fight back, and I guess Dad knocked him down the cellar steps and then just walked out, and mum was left with John in a bloody heap, unconscious, so obviously she panics, thinks he’s dead.”
She takes a deep breath, and forces a smile. “Well you know John, would take a hell of a lot more than that. I told her to call an ambulance. She did. Lied for dad, of course. Said John just fell down the stairs. Turns out it was a broken leg, two broken ribs. He healed up okay, but that’s when he started in on the Medicine thing. Spent all his time at school, at the library studyin’, away from the house, then uni in London, then the army…”

“Young father—was it a constant?”

She shrugs. “Good patches, and bad patches, but the risk was always there. John learned to make himself small. I never had the knack. But really, I don’t know which of us had it worse in the end. Maybe there’s no comparing things like that.

“Dad would have killed me for sure, if I’d stayed after me and Fran stopped hiding. He was like that. The world was a cage of his own making and everything and everyone had to fit or Christ help you…”

Sherlock nods.

Harry smiles. “Great genius you’re supposed to be, I thought you’d have figured all this all out ages ago.”

“To a point. Details are helpful.”

“Don’t tell him I told you, yeah? He’ll just push you out, and… He needs you, I think.”

“We need each other.”

“Yeah?” She nods. “Well, that’s nice, that’s good, because he’s dead gone on you.” She grins.

Sherlock feels his cheeks heat, and Harry lets out another bark of a laugh, just as the door downstairs slams shut and the sound of John’s footsteps come to a pause at the bottom of the stairs. When they resume they come up two steps at a time, and then stop dead at the entrance to the kitchen. John’s eyes flick back and forth between Sherlock and his sister.

“You’re home early.” Sherlock observes.

“Headache.” John turns his attention on Harry. “What are you doing here?”

“Brought a birthday gift for my niece, since I didn’t get an invite to the festivities.”

John doesn’t seem to know how to respond.

“We’re just getting caught up,” Sherlock offers without thinking.

John frowns. “You two’ve met?”

Harry grins, and glances over at Sherlock. “You bad man. You didn’t tell him?”

“Tell me what?” John looks pale and stricken.

Harry just laughs. “He had me out for coffee a couple of years back, to try and convince me to go to your wedding.”

John looks confused. His eyes flick to Sherlock.

“She declined the invite. I—wanted to ensure it was the right decision.”
Harry sighs. “He was trying to do something nice for you, you twat.”

John scowls at her, while casting sidelong glances at Sherlock that he can’t quite interpret. “Okay, but why are you here?”

“She’s telling the truth, John.”

“Alright, but why not bring it to my flat?”

“She’s telling the truth, John.”

“Okay, but why are you here?”

“She’s telling the truth, John.”

“Yeah, but why not bring it to my flat?”

She shrugs. “You’ve not been talking to me. Thought I might do a bit better with this one.” She jerks her head at Sherlock.

Sherlock gets up from his chair, goes to the cabinet over the sink, pulls down the bottle of Paracetamol, dispenses two, fills a glass of water, and walks over to hand them to John.

John takes them out of habit, and then looks down and registers what it is. “What’s this?”

“For your headache.”

“I’m fine.”

“You came home early.”

“I’m fine!” he snaps.

Harry cocks a brow. “Jesus, you look like shite, John.”

“Oh well ta, Harry. I don’t remember anyone asking you.”

“Johnny…”

“What!? Why are you even here, Harry? I mean why are you really here?”

“She’s telling the truth, John.”

“You stay out of this.”

“To bring Rosie a birthday gift, and to see how you’ve been.”

“And there it is…”

She snorts. “I’m not allowed to care about my own brother now?”

“Well there’s a first time for everything, I suppose.”

Sherlock sees the words hit their mark, sees Harry’s ease and confidence flicker. She gets to her feet, picks her handbag up off the floor and slings it over her shoulder. “You’re mean when you’re hung over, John. Have a drink you’ll feel better.”

Her words seem to hit a nerve. John pales and then flushes purple, the vein in his forehead distended and pulsing with barely repressed rage.

Harry strides over and gives Sherlock a quick peck on the cheek on her way out the door. “Give the wee girl a kiss for me, yeah? And make sure she gets her gift?”

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“I’m fine!” he snaps.

Harry cocks a brow. “Jesus, you look like shite, John.”

“Oh well ta, Harry. I don’t remember anyone asking you.”

“Johnny…”

“What!? Why are you even here, Harry? I mean why are you really here?”

“She’s telling the truth, John.”

“You stay out of this.”

“To bring Rosie a birthday gift, and to see how you’ve been.”

“And there it is…”

She snorts. “I’m not allowed to care about my own brother now?”

“Well there’s a first time for everything, I suppose.”

Sherlock sees the words hit their mark, sees Harry’s ease and confidence flicker. She gets to her feet, picks her handbag up off the floor and slings it over her shoulder. “You’re mean when you’re hung over, John. Have a drink you’ll feel better.”

Her words seem to hit a nerve. John pales and then flushes purple, the vein in his forehead distended and pulsing with barely repressed rage.

Harry strides over and gives Sherlock a quick peck on the cheek on her way out the door. “Give the wee girl a kiss for me, yeah? And make sure she gets her gift?”

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“There’s a good man.” She gives his arm a squeeze and then pushes past John into the landing. “Take care of yourself John. You may be a giant pain in the arse, but you’re still the only baby brother I’ve got.”

And then she’s gone.

The minute the door clicks shut at the bottom of the stairs, John springs to life, marches to the window to look down at the street and then swings around to face Sherlock. “What the fuck was that about?!”

“I didn’t know she was coming. She seemed sincere. A gift for Rosie, and news of you.”

“Oh, so you two talking about me behind my back now?” John bites down hard, a muscle in his jaw twitching.

“Yes.”

John jerks at the honesty, like he wasn’t expecting it. He huffs out a bitter laugh. “Nice.”

“Did you know she’s sober.”

“So she says.”

“John.”

“What?”

“She cares about you. I care about you. We talked about that.”

“Did it ever occur to you that maybe it’s none of your business?”

“I love you.”

John is caught up short by the repeated confession. It still shocks him, still sets him slightly off kilter. Some of the anger drains out of him. “Yeah, I—I know. Still don’t know what that’s got to do with…”

“She loves you.”

John shakes his head.

“I’m her window into your current life. She’s my window into your past. It’s helpful to us both.”

“I don’t like people talking.”

“I know you don’t.”

“And yet…” John arcs a brow, challenging, bitter.

“The other night at your flat, you told me that you weren’t alright.”

“So what? You’re going to punish me for it now?”

“No. I want to help.”

“No one can help.”
“Then what do you suggest we do?”

“We?”

“Yes.”

“This isn’t your responsibility.”

“Perhaps not, but it affects me.”

John blinks. After a moment he stares down at the medication and glass of water he’s still holding and takes the tablets. “You wanted to know why I’ve been pulling away the last few months?” he offers after draining the glass.

Sherlock just stares, but John continues on anyway. “It’s this. It’s me, the way I am. I’m not going to get better, Sherlock, that’s not how it works. You’ve seen my sister. On again/off again for years. My…” He swallows dryly. “My dad was… Mum killed herself.” John bites down hard on his bottom lip, swallows tightly. “You deserve better.”

“You’re not your family, and I don’t want someone else.”

“I know you don’t. I know. But you’d be better off with someone else, and…” John presses the ball of his hand against his temple, rubs a hand over his eye and stares down at the floor. “I’m just going to end up hurting you.”

“You’ve already hurt me, John.”

John’s head snaps up. He looks stricken. “If I felt things the way other people do, I would say that you’ve broken my heart—more than once—just as I’ve broken yours. And we’ll do it again. It’s the natural risk inherent in these sorts of arrangements, I believe.”

John shakes his head. He’s gone pale. “I’m talking about more than heartbreak.”

“I know.”

John reaches behind himself for the desk chair, and lowers himself into it. “I could have killed you.” It’s barely a whisper. He’s staring down at his hands, worries the cuffs of his shirt between his fingers “And you would have just lay there and let it happen.”

Sherlock nods. “Yes.”

He shakes his head. “That’s why, Sherlock. That’s why I can’t…”

“But not anymore.”

John looks up.

“John, we both deserved better than that. We do. So let’s do better. Let’s at least try.”

the corner of John’s mouth twists bitterly, and he stares down at the floor with a shake of his head. “Stop punishing yourself.”

He huffs wetly, looks back up. “For what?”
“For everything.”
“Could probably say the same to you.”
“Admittedly, yes.”
“So what is it you want me to do?”
“Us.”

“Okay. Us. What are we supposed to do?”

Sherlock walks over and sits down on the coffee table. “Come and see Ella with me.”
“Ella Who? Wait, my Ella? My old therapist?”
“Yes.”
“No. No Sherlock, she never did a thing for me.”

Then someone of your own choosing.”

John’s mouth twitches into a confused ghost of a smile. “You’d go to therapy with me?”
“Yes.”

“Thought you didn’t believe in all that sort of thing.”
“I’ve never said so. It can be beneficial for some, in some circumstances. It seemed to help you when you needed it, and it has not been without its merits these last couple of years.”

“Wait, you—you’ve been going to see Ella?”
“Yes.”

“Since when?”

“Off and on since Mary died.”

John’s mouth is agape, but his face is an unreadable kaleidoscope of emotion.

“In the beginning it was because I was concerned for you, and then I kept going, and it’s been—helpful.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes.”

John leans forward in his chair, rests his elbows on his knees and stares down at Sherlock’s shoes. “Okay.” He looks up. “Yeah. Okay. I’ll go with you.”

Sherlock gifts him with a smile. “How’s your head?”

“Killing me.”

“Do you want me to fetch Watson from Nursery?”
“You don’t have to do that.”

“I’m offering. Go to bed for a little while. You didn’t sleep well last night.”

“Yeah, I—I’m sorry about that.”

“No need to be.”

“Take my car.”

“Alright. I’ll order takeaway when I get back. Thai?”

“Chinese. Steamed rice and veg for Rosie, and maybe a little sweet-n-sour chicken.”

“Alright.”

Sherlock gets up, and goes out onto the landing for his coat.

“Sherlock?”

“Mm?”

John appears in the doorway to the lounge. “Thank you.”

“Of course.”

“No. For everything.”

Sherlock turns, holds his gaze while he dons his scarf, and then steps forward and leans down to plant a brief kiss to the top of his head. It’s a risk, a big one, but as far as affectionate gestures go, he wagers it’s a fairly innocuous one.

When he pulls back it’s to the sight of John’s eyes just sliding open. He doesn’t look stunned, or angry, or unsettled. In fact, Sherlock can’t seem to read his reaction at all.

“I’ll be back in a bit. Sleep.”

“Yeah. I—I’ll try.”

“Good. Be back soon.”

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John is sound asleep when Sherlock gets back from the Nursery. He sets Rosie up on the hearth rug with an assortment of building blocks and colouring books, and then sets to ordering supper.

Mrs. Hudson comes up and brings them their mail, and a chocolate-hazelnut bundt, and then stays awhile to hear about Rosie’s day.

When the food arrives, Sherlock sets the bags and boxes out on the table and is just going to wake John when he appears in the doorway to the kitchen, bleary-eyed, scratching at his hip, and smiling sleepily. “Guess I did sleep.”

“So it seems.” Sherlock smiles back. “The food’s just got here. Rosie’s in the lounge. I can set
“Yeah, think I will do. Any more fights at playtime?”

“Not today.”

“Good.”

Sherlock unpacks the food, listens to John chat with Rosie, the way she does her best to form a picture of her day with her swiftly emerging vocabulary, the way that John listens, patiently responds. He showers her with praise, and encouragement, and terms of endearment. Sherlock pulls out his phone and sets it to record, a little bit of proof of his parental competence tucked away for the darker days that are sure to come.

When the food is ready, he pockets his phone again and calls them to eat.

Rosie is as enthusiastic about her food as John is indifferent. Sherlock watches him pick around his plate, his hands shaking now and again. Half way through dinner, he strips off his jumper, and rolls up his shirt sleeves. He keeps eyeing Harry’s gifted bottle of wine on the counter.

His ability to focus and bear Rosie’s noise, is swiftly diminishing. Sherlock slides his foot across the floor, under the table, and presses it against the inside of John’s, before turning his attention to Rosie.

“Watson, your Aunt Harry visited today, and she brought you a gift. Would you like to see it?”

It’s enough to distract her. Sherlock cleans her up, takes her upstairs and lets her open the gift. Two stories later and she’s dozing in his arms.

When he comes back downstairs after putting her down, it’s to the sound of John vomiting in the loo.

He sets about making some peppermint tea, and when it’s brewed, returns to the loo and knocks on the door. “Are you alright?”

“Fine…” half moaned into the toilet bowl.

“There’s peppermint tea if you’d like.”

“Go away.” echoing off of porcelain.

Sherlock goes to the bedroom and sets the tea down on the nightstand on John’s side of the bed, and then lays on his back, stares at the ceiling, and listens to John vomit some more.

After awhile the taps in the sink turn on and then off again, John appears in the bedroom doorway and stares down at him.

Sherlock nods his head toward the nightstand. “Your tea.”

“Think I’m getting sick.”

“It seems so.”

“Rosie asleep already?”

“Yes. Still recovering from the party Saturday, I think.”

“I’ve sired an introvert, it seems.”
“It will serve her well in this household, Mrs. Hudson’s unabating social enthusiasm not withstanding.” Sherlock sits up. “You have a headache. Do you want me to let you sleep?”

John sighs and pinches at the bridge of his nose. “I should really go back to the flat. I need to do laundry, and…”

“Perhaps tomorrow? Rosie’s already sleeping.”

“Could I leave her here, do you think? I know it’s a lot to ask, but I—there are just things I need to get done and like you said, don’t want to wake her.”

“If you need to go, go.”


“I see Ella tomorrow at noon. Call me if you’re ill. If not, I’ll meet you there. She’s changed locations. I’ll text you the new address.”
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

John is fifteen minutes late to Ella’s office, but he does eventually show up.

He has a travel mug of coffee spiked with something a little stronger clutched in one white-knuckled hand, and a wrinkle between his brows that indicates that the headache from the day before is still tormenting him.

Ella smiles as he sits down with a mumbled apology. “It’s good to see you, John.”

“Right. Yeah.”

“Sherlock tells me that you’re moving back to Baker Street.”

John looks over at him, and then quickly away again. He takes a sip of coffee. “Yeah. We’ve talked about it. Not sure it’s set in stone at this point, but…”

When he leaves the sentence hanging, Ella writes something in notepad in her lap, and then looks up again. “But?”

“What?”

“You said that you’re not sure it’s set in stone at this point, but…”

John shrugs. “I just mean—I’d like to.”

“You want to move back?”

“Yeah.”

Ella turns to look at Sherlock. “When you told me about it this morning, it seemed like you assumed the decision had been made. Is there anything you’d like to say to John about that?”

They’re five minutes in and Sherlock already hates everything about the situation. Horrible idea. Terrible! What on earth had he been thinking asking John to do this with him?!!

“No.”

“Alright.”

“John, were you aware that Sherlock thought your mind was already made up?”

“I don’t know what you want me to say?”

“You can answer the question however you see fit.”

John sniffs. “Yeah? Well maybe I don’t want to answer it at all.”

“That’s fine.”

John sniffs again, and rubs the back of his fingers along the scruff at his jaw. Ella scribbles some more on her notepad, while John glares daggers at her over the rim of his travel mug. He sets it
down on the table beside his chair with a metallic clank.

“It was sudden. Needed time to think. I did some of that last night, and I’m not sure it’s the wisest choice at the moment.” It’s said in a rush, emotionless.

Sherlock’s stomach twists with something he can’t define. It’s not disappointment. It’s not even surprise. But if feels like taking a step down, expecting to find solid ground, and realising you miscalculated. Suddenly he’s angry.

He sits up straight, worrying the arms of the chair with his fingers, deepening the bald spots in the teal-coloured velveteen upholstery he’d already started to wear down in sessions past. “Why?”

Both John and Ella turn to look at him.

“What?” John’s voice is tight.

“You heard me.”

“I have my reasons, Sherlock.”

“Such as…?”

John clears his throat, takes a sip from his thermos, and clears it again. “Such as your safety.”

“You think that your moving back in with Sherlock will endanger him?” Ella’s pen hovers over her notepad.

John shrugs.

“Why?” She asks.

John turns to look at him instead. “You know why.”

“He’s talking about what happened two years ago, on the Culverton Smith case.” Sherlock addresses Ella, but doesn’t take his eyes off of John, whose gaze is level and almost defiant.

John slides his tongue along the inside of his cheek, and then sniffs and turns back to Ella. “I can’t take it back. It’s done. It’s who I am. I’m capable of that. I know that now. That’s all I need to know.”

Ella leans back in her chair, sets her pen down. “Do you feel remorse?”

Sherlock feels John go lethally still beside him, hears the tight sniff, the electric change in the air as John’s anger spikes.

And then suddenly Ella is looking at him, instead. “You leaned away from him, just now, when he got angry. Did you notice that?”

Sherlock had not noticed. He doesn’t know what to say.

“How do you feel right now?” she presses.

Sherlock just shakes his head. He can’t look at John. It feels like betrayal.

“He’s scared of me. He should be.”
Ella looks at John, scribbles something on her notepad, and returns her gaze to Sherlock. “Is that true?”

“Of course not.”

“Jesus,” John whispers beside him. He leans down, rubs a hand over his eyes and then sits back up again, posture military stiff, and turns to stare out the window with a small shake of his head.

“John,” Ella tries carefully. “His response upset you. Do you know why?”

“Yeah—yeah, of course I bloody do! He’s making excuses for me. And I told him he can’t…”

“Are you blaming him for his reaction?”

“NO!”

Even Ella sits back a little at the force of John’s response. She waits in silence. When John just continues to glare at her she continues. “If you would like to step outside, take a moment to catch your breath…”

“You’re kicking me out, now?” John grinds out through clenched jaw.

“I’m giving you one option for how to manage your anger.”

“No, I don’t want to fucking step outside.” He’s trying to calm himself. Sherlock can hear it in his voice.

“Sherlock, what are you feeling right now?”

He looks at John, all tied up in knots. He has to look away. “I want to touch him.” Such a strange thing to say. True, but unexpected. John’s head turns, he stares down at Sherlock’s fingers plucking at the knee of his own trousers. (Why is he?) He forces himself to stop.

“Do you know why?”

Sherlock just shakes his head. “It wouldn’t be the correct choice.”

John is looking at him properly, now, but still Sherlock stares down at his hands.

“Why?”

“Not when he’s angry.”

“I see. John, do you agree with that assessment?”

*John is still staring at him.* (Why can’t he look back?)

“Yeah. Maybe. I guess. I don’t know. I don’t know how I would react. I just…” He hears John suck a breath in through his nose, let it out again, quavering, raw. He clears his throat. “I don’t want to hurt him again. That can’t happen.”

“Yes,” Ella agrees. “I think we’re all agreed on that. Sherlock, you agree?”

He says nothing. He doesn’t mind so much, not really. It hurts John, and that’s the worst of it, but he’s endured worse.
“Sherlock?”

He looks up. “Yes. I agree.”

“He’s lying.”

Sherlock’s head snaps to the side of its own volition at the words. John catches his eye briefly, and then looks back at Ella. “He’s lying. I can always tell when he’s lying.”

“Are you?” Ella asks him.

“No. But in some ways, I—I didn’t mind it.”

“You didn’t mind him taking his anger out on you? You didn’t mind him assaulting you?”

It sounds so harsh, so crass, so horrible put like that. It wasn’t like that to him, not in the reality of the moment. In that moment it felt intimate. Awfully, violently so, but intimate none-the-less.

“It wasn’t like that.”

John huffs in exasperation and turns away.

“What was it like, then?”

“It felt like—like I mattered. It felt like being wanted.”

The room falls into silence, nothing but the sound of the soft rain outside on the window pane, and the scratch of Ella’s pen on the pad in front of her.

“Is it wrong?” Sherlock finally asks when the silence has strung out further than he can bear.

Ella looks up. “No judgements. But I am curious if you could elaborate. Why did John assaulting you make you feel like you were wanted?”

“He was trying to stop me.”

“From hurting Mr. Smith, you mean?”

“Yes. And more indirectly, myself.”

“And you saw that as an act of caring.”

“Yes.”

Ella picks up a tablet on the desk beside her and flicks through unseen files. “I have notes from John’s other therapist here, she says that John’s said that he disarmed you, but then he let his anger over Mary’s death, and other unresolved issues between you come to a head, and he acted on that anger, and took things much further. What about that? How do you feel about it?”

“It was—understandable.”

“What made it understandable?”

“I killed her.”

“Mary?”
“Yes.”

“Did you?”

“Yes.”

“How so?”

“Pride. Arrogance. Over-confidence. And maybe…”

“Maybe?”

Sherlock steals the tiniest of glimpses of John beside him, but looks away again, just as quickly when he sees the stricken look on his face. He looks back up at Ella.

“Maybe I wanted to die.”

“You wanted to die?”

“Not anymore, but—I think maybe I did that night.”

“Why did you want to die?”

“It hurt.”

“What did?”

“Living.”

“Why?”

“Because…” Sherlock sucks in a shaky breath. It seems insurmountable. “Because I…” He can feel his anxiety mounting.

“You can take your time…”

“Yes, I know. I…” He finally does turn and look at John—John with lips slightly parted, and eyes stricken. John who is subconsciously rubbing a hand along his thigh, self-soothing the pain, the trauma Sherlock’s words are stirring up. “I was alone. It was what you wanted, so—I wanted you to have it, but it was lonely. And then there were those three months—just you, and me, and Rosie. When you finally wanted to go and fetch Mary, when we came back, it—it was harder than I’d anticipated.”

John just shakes his head, but he’s not looking away. It’s Sherlock who has to drop his eyes, first. Too painful. “It was—selfish of me.”

“It’s natural to feel that way. You care deeply for John, and the two of you lived together, shared a life for a year and a half. You’ve said you have a very small social circle. It’s natural to feel isolated and even desperate when you lose someone that close and important to you.”

“Yes, but I—I’ve hurt John enough.”

“You recognise that taking your own life, would hurt John.”

“Yes.”
“Do you acknowledge that it did.”

Sherlock looks up at Ella. Her eyes flit briefly to John, and back again. And Sherlock turns again, finds the courage somehow to look John straight in his full, red-rimmed eyes. “Yes. My life was not my own to toss away. I didn’t realise that then. I didn’t stop to think of it when I stepped off that roof, when I kept you in the dark for two years, the night I—I overstepped at the aquarium, or more recently when I… The drugs. You were right. I made a vow to you, and I broke it.”

A single tear rolls over and clings to the tip of one of John’s lashes.

“I’m sorry. I know I’ve apologised before, John, but—I didn’t see then. I do now.”

“What do you see?” Ella urges.

“That he needs me, as much as I need him.”

Ella nods, writes. “Do you think that’s true, John?”

Sherlock looks up when there is no response. John is just staring at him.

“John,” Ella prompts gently. “Is that true, do you think?”

“You need me?”

“Of course, I do.”

John’s face contorts in disbelief. “Why? Why would you need me? Look at me. What do I even have to offer you, Sherlock?!”

Sherlock blinks. “I don’t know what you mean?”

“LOOK AT ME!”

Sherlock jerks a little at the sudden increase in volume, and he does catch himself this time, unfortunately so does John. He’s up and out of the chair and striding over to the far corner of the room before Sherlock knows what’s happening. He moves to get up and follow, but Ella shakes her head, and he sits back down.

John has one hand against the wall, and another over his eyes, and he’s trembling. Sherlock aches, aches to touch him (why?). It seems like hours they sit there and wait, though in reality it is probably closer to 5 minutes. Finally, John’s arm slides down the wall to rest at his side. He wipes at his eyes, pulls himself up straight and returns to his chair without even looking at Sherlock as he brushes past.

“Sorry.”

“It’s fine. That was very good, John.”


“Separating yourself from a situation that was triggering your anger and anxiety. Are you fine to continue?”

John must nod, because Ella turns to Sherlock. “Do you want to ask for clarification about what John was talking about before?”

“Not if he doesn’t want to talk about it.”
“John?”

“There’s nothing to talk about.”

“You seemed to have things to talk about before. You don’t believe Sherlock needs you?”

“Leave it.”

“Yes. He doesn’t have to talk about it.”

Ella looks back and forth between the two of them. She nods. “You did well today. First joint sessions are always hard. We covered a lot. I do hope you’ll come again in two weeks. I feel we made progress. And John, it may be helpful for you to resume individual sessions outside of what we do here.”

John doesn’t say anything.

“Thank you,” Sherlock offers for them both. “In two weeks then…”

Chapter End Notes

This is the last of the chapters I had pre-written, so the wait between chapters might be a little longer after this. Apologies.
John has run out of coffee by the time they both slip into the backseat of their shared cab back to Baker Street. Sherlock can see him lift the mug to his lips now and again, only to remember it’s empty. He keeps stealing glances in Sherlock’s direction, too, but Sherlock chooses to ignore it.

He waits until they pull onto Baker Street to speak. “Are you coming in then?”

“Need to get Rosie.”

“Fine.”

“Sherlock…”

The cab pulls to a stop at the kerb, and Sherlock practically leaps out, shoves a handful of bills at the cabbie, and then hurries inside without waiting for John to follow. He can hear Mrs. Hudson talking to Rosie in her flat, but he goes straight upstairs, shuts himself in his bedroom, curls up on the bed and tries not to think.

It’s impossible, of course.

John isn’t coming back. John isn’t coming back because he’s angry. He’s angry because Sherlock needs him. And isn’t that just always the way? Not brave enough, not smart enough, not strong enough, not enough by far, plain and simple.

And oh, how he’s tried. But it was a silly, childish dream to think that he might be wanted despite everything. John needs him, and that’s something, but it’s not enough. It never is.

John isn’t coming home, and it’s only a matter of time until he goes for good. They were teetering on the brink of it before Sherlock had stupidly found his courage, and now it’s more sure than ever.

Sherlock feels that certainty wash over him, twist in his stomach, sour and awful. He curls up tighter and pulls hard on his hair, one pain to override the other. He forces himself to breathe. Lets himself sink, down, down, down…

It’s dark when he finally comes back to himself. He wonders if he slept, how much time has passed, if Mrs. Hudson has gone out to play Bridge as she usually does Tuesday nights, or if she might still be home, might have just a little more of her excellent hot cocoa.

He listens for her television, or any sounds of movement from downstairs and hears nothing. After a moment or so more of lying in the dark, he sits up and fishes his phone out of his pocket. He scans through his text history and stops on the text he’d received from John earlier in the day saying he was running late. His thumb hovers over it, battling the urge to swipe and delete, to for once find the sort of courage that matters, to do what needs to be done, to stop hoping, needing, caring.

His thumb trembles, and he scrolls down to the last text he’d sent Wiggins, opens it and then squeezes his eyes shut, and tosses the phone onto his bed with a sigh.

Molly works a nightshift at the morgue. He could go there. Perhaps she might have something interesting in. The moon is freshly waning, and there are always interesting corpses to be had after a full moon. He decides. It will be a distraction even if she doesn’t have anything in, she’s always willing to make him some coffee and prattle on as long as he’ll tolerate it.
He swings the door to his bedroom open and, to his great surprise, almost trips over John who is laying on the floor, back propped up against the wall, legs extending across the doorway. He’s pale, and sweaty, and sound asleep.

Sherlock steps over his legs, and then crouches down beside him. “John? John, wake up. Where’s Rosie?”

John stirs. His eyes pop open.

“What’s Rosie?” Sherlock repeats.

“You okay?” John blurs blearily.

Sherlock frowns. “Of course, but Rosie?”

“Oh. Yeah. I—i took her back to the flat, got her sorted, and then I couldn’t… I called a minder. I needed to see you.”

“Why?”

“Today, with Ella.”

“It’s fine.”

“No.” John’s lips are white, lids heavy, and the bags under his eyes more pronounced, two angry bruises, almost livid against the pallor. He winces. “Can you help me.” He reaches a hand out, and Sherlock stands up, takes it, and helps John to his feet.

John weaves a little, reaches out for the wall to steady himself.

“You’re ill.”

“I’m not. It’s…” For a moment Sherlock thinks John’s going to cry, but he masters it before it can overwhelm him and falls back against the wall with a deep sigh instead. “I’m trying to cut back.”

“The drinking?”

He nods.

“Do you want help?”

“It’s fine. I can’t ask you to do that.”

“Why not? You’ve helped me—when I needed it.”

John has no reply. He wipes a hand over his eyes. “Anyway, that’s not why I’m here.”

“Then why are you here?”

“To say sorry.”

“For what.”

“The stuff I said today with Ella.”

“You said a lot of things. Which in particular?” Sherlock knows he sounds short, but so much of it still stings.
“I need you to know that I’m not angry at you.”

“I know that, John. You’re angry at yourself. You simply don’t want me.”

John has been staring down at his hands as he speaks, but his head snaps up at Sherlock’s words. He opens his mouth like he might refute him, but then he stays silent after all.

Sherlock hurts everywhere. “I may leave London for awhile. I need—distance.” He isn’t sure he means it, but it feels like doing something.

He sees the words strike, sink in. John seems to shrink and diminish right before his eyes. “You said things could stay as they were.”

“Yes. I know. I was wrong.”

“Okay.” John sounds impossibly young, and Sherlock thinks it might kill him, this tearing off of the plaster, this seemingly necessary step.

He feels selfish. But staying when John is constantly denying them both, constantly punishing himself, only one bad night away from leaving again, possibly forever—it’s too much. He deserves a little self-preservation, does he not? After everything?

“When you said you would come home, and then you decided you couldn’t, I didn’t realise how much I wanted it until that moment. It’s difficult for me, John. What I said today is true. It’s lonely here without you, and I can’t… I need space, distance to understand what we’ll be now, if anything; who I’ll be without you here.”

“See.”

“See what?”

“I am hurting you.”

“Yes, John. But not in the ways you think. I want to do this together. You don’t.”

“I can’t!” It’s whispered, ragged, desperate and sorry all at once.

“I know.” Sherlock holds his gaze, until John looks away. He takes a deep breath. “I’m going out. I’ll talk to you—when I do.”

John’s hand shoots out and grabs at his wrist. It’s not rough. It’s tentative but desperate. John’s fingers are ice cold. They tremble. “Wait.” His eyes are swimming, and his breathing picking up. “Please.”

Sherlock gently prises John’s hand from his wrist, looks down at him, small, and terrified, and coming apart at the seams. “John, what is it that you really want?”

“Mum killed herself.” His eyes spill over.

It takes Sherlock a moment to catch up to the sudden change of topic. “Your mother? Yes you mentioned it the other day. I’m—I’m sorry.”

“I left. I left her, and then she couldn’t…” John lets out a small, broken sound that twists under Sherlock’s skin and burrows deep beneath his heart.

“You were young. It could hardly be considered your fault.”
“He hurt her, and punished her, and neglected her, and she—she never stopped loving him, not for a moment. She always said he loved her. Always. She’d be bruised and bloody, and it was always just fucking love to her… But it wasn’t, it wasn’t, and all that time—all that time it was sitting inside her, festering, and she never said anything, she never did anything, and then it was too late.”

Sherlock is totally lost. “John, I’m sorry, I don’t…”

“I want to do this together, Sherlock. I want to, but I—I’m so fucked up, and that’s not going to change, and I’m hurting you, over and over. And Christ help you, you see it as love. I’m killing you. Don’t think I don’t see it. I see it. I know it. And I’ve already lived with the reality of what that felt like for over two years. I can’t do it again. I can’t do it for real. And I—” He lifts a hand to cover his eyes.

Sherlock’s eyes burn. “You’re an idiot.”

John’s hand drops. He blinks, face a mix of surprise and blank confusion. Fresh tears spill over.

“You’re an idiot,” Sherlock repeats, strides forward and pulls him into his arms. John goes rigid. “You’re not your father, but you most certainly are a Watson, and you’re an utter idiot.”

John huffs out something that almost sounds like a laugh, but which quickly devolves into something much different. Sherlock pulls him closer. “Come home, John. Just stop this, and come home. Let us both at least try!”

“I can’t be the reason you…”

“I need you. You need me. We’re allowed to need each other. And if not, then, can we still at least choose one another?”

“I’ll let you down.”

“And I’ve already let you down more times than I can count, but I want to try.”

“And if we destroy one another?”

“And if we don’t?”

John sniffs against his shirt, and Sherlock smooths a hand over the back of his head. “Sometimes I don’t know which you’re more afraid of.”

“I know…” John whispers so quietly against his chest, he’s unsure if he’s heard it at all.

Sherlock stares down at the top of John’s head, the way in fits so perfectly into the cup of his hand, the way John rests beneath it, without even realising. “How long do you have the carer for Watson?”

“All night. Didn’t know how this would go.”

Sherlock strokes John’s head again. “Come to bed with me.”

He feels John tense and rubs a hand down his back. “Not like that. Just sleeping. Stay.”

John shivers, and then lets go, melts against Sherlock’s chest like he might be half-asleep already, like he might want to be lifted up and carried to bed. It’s relief, Sherlock suddenly realises. He came here hoping to make amends, hoping for a second chance, hoping that Sherlock would give him a reason to believe they had a chance, and he’s found it.
Sherlock pulls back a little, slides a hand down the length of John’s spine before dropping it, and then turns back to the bedroom. John follows. They strip out of their clothes, Sherlock keeping his pants on, shrugging into an old t-shirt, John in boxers and an ill-fitting vest.

They crawl beneath the covers, and gravitate toward one another, each lying on their sides, close enough to breath one another’s breath. One of John’s small, cold fingers hooks over one of his. “I need to ask you something, and I need you to be honest with me.”

Sherlock tries to read John in the dark, but comes up empty. “Alright.”

“If we’re going to… It’s important. It’s important to me.”

“Alright.”

John’s finger stirs against his. “Tell me you understand that what happened between you and me that day, in that morgue, tell me you don’t really see that as care, as love.”

“I don’t.”

“Are you telling me the truth?”

“Yes. It’s more complicated than that.”

“Yeah? Then explain it to me.”

Sherlock considers it for a moment. “Have you ever been high?”


“Sometimes there’s this moment, a tipping point. You reach this moment where you’re deep under and balancing a mere hair’s width between being in an emotion, and slipping over into something more primal. In that moment, it feels like it could become one thing or the other, and you don’t know which it will be until suddenly you’re there—possessed by it.

“It’s only ever happened to me a few times, always when I was high on a very particular cocktail, but that’s beside the point. The point I’m trying to make is that it’s a thing that happens, and maybe the catalyst is a drug, or maybe it’s a particular cocktail of brain chemicals, but it does happen, and when I think about that day, blurry as things are, all I remember is watching you balancing there, and thinking that you had been balancing there for weeks, months, years maybe? And there I was, unravelling about to do something spectacularly stupid, to most likely take myself away from you again, and you wanted to stop me. You were on that fence, and when I knocked you over…”

“No.” John shakes his head and sits up. He stares down at him in the shadows. “If this is going to work. If we are going to try to do this, then you have to stop making excuses for me, and you have to stop blaming yourself for everything. That was not your fault.”

“I…”

John sighs and looks across the room to the curtains billowing softly in the cold night air. “I know I blamed you for a lot of things for a long time when you came back, and I know that made you feel like you had a lot to make up for. But that needs to end now, okay, because I wasn’t angry at you. I mean I was, I was angry that I didn’t know, that Molly fucking Hooper and fifty plus tramps knew
and I didn’t, but I was mostly angry at myself because…” He sucks in a sharp breath. “There were so many things I’d wanted to say, so many things I swore I’d say if by some miracle if was all just some huge mistake and I got a second chance. And then when that chance came along…”

He turns and looks back down at Sherlock. “And I’m still not saying them. Thought it was too late, really; that the chance had passed me by.”

“It hasn’t,” Sherlock whispers.

John stares down at him, barely visible in the artificial dusk of the room. He reaches down, brushes a single curl from Sherlock’s forehead with one finger, and then pulls away again, just as quickly. “I don’t know. I’m not young anymore, Sherlock.”

“In your case, age could hardly be considered a detriment.”

John looks down at his lap, and worries the edge of the sheets. “That some sort of compliment?”

“Yes.”

He thinks he sees John smile.

“Feels too late to change, maybe.”

“It’s not.” Sherlock curses and and is grateful for the darkness, all at once. He longs to be able to see John’s face, to read every tiny nuance of emotion, but at the same time he knows it would probably be too much—for both of them.

“When you died, I—I couldn’t stop thinking about all the things I almost told you and didn’t. When you came back I thought I hated you, but really, I think I hated myself for never seeming to find the courage I wanted to find. I think my stag do was just another pathetic attempt. Thought if I got us drunk, then maybe I could—I don’t know. I guess I hoped that maybe the choice would be taken out of my hands. And now—now I’m glad it wasn’t.”

“Are you?”

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

“Because, I want to choose you. You deserve to know it was a choice, not a mistake, not a regret, not a last resort, and that night, if we’d… I think I would have married her anyway, Sherlock, and…” John wipes at his eyes. “I’m not sure that’s something we could have ever come back from.”

Sherlock doesn’t know what to say, so he says nothing.

John wipes at his eyes again. “Listen, I know, I know this sounds like you are my last choice, and I can’t…” John runs a hand through his hair, and then drops his hand to his lap. “I don’t know how to say it, how I can ever make it clear enough that you were my first choice, from the very first moment we met, the second I walked into that lab with Mike, and looked over at you standing in front of that microscope, trying to pretend you weren’t interested, from that very first glimpse, all I could see was you, all I wanted was to be with you, all the time, every minute of every day, but I didn’t know how to…” He shakes his head, clearly frustrated at his inability to find the words.

“It’s alright.”
“No, it’s not!”  It’s not angry.  It’s frustrated, lost.

“It only requires three words, John, and you’ve already said them.”  And when John says nothing in return.  “Did you mean it?”

“God yes.  ‘Course I did.”

“And you agree it’s better we work through all the rest together?”

“Yeah.”  It’s a whisper.  ‘Yeah, I want to.’

“Then I imagine that over time actions will speak louder than words ever could.”

And that is it, really, Sherlock knows.  That’s the sticking place.  That is where they will either rise together or fall apart.  They’ve never needed words, never been good at them even.  John is man of action, first and foremost, and only time will tell if he will find the courage to take all the sentiment, all the regret, lay it aside, and move forward.  There’s nothing more to be said tonight.

“Should we sleep?”

“Yeah, I…  Yeah, probably we should.”

“Alright.”

John lays back down, rolls onto his back, and pulls the blankets up under his chin.

“Good-night.”

John rolls his head to the side.  “Night.”

Sherlock lays in the dark and listens to the distant, quiet hum of late night traffic.  It lulls him straight into that sweet spot between sleep and awake.

“Sherlock?”

“Mmm?”

“I do love you, you know.”

He smiles softly in the dark.  “I know.  I love you, too.  Sleep now.”
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

A little lull in the storm in this chapter. Figured you could all use a little sweetness and breathing space.

I'd also like to thank each and every one of you for your wonderful comments. They're like oxygen when I'm writing a story as difficult and occasionally draining as this, and though I may not have the time to respond at the minute, I still want you all to know how very much I appreciate and cherish each one.

The bed is empty when Sherlock wakes. He jerks up at the realisation, scrambles for his phone on the nightstand. No texts from John. He strains his ears. Not a sound.

The night before feels like a dream, hazy around the edges, undefined in the light of day, too intimate, too new. He might have dreamt it, vivid though it was.

He swings his legs over the side of the bed, and stares down at his pants and t-shirt. He always sleeps naked, so—not a dream then. John had been there. John had lain beside him in the quiet darkness and bared more of his soul than Sherlock can ever recall him doing. It seems significant, momentous even—if it sticks.

He showers. He gets dressed. Spends a ridiculous amount of time on his hair. He tosses his new, claret, silk dressing gown over shirt and trousers, and makes his way into the kitchen for tea.

Mrs. Hudson has left it where she always does. Propped against the teapot is a piece of paper torn hastily from the notepad he keeps on the desk in the lounge, and folded in half twice.

He let's his hand hover over it. His fingers twitch. He snatches it up, unfolds it, and takes in the lines of John’s neat, even handwriting.

Called in at work.

Gone to get Rosie.

Will stop by the shops for food.

Text if you need anything.

He fingers the phone in his dressing gown pocket, plucks it out. It’s 10:00. He usually wakes around 9:30, but whether John is observant enough to have noted this is not clear. Still… Wouldn’t want to look too eager.

He waits until 10:15 to text him back.
**Where are you?**
At Waitrose.

**Why?**
Getting food.

**You hate Waitrose.**
Thought I’d get something nice. Make us supper tonight.

**Good idea.**
You want wine?

**We have some.**
Red or white?

**Red.**
I’ll get some white.

**Suit yourself.**
Almost done. Be home soon.

Sherlock traces a finger lightly over the word: *home*. He texts an acknowledgement, and then flops into his chair to drink his tea.

When the door from the street swings open a half hour later it is to the sound of Rosie screaming, John snapping at her, and a bag of shopping bursting open to spill all over the floor of the foyer.

“Fuck!” From John.

“Fuck!” in echo from Rosie.

Sherlock decides to intervene.

“Colourful but rather pedestrian expletive, Watson. Really there are better words with which to pad your vocabulary.” He descends the stairs with hurried steps. “Come, let’s help your father.”

She is wet-eyed, and red cheeked, and she reaches out for him the minute he reaches the bottom. He takes her into his arms, and she presses her wet, snot-smeared face into his neck.

John, as his sister had so accurately observed two days prior, looks like shite. “Just take her upstairs,” he snaps.

Sherlock does. He sets her down in his chair and removes her coat, and hat. He wipes the frankly alarming amount of tears and mucous from his neck (and less successfully from the the collar of his shirt and new dressing gown), and then wipes it from her face as well.
“How were the shops today, Watson?”

“No sweeties, Daddy said.”

“Is that so.”

“Yes. And…” She sucks in a deep breath, and rubs one hand over the metal arm of Sherlock’s chair. “And… And—and he yelled at the computer.”

“The chip and pin machine. Yes. Your daddy has a somewhat fractious relationship with it.”

Rosie blinks up at him, picking her nose, and giggles.

He grabs a tissue off the desk, hands it to her, and goes into the kitchen. “Go lie down. Let me put this away.”

“I’m fine.” John is stuffing things violently into the refrigerator.

“It appears not.”

John swings around, mouth open like he means to shout at him, but he stops dead, eyes flicking toward the lounge where Rosie is kicking the seat of Sherlock’s chair with the back of her heels and singing to herself.

Sherlock casts a sympathetic eye on the state of him. “It’s most likely withdrawal,” he murmurs low enough for Rosie not to hear.

“What?”

“This.” He motions to John. “You’re a doctor. You know this. The headaches, the sweating, the nausea. You said you’ve been trying to cut back. So, go rest. I’ll take care of this, and Rosie. If you’re feeling better later, you can cook us supper, like you planned.”

John’s mouth presses into a tight line, and Sherlock sees him trying to master his anger. He’s not angry at Sherlock, not really. He’s angry at himself, as usual. Sherlock just always seems to be the catalyst and nearest target.

After a moment, he drops his head and wipes a hand over his eyes. “Said I don’t need your help.”

“Then I’ll leave you to finish here, and I’ll take Rosie for lunch in the park.”

In truth, Sherlock is not fond of taking Rosie to the park. It’s not that he begrudges her the exercise, or a bit of fun, or even that he dislikes her company, it’s just that they attract the sort of attention he’d rather avoid: cooing old ladies, overly-friendly shopkeepers, fawning single mothers.

Rosie is more than keen, as she loves to show off, but by the time he gets her and the ducks fed, gives her some time to play on the swings, and wards off a veritable army of ridiculous women, he’s usually exhausted. Today is no different.

It’s already nearly three when they get home. Rosie is tired enough that he knows she’ll go down early if he can get her fed and bathed.

The door to his bedroom is closed. John is sleeping, then. Bathing Rosie will likely wake him, which is regrettable, but selfishly Sherlock hopes to see him a little after almost an entire day without.

Having missed her afternoon nap, means that Rosie is about as keen on her bath as Sherlock is on
giving it. It’s sounds more like a battle zone when John finally stumbles through the door of the loo with a scowl.

“What’s all this then?” There’s a bit of the Captain about his tone. Both Sherlock and Rosie’s eyes snap up to him, instantly at attention.

“A bath.” Sherlock blurts.

John’s brow curves and the corner of his mouth twitches. “Sounds more like a war zone.”

“NO BATH!” Rosie interjects with a great deal of conviction.

“Yes, a bath. And stop splashing. You’re getting water all over the floor, and you’ll flood downstairs, and wash poor Mrs. Hudson into the Thames.”

She stares at him for a moment, and then laughs tentatively, no doubt gauging his reaction. He smiles and she giggles some more.

John walks over to the tub, and stares down at Sherlock kneeling on the cold, wet tile, hair askew, shirt and dressing gown stained and splattered with water, exhaustion no doubt written all over him, and graces him with a smile too. “I can finish up here. Go sit down for awhile.”

There’s a fondness to it, a softness that Sherlock doesn’t expect, and it washes over him with a comforting warmth. “If you’re sure.”

“I’m sure. I talked to Mrs. Hudson earlier, and she said she can watch Rosie. Thought maybe we could go out.”

“Out?”

“Angelo’s?”

Sherlock briefly wonders if the gesture might qualify as a date in John’s mind, and then stuffs the thought down deep. “Angelo’s is fine.” He glances down at his shirt and trousers, soaked through with soapy water. “I will, however, need some time to get ready.”

John glances down at himself. “Me too, if you haven’t noticed. I need to shower. Maybe you can feed her after I’m done here, and I’ll shower, then when I get out, I’ll put her down and you can do what you need to do?”

“Alright.”

John grins, wincing a little around the headache that is still clearly plaguing him.

“Okay.”

They walk to Angelo’s. The night is cool, but dry, and the streets are filled with evening bustle. John is clearly still feeling ill, and his tolerance for noise and jostle, visibly low, but he seems pleased to be out of the flat, away from Rosie, just the two of them, and the cold air seems to be soothing his head.

“This take you back?” John asks beside him.
“Mmm?”

“This. Walking from the flat to Angelo’s. Our first case, remember?”

“Yes, I do.”

“What a night that was. Hunting down Hope. Didn’t know that’s what we were doing until we were in the middle of it, because you were off trying to do it all on your own, as usual, but…”

“You didn’t seem to mind.”

“Minded you running off on your own like that, but the rest…? Christ. ‘Course not. Best night of my life.”

Sherlock feels warm. “Was it?”

“God, yes.”

“Still?”

He can’t bring himself to look over at John, but he can see John looking up at him out of the corner of his eye. “Still.”

Sherlock feels his cheeks heat, and turns to stare across the street at nothing in particular.

When they reach the restaurant, John holds the door open, and then heads straight for the window seat, they’d sat at that first night. There is a small reserved sign on the table; the only way they would have managed such a prime spot right at supper hour.

Marco, one of Angelo’s best waiters descends upon their table immediately, bringing a candle, two menus and a bottle of wine. He uncorks the bottle, lights the candle, and then leaves again with a small tilt of his head in John’s direction.

John has planned this then—reserved this table, presumably asked for the candle, the bottle of wine to be brought as soon as they arrived, asked that they be given time and space to savour their meal, and perhaps one another’s company.

John pours himself a glass of wine, and then fills Sherlock’s glass as well. He looks relaxed, happy even, so different than he had been the night before, or even earlier in the day. It’s a welcome change.

He opens his menu and leans back in his seat, and Sherlock’s breath catches as John’s foot comes to rest against his under the table.

“You want to share a lasagna?”

“Alright.”

“Dessert?”

“I’ll decide later.”

“Hmm…” John’s eyes scan the menu. “Might get the antipasto first. Any objections?”

“No. Go ahead.”

Marco appears out of nowhere, as if by magic, and John orders for them both, getting all the details right, everything exactly the way Sherlock likes it, and Sherlock is stirred, moved, hungrier than he
can ever remember being.

He can’t take his eyes off of John, the way he’s done his hair, less slicked back, softer against his forehead, the trousers he has on, newish by the look and perfect fit of them, the dark blue button down shirt, same colour as his eyes, rolled up over his forearms, top two buttons undone. He’s still too pale, and too tired, and too thin, but there is a relaxed, easy energy about him, tonight, that has Sherlock riveted.

He’d stopped allowing himself to look at John this way, and it’s been so long since… He isn’t prepared for the shot of desire that laces it’s way between his cells, races through his bloodstream, lights him up like an autumn sky. When John looks back at him after ordering, a soft smile on his face, Sherlock has to look away for the second time since the evening began.

“You okay?”


“Rosie wear you out?”

“The mothers at the playground, more like.”

“What mothers?” John sits up a little in his chair, and Sherlock mourns the press of his foot against his.

“All of the mothers. Well—most of the mothers, and one au pair.”

“What? Why?”

“Apparently the sight of a relatively attractive man at a playground with a toddler they assume to be his, is too great a temptation to resist. Three mobile numbers slipped in my pocket before the hour was through, and an utterly ridiculous level of flirtation.”

John sniffs, and takes a sip of wine. “Should mind their own bloody business.”

“Indeed.”

John takes another sip, longer this time. When he sets his glass down again, his foot returns to it’s place beside Sherlock’s. “Listen, I um, I called Ella today.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. I’m going to see her Thursday afternoons, like she suggested, and umm… I was wondering if you could pick Rosie up from nursery that day, and watch her until I get back.”

“Of course.”

John nods. “Thanks.” Some of his ease is slipping. He seems tense, and Sherlock hates to see the strain start to creep back in and pull at his edges. There’s no need for him to ask. They already regularly share responsibilities for her, but John’s anxiety is clearly indicative of just how big a shift he deems Sherlock’s proposal to be.

“Also called an estate agent while you were out.”

“Estate agent?”

“For my flat. I—I’m going to try and sell it. If that’s okay.” He looks afraid for a moment, like
maybe the offer to come home is something Sherlock already regrets, something he might renege on at the slightest whim.

“Of course. I hardly see why we would need two flats.”

The tension in John’s shoulders lets go. “Right. Yeah. Right. Good. Well, um, she said she could probably come round to take a look at it next week, see about getting it listed asap. Could use the money, to be honest.”

Sherlock tilts his ankle inward a little, just the slightest pressure against John’s foot. “Good.”

John huffs, and smiles a small, almost shy thing, his eyes flitting away to the candle on the table between them. His calf tilting in further, to press against Sherlock’s, and Sherlock has to take a slow, quiet breath to calm the beating of heart.

Marco chooses that moment to appear with the antipasto, and John’s foot disappears from beside his. “Mr. Angelo says to tell you that it’s on the house, tonight.” He takes a moment to refill both of their wine glasses. “In celebration of your union.”

Sherlock blinks.

John’s face goes the most spectacular shade of red. “Umm… Yeah. Thanks.”

Marco excuses himself, and Sherlock stares over at John as he hurriedly piles a cracker with cheese and tapenade.

“What?” John glances up like he has no idea what Sherlock is asking, and then opens his mouth wide, stuffing the entire cracker in at once, while piling cheese on a second one. He chews, swallows, glances up and sees Sherlock still staring, and finally folds.

“Probably a misunderstanding. Told him I wanted this table because it was the one we sat at first night we came in here together, and since I was moving back in, thought it would be nice. And well—you know Angelo…”

Sherlock can’t help the smile fighting it’s way to the surface. An answering one twitches at the corners of John’s mouth, too, and then they’re both chuckling over the whole affair.

“Yes, well, one best not look a gift horse in the mouth, I suppose.”

“Too right. Not going to say no to free food.”

And the food is delicious. John actually manages to eat his full half of the lasagna, as well as a salad, bread, most of the antipasto, and two glasses of wine. He looks well sated rather than nauseous when he’s done, and Sherlock is glad to see it.

He’s glad too, for John’s wandering foot, which continues to seek out Sherlock’s beneath the table, whenever the coast is clear, a pleasant, steady anchor that seems to ground Sherlock rather than distract him.

When their entrée is finished, John asks for the dessert menu, and orders something rich and chocolate, something Sherlock knows he doesn’t prefer, but which is Sherlock’s favourite, and even though he’s already full, Sherlock does his best to eat his half, more touched than he has words to express.

It’s late when they finally leave the restaurant, still reminiscing about cases past, still a little high on
the light and companionable atmosphere the whole evening has seemed to hold. John walks close to
him, as they stroll back to Baker Street. He laughs at his jokes. He smiles, and hums, and even
praises Sherlock once, or twice over an old deduction or a miraculously solved case, which is so
unexpected that Sherlock finds himself blushing like an infatuated school girl and has to look away
yet again.

When they get back to the flat, John offers to go get Rosie from Mrs. Hudson, and Sherlock heads
up to make them both a cup of tea before bed. He’s just poured, and added milk to John’s when
John appears back in the kitchen empty-handed.

Sherlock raises a brow in question.

“She says she only just got to sleep an hour ago, to leave her be. I’ll go down and get her in the
morning.”

“Ahh. I’ve made some tea.”

“Want me to light a fire?”

“A fire would be good.”

When Sherlock comes back into the lounge, John has pulled their chairs closer together, and closer to
the hearth, and he’s sitting in his chair, staring into the flames. Sherlock hands him his tea and then
sits down across from him. He takes a sip and then sets the mug down on the table beside him.

“Thank you for tonight. Angelo’s. It was a good idea.”

“Yeah?” John looks pleased. “It was nice to go out and do something again, I thought.”

“Yes.”

They sit in companionable silence, listening to the crackling of the flames in the hearth, and the soft
whisper of evening traffic outside.

“I’ve missed this,” John finally breaks the silence. “Missed the quiet evenings.”

“No chatter.”

“No constant chatter, no midnight feedings, no—no rows over who’s turn it is to take to the
rubbish.”

Sherlock grins. “Perhaps because I’ve never done it. Lovely thing that. You were the easiest
flatmate in London. One only needed to wait until you were frustrated enough with the mess, and
you would begrudgingly tidy yourself. Simple. No negotiation needed.”

John tries to look indignant and fails. “You what..? I can’t believe…”

Sherlock smiles at him, until John huffs out a small laugh and looks away. “Would appreciate some
help now and again, you know.”

Sherlock sobers. “I hope that I’ve been better about it the last year or so. You’ve had a heavy
burden to bear. I have tried to lighten it when I could.”

John’s grin softens into something small, and sad. “Yeah. You have. Appreciate it, and I—I’m
sorry if I haven’t always been the best at telling you. I’ve been a bit ungrateful, I think.”
“More distracted, I would say. And it’s alright.”

They descend into silence again.

John stretches out one socked foot to nudge against the toe of Sherlock’s shoe, and when Sherlock looks down at their touching feet, and then back up at John’s face, he smiles. “Missed this. But, I missed you too.”

Sherlock swallows down a sudden wash of emotion. “Did you?”

John nods. His lips part like maybe he wants to say more, but they close again, mute, his eyes dropping down to his lap.

Sherlock, for what seems like the millionth time in the last few months, aches to touch him. It’s an almost magnetic thing. Not ache, really. Not painful. But hollow, reaching, tugging, like the whole of his body is this great empty thing that only John can fill. He wants to pull him close, breathe his air, taste his mouth, pull him up under his skin, his ribs, inside the echoing chambers of his heart until John beats and throbs in him like a sympathetic pulse.

“Hey?”

Sherlock’s eyes snap away from the sight of their touching feet and up to John’s eyes.

John smiles. “You okay?”

“Yes. Fine.”

“You tired? Want to go to bed?”

“Yes.” It comes out wrong. It gives too much away.

He sees John register it. Sit with it. Consider it? He takes another sip of tea, and then sets the cup down on the table, and moves to the hearth to scatter the logs. “Go on then. I’ll just tidy up here.”

Sherlock curses himself all the way down the hallway to his room. He curses himself as he strips swiftly in the dark, and pulls on the pants and t-shirt that make it almost impossible to sleep. He curses himself as he curls up small under the covers and tries not to think about how perfect the evening had been, and how very much he’s just…

The door to the bedroom cracks open. He listens to John move around in the darkness, undressing, moving to the loo to brush his teeth and relieve himself, and then tries to pretend he’s sleeping when John slips beneath the sheets behind him.

“I know you’re awake.”

Sherlock squeezes his eyes tight, and huffs.

John shifts a little. “You sure you’re okay?”

“Fine.”

The radiator clanks across the room just as a breeze kicks up outside.

“I don’t mind, you know.”

“Mmm?”
“I don’t mind when you look.”

Sherlock prickles with anxiety. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

John sighs. “Sherlock.”

“What?”

“Just… I don’t mind.”

Neither of them says another word.

The sleep that eventually claims them both is deep and dreamless, and when morning comes, Sherlock opens his eyes to find John still in his bed, watching him slowly wake with a look on his face that Sherlock thinks he wouldn’t mind waking to for the rest of his life.

He smiles
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

This chapter earns the explicit rating. Please heed the small handful of new tags: #Masturbation, #Sexual Self-Exploration, #Conflicted Feelings about Sex, #Sexually inexperienced Sherlock.

“Hi.”

“Hello.”

John’s hair is falling down over one eye in soft wave. The bruised indigo beneath his eyes has faded. He looks rested.

“No dreams?”

John shakes his head. “Nope.”

“Good.”

“Need to get up. Need to get Rosie ready for nursery and then get to work.”

“Go. I’ll get her to nursery.”

“You sure?”

“Of course.”

John’s eyes hold his for a moment, and it feels like there is so much he wants to say, but as usual, no words are forthcoming. John’s hand darts out, as though reaching for Sherlock’s cheek, but then drops to his shoulder, instead, giving it a brief squeeze before he sits up and swings his legs over the side of the bed.

Sherlock looks over at him, the way his vest is riding up in the back, and his boxers riding down, at the glimpse of curved, white spine visible between. His fingers stir beneath the sheets.

“Gonna shower. Don’t lounge about too long. She needs to be there in…” John reaches down and picks up his phone. “Fuck! In a half hour. Did I not set my alarm last night?”

John bolts out of bed and into the loo. “Go get her from Mrs. Hudson right now!” He calls as the shower bursts on.

Sherlock can hardly understand the urgency. It’s nursery. It’s not as though she’s sitting for her GCSEs, but he does get up, gets dressed, heads down to Mrs. Hudson’s. Mrs. Hudson is already dressed, already has Watson fed, and her hair pulled up into two curly bunches with bows that make her look like an exceptionally pampered poodle.

“Thought maybe you two boys might need a bit of a lie-in after last night.” She gives him a conspiratorial wink, and he smiles, lets her think what she wants.
He heads upstairs with Rosie, dresses her carefully, even as he can hear John tearing about a floor
below like a small hurricane. When they get back downstairs, Rosie propped against Sherlock’s hip,
John is just heading for the stairs with a satchel slung over one shoulder, a scone in his mouth, and a
travel mug in one hand. His hair is still damp, and his hands are shaking.

He pulls the pastry out of his mouth. “Christ, I’m late. Sorry. Gotta dash. Be a good girl for
Sherlock, okay, and no pushing or hitting at nursery. John swoops in and gives her a kiss on the
forehead, and Sherlock just catches himself before unconsciously leaning in for one of his own.

John glances up at him, pauses for a moment, a calm breath in the midst of the maelstrom that has
been his morning thus far. “Thanks. Really. I…”

“It’s nothing. Text me at lunch about what you want to do for supper.”

“Could cook. Got all that stuff yesterday, and never…”

Sherlock smiles. “Go John. You’re going to be late. We can talk about it later.”

“Yeah, right, right.” He reaches out and squeezes Sherlock’s arm, just above his wrist, and then he’s
off.

“Daddy’s late.” Rosie offers.

Sherlock looks down at her. “Yes he is, and so will we be if we don’t go catch a cab. Or would you
rather we take Mrs. Hudson’s fancy car?”

“Car!!”

“Alright. Let’s go ask her.”

The flat seems more echoingly empty than usual.

Sherlock walks about it in circles like a caged cat, running his fingers over his dusty belongings, a
book here, a beaker there. He stops and hovers over his violin case, and then decides against it. It’s
not what he wants. He tries to read, but grows distracted and bored after only a few minutes. He
briefly considers dissecting the human heart in his freezer, but it would need time to thaw, and
patience is something he feels painfully short on.

He wanders back down to the bedroom and stands in the doorway, staring down at the sheets still
rumpled and hastily thrown back, the slight dent in the pillow where John’s head had been resting.

Sherlock sits down, reaches out. There is a silver hair on the pillow, and one a little more golden.
He picks them up and rubs them lightly between his fingers, strokes their length, wonders if John
feels it somehow, and then catches himself for his foolishness, and presses the hairs back down onto
the pillowcase.

The curve of John’s bare spine visible above the waistband of his boxers, pale and vulnerable, rises
up suddenly and vividly in his mind’s eye and his fingers itch all over again at the memory, yearn
to learn the individual rise and fall of each vertebra, the silky slide of the soft, untouched skin there, to
experiment with that touch and watch how John’s body responds.

He sucks in a breath through his nose, and shifts his hips a little, tries to ignore the way his own body
responds to the memory. It’s foolish, dangerous even, to indulge in these sorts of musings. It can find no constructive outlet, and it will become a distraction after awhile, a constant, buzzing thrum beneath his skin, that begs for attention, that pulls his mind away from more important matters.

He stares down at the slight bulge in his pyjamas with a scowl.

Indulging this need is something he had decided to quit cold turkey after his first face-to-face encounter with James Moriarty. The necessity had been blindingly clear, like a lorry slamming into him at a 100 km an hour, a warning and wake-up call all at once.

He’s always been a markedly un-sexual being. Oh, there had been brief forays into self-exploration, the same way most children and teenagers discover how their bodies function and the sensations certain kinds of touch elicit, but masturbation had been an unspoken evil in the Holmes household, a weakness, a risk not worth taking for two young geniuses, given the fleeting reward, puerile and mentally depleting.

Mycroft had caught him touching himself once, when he was barely fifteen, and rushed to tell their mother, who had proceeded to very seriously lecture him on how he was too intelligent for such base things, that it was a common, draining habit he would do best to avoid if he wanted to do well in school and develop his intellect. There were better things to concentrate his energies on, she had said. And she had been right really. It wasn’t something he missed or even desired beyond those first, fumbling boyhood explorations.

Oh, he had been aware that he was attracted by certain things, to certain physical and psychological traits. There had been a boy or two in uni who had caught his attention, and whose company he’d craved and even sought. But they could hardly be bothered with him, and the relationships had never developed, so his awareness of what aroused him had, for the most part, remained theoretical.

He had been shocked then, upon meeting John, to discover that his warmth, and praise, and attentiveness lit something up inside him, stoked to life the thing that had always been smouldering quietly just under the surface. It made him ache, and burn, and need with an urgency that could not be denied.

For two months he had let himself slide down the rabbit hole of frantic, desperate, unchecked lust. He’d fantasised about John in the shower, in bed at night, any time he found himself alone in the flat. They had been elaborate, delicious fantasies, that he strung out, fleshed out, stored away in his mind palace for future reference and replay.

The dark, dangerous and seemingly delicious mystery of Moriarty’s appearance had only stoked that lust higher, but then John had been taken, and there was the confrontation at the pool, and the horrible realisation that in the haze of his lust-fuelled distraction he had missed something so essential that it had almost stolen from him the one thing that meant more than any momentary indulgence, or unchecked fantasy could.

John’s friendship, his companionship, his good opinion was worth everything. John was worth more. He deserved more. And Sherlock owed it to him to keep himself in check.

Most of the time things stay in line. Occasionally there are some night time emissions, something he will need to consider now he shares a bed with John, but otherwise he is untroubled. But this—this arousal brought on by something other than autonomic response, as the result of sentiment, attachment, and the mental replay of emotional and physical stimuli, this is something he has not experienced in a very long time.

He knows from experience that indulging it will not solve the problem. It will scratch the itch for a
short time before it rises up worse than ever. And to be facing this now, after everything, at his age when the blood is supposed to be starting to cool, and with John finally coming home. It’s beyond inconvenient.

He pulls his phone out of his pocket and looks at the time. Half past eleven. John takes his lunch at half past noon. He will text in an hour to discuss supper. He will be home four and a half hours after that. Five and a half hours, then. Five and a half hours to fill with something, anything other than the indulging of this ridiculous, adolescent craving.

First things first. He goes into the loo, strips, and takes the coldest shower he can bear. When he gets back out he dries himself briskly, efficiently, and then dresses in his pyjamas and goes and drinks a cup of coffee.

John texts him at 12:30 on the nose, which is gratifying. They text through the entirety of John’s lunch. Simple chatter. Did Rosie get to nursery alright? Will they cook the things from Waitrose for supper? Any interesting cases in the inbox?

When John’s ‘Gotta go!’ finally pops up on the screen a half hour later, Sherlock feels somehow better and worse. He goes down to see if Mrs. Hudson is in, but she isn’t. He texts Greg about any cases, and gets no response. He attempts a little composing, but everything comes off sounding trite and amateurish.

He goes back into the bedroom, shuts the door, and sits back down on John’s side of the bed.

He lies down.

He can smell John on the pillowcase. His shampoo, his toothpaste, the cheap soap he always insists on buying from boots even though it dries out his skin; clean but just a little stale, wholly human. He presses his face deeper into the down, mouth slightly open, breathing in all the microscopic scraps of John: hair, skin cells, sebum, like maybe it will calm him somehow, satisfy the ache to take pieces of John inside his own body to mesh and meld with his.

He breathes deep and shivers, lays very still, eyes screwed tight shut, and waits as his body starts to respond. The arousal is stronger now than it was earlier. He breathes through his nose, and lets it build. He won’t move. He won’t indulge it. He’ll wait it out. He grows hard between the flat plane of his belly and the mattress. He controls his breathing, even in and out, each inhale taking in pieces of John, each exhale hot and ragged, barely clinging to the edge of control.

It’s hateful, hateful that this is happening to him now!

He presses his face deeper into the pillow, sees John across from him at Angelo’s the night before, hair combed softly against his forehead, eyes almost black in the candlelight, the line of his throat trailing down to a brief glimpse of chest, just below his clavicle.

There is a twitch against his abdomen, a small spot of heat spreads to moisten his pants. He knots his fingers in the pillow, either side of his head, and huffs. He should think of unpleasant things, decidedly off-putting things. He thinks of necrotic lungs, of his brother prattling endlessly away about politics, about Molly Hooper talking about having copious amounts of sex with her boyfriend du jour.

He shudders and rolls onto his back. It seems to help a little. He fights to clear his mind completely, to school his breathing, and after a moment or two dares a peek downward. His erection still juts out obscenely, tenting the front of his pyjamas, the small wet spot on the front, seemingly spreading before his eyes. It’s—it’s… His mouth waters, and he realises too late that he is actually aroused by
the site of his own want.

Ridiculous.

He slams his head back down onto the pillow with a breathy grunt.

Fine.

Fine. He will just have to take care of it.

He rolls over twice until he’s on his side of the bed, and fumbles around in the nightstand for some tissue and a bottle of lube so old he has to check the expiry date. Fortunately it still has a couple of months left. He sniffs it delicately, just to be sure, and then buries himself well under the covers.

He takes a deep breath and shimmies his pyjamas down over his hips. The sensation of springing free, of his damp head sliding over the soft cotton of the sheets feels so good he inhales in a surprised gasp.

It gets harder then. Well everything does, but especially the ability to keep thoughts of John from his mind, the memory of his smile, his laugh, the light in his eyes, and crinkles in the corners when he had only last night said: ‘brilliant, fantastic, cleverer than the whole lot of them put together’.

The memory pools molten and hot in his abdomen, races downward, outward. His skin thrums, and prickles, and aches. He sucks in a sharp breath and holds it, waits for the lack of oxygen to push any images of John from his mind, and deprive his member at it’s source. It does little to help, and he decides to just be done with it.

He dispenses an adequate amount of lube on his palm, waits a moment for it to warm, and then reaches beneath the sheets to wrap a hand around himself. Warm as it is, his hand is still cooler than the heated skin along his shaft, and the difference in temperature causes a shot of pleasure so intense, he moans into the empty room before he can stop himself, and then bites down hard on his lip, grateful that Mrs. Hudson is not home and that John had thought to shut the bedroom window when he’d gotten up that morning.

It won’t take long, which is good. He can feel the pleasure mounting, even with the still, firm pressure of his hand. He pushes away the sudden temptation to drag it out, long, strung-out minutes of threading together stories, keeping himself teetering on the brink, hungry, and thirsty, and wholly, emotionally engrossed. No! It’s not a fantasy. it’s practicality.

He rolls his hips, lets out a sigh as his cock slides through the tight ring of his hand. Rocks again, and again, and again, whines when he throbs against his own palm, and then rolls over onto his stomach, scrambles with the sheets, pulls his pillow down against his chest, pushes it down between his thighs, tries not to think too much about why, makes sure not to think of John when he thrusts against it, pumps his hand quicker, slicks the pillowcase with lube and his own pre-come.

But John’s name is there, in the back of his throat, on the tip of his tongue, laced through every panting breath, every desperate whimper. So when he hears the door slam downstairs indicating Mrs. Hudson’s return, he is grateful for the added urgency. He picks up the pace to something frantic, desperate to be done before he is caught out and interrupted.

The intensity of the orgasm shocks him. Full body, a lightning strike of pleasure so intense it almost feels like pain. He shouts and comes so hard his eyes water, back arching all the way off the mattress.

It seems to build and build before it subsides, his cock pulsing over and over in his hand, releasing
months, years of pent up need. He bites through his lip trying to stifle his moans, and prays that Mrs. Hudson is too busy putting up her shopping to have heard.

When it finally releases him, he lies panting and dizzy, tears squeezing from the corners of his eyes, the metallic taste of blood against his tongue, and realises too late that he’s forgotten all about the tissue, and has soiled the sheets and his t-shirt quite thoroughly.

He lets out a stuttering sigh, and lets his eyes slide shut. This is the part he hates, the coming down afterwards, alone in an empty bed, the gaping emptiness that had momentarily been filled by a chemical rush, now even more overwhelming than before.

So like the agonizing crash after a particularly euphoric hit of drugs.

It’s one more reason he doesn’t indulge. The main one, if he’s honest. Because the longer he does, the emptier he feels, and the emptier he feels the more he wants something, anything to fill the gap.

The drugs are often much better at that than continuing to drown himself in fantasies of things that can never be his. He rolls onto his side and presses his face into John’s pillow, breathes deep. After several minutes it calms and centres him enough that he feels like he can breathe again.

He should get up, clean up. He will have to do laundry now, before John gets home, and then there will be the awkwardness if John notices, because Sherlock doesn’t do laundry—ever.

“Did you change the sheets?” John calls as he strolls back into the kitchen after changing out of his work clothes in the bedroom.

“Mrs. Hudson.” Sherlock says by way of explanation. He’s lying on the sofa, hands tented under his chin, doing his best to ignore whatever inane thing it is John’s put on the telly for Rosie while he makes supper.

“Ahh…” John replies knowingly, and doesn’t bother to probe any further.

“I’ve got Ella tomorrow, don’t forget, so you’ll have to get Rosie.”

“Mm, yes.”

“I’m serious, Sherlock. Don’t forget.”

“Won’t.”

John smells strongly of rubbing alcohol and antiseptic from work. It should be off-putting, but it’s not. It’s oddly comforting, bringing to mind the tender touch of capable fingers, contrasted against the sting of a cleaned wound, the prick of the stitching needle, and the icy press of a cold pack against livid bruising, the only times anyone has ever deemed to touch Sherlock with tenderness, the only times he’s permitted it.

Stop thinking.

“Sher, doggies!”

Sherlock cracks one eye, and glances over at the television set where a pack of animated dogs in improbable, bark-translation collars gallops through dense jungle. “Indeed, Watson. A whole pack.”
“Still no cases on?” Sherlock hears John open the fridge and close it again, take out the cutting board and their best paring knife which Sherlock had used on a cancerous liver on the weekend, and then absently put back without washing.

“Wash that knife before you use it. Use bleach.”

John sighs heavily. “Cases?”

“Had one last week. A six at best. Nothing new. I texted Lestrade today, but he’s ignoring me.”

“Doubt that.” John’s voice is closer. Sherlock opens his eyes and cranes his neck to look over to the entrance to the kitchen where John is wearing a red and white striped apron over worn jeans and an oversized jumper. He holds up a bag of potatoes and a peeler. “Could use some help here.”

Sherlock sighs, but sits up, and makes his way into the kitchen, none-the-less. “What is it?”

“Hmm?” John is clearing the clutter from the top of the cooker so he can set down the jellyroll pan currently clutched in his hand.

“What you’re making?”

“Chicken cordon blue and potatoes gratin.”

Sherlock’s mouth waters. “Ahh.”

“That okay?”

“Of course.”

“Good, ’cause you’re not getting anything different.” John’s tone is light, almost teasing. He looks better. His hands are more steady, his eyes clearer. Sherlock wonders if it’s because he’s been sneaking alcohol to work with him, or because he’s cut back enough that he’s started to feel better.

There’s a bottle of B-Complex vitamins on the counter by the sink that weren’t there before. He’s serious then. He’s trying.

John hands him the peeler and nods toward the bag of potatoes he’s deposited in the sink. “All of them. Peel, wash, and then use the mandolin.”

Sherlock does as he’s told.

“You smell like the surgery.”

“Right. Sorry about that. We had a bleeder. Hell of a mess to clean up, ton of antiseptic.”

“Mmm.”

They stand side-by-side prepping the food in silence. After a moment or two, John slides over, and leans against him as he reaches over his head for the measuring cup in the cabinet. If Sherlock were to turn his head, just a fraction of an inch, he could press his lips to the soft skin just behind John’s ear.

He should help him, but selfishly he’d rather let John struggle, pressed up against his body, and breathe in his scent. His mouth waters. And then, just as quickly as he came, John is gone again, tossing breadcrumbs in a bowl, depositing four chicken breasts in a bag, rolling up his sleeves to pound them flat. Sherlock watches the muscles in his arms flex, and has to look away.
“Daddy stop!” from the lounge when he finishes.

“Sorry, Luv. Daddy’s done.”

Rosie goes back to watching her film, humming to herself as she colours with the new crayons Mrs. Hudson brought her from the shops. John whisks up a bit of egg wash beside him, and then goes about assembling the chicken. The sound of the evening traffic outside is slightly muffled by the pouring rain, and Sherlock’s chest surges with a sudden wave of fondness, of rightness so strong it’s almost unbearable.

He feels a nudge against his arm, and glances quickly over at John and then away again, knowing it must be obvious, must be written all over his face, and he doesn’t know what to do with it, he wasn’t prepared, isn’t ready to face the onslaught of emotion that having John home is inexplicably arousing.

“You okay?”

He nods, picks up the nearest peeled potato, and starts to slice it on the mandolin.

“Sure?” John sounds so genuine, so sincere, and Sherlock really wishes he wouldn’t. It makes it harder. It makes him want more—to touch, to hold, to possess, and yield, and…

The pain is sharp, and sudden, and he jerks his finger back, watches with slightly detached fascination as his blood blooms against the starchy white surface of the nearest potato slice.

“Jesus.” John reaches over and grabs his hand.

“Idiot. Be careful.” He flips on the tap and plunges the wounded finger under the stream. It hurts, and Sherlock hisses a little in objection.

“Keep it under there. Be right back.”

The water runs slightly red, and Sherlock wonders if maybe he did it on purpose, cut his finger so that John would have touch him, have to take onto/into his body, little bits of Sherlock’s.

John returns from the loo with the first aid kit, shuts off the water, and takes Sherlock’s hand in both of his to examine the cut. He dabs at it with some gauze, and then presses down. “Hold that.”

Sherlock does. Watches the top of John’s head, as he dig through the kit for tape. Sherlock briefly wonders what his blood would look like against John’s skin, under his nails. He wishes, for the briefest of moments, that John wasn’t so fastidious. He wants it. He aches to have some part of himself smeared across John’s skin.

John is back with a piece of tape torn off and hanging from one fingertip. “Lift up the gauze. Let me see.”

Sherlock does, watches a small red bead form where he has sliced of a chunk of his skin.

“Put it back. Press down.” John orders softly. His voice is low and intimate. He takes Sherlock’s hand in his again, and tapes the gauze down, keeps hold of Sherlock’s hand, turning it a little this way and that to observe his handiwork.

John gives his hand a gentle squeeze. “Every time I tell you to use the guard, and every time you just go ahead and use your bare hands.” He sounds fond rather than angry.

“Perhaps you should stop asking me to help in the kitchen altogether, then, since I’m so clearly hopeless.”
John snorts. “Oh no, you’re not getting off that easy. Now finish the potatoes, and use the bloody guard. I have to put them in to bake first.”

It’s all over too quickly.

Sherlock goes back to slicing the potatoes, and imagines himself crowding John up against the counter instead of just letting him go back to cooking, imagines stripping him of the too-large jumper he’s wearing, imagines the way his large hands would look against John’s compact ribcage, the way his thumbs would look stroking over the flushed peak of John’s nipples. What sounds would John make? He imagines those too.

He’s actually grateful he indulged earlier, it means his body isn’t so quick to respond, no matter how stimulating the fodder. Still, he pulls his dressing gown closed and ties it around his waist just to be on the safe side.

Eventually dinner prep is done, food is cooking, and then there are all the evening responsibilities to attend to ($blessed$ $distraction$), the eating, the bathing, the stories, the prep for the next day (John even makes himself a sack lunch which Sherlock can never recall seeing him do before).

It is going on 20:00 when they finally get everything settled, and it’s just the two of them again. John makes himself a cup of tea, and settles in with a book. Sherlock tries to read, and then gives up, and takes to playing some of John’s favourites on the violin.

John favours the most sentimental pieces, and is always very responsive to them, whether he realises it or not. Sherlock tells himself he’s playing for John, but he quite loses himself in the music for awhile, in Tchaikovsky’s 6th, the 4th movement especially, and as the last, low, sad strains reverberate from the instrument he realises that the flat around him has gone completely still.

He can hear Rosie’s soft breathing on the baby monitor by John’s chair, the rain outside all but masking the sounds of the traffic. Sherlock stares at his reflection in the mottled window, and lowers the instrument from under his chin.

When he turns around it’s to the sight John, standing in front of the fire, staring into the flames. Sherlock takes in the droop of his shoulders, the loose fingered fist resting on the mantle, the way he favours his bad leg. He wants to speak, but is afraid to break the silence.

When John finally looks up, his eyes are red-rimmed and his eyelashes damp. “I never should have left.”

“I neither should I.”

The corner of John’s mouth lifts in a momentary, sad smile. “I used to wonder what things would have been like if I’d just told you.”

“I’m not sure they would have been much different. I’m not sure I could have…”

John looks up, brows knit. “Thought you said you’d wanted me from the start.”

“I did.” It’s naked, and he sees John hear it, see it. He doesn’t look away.

“But you would have pushed me away anyway?”

“You’re not the only one who fears being a danger to those you love, John. Your safety, your comfort will always come before anything I might desire.”
John’s fingers unfurl on the mantle, reach for a glass that isn’t there. He looks around himself, for a moment, as though lost, and finally strides over and takes up his cup of tea, draining it in one long gulp. “You were right.” He puts the empty cup back down on the tea table. “That first night at Angelo’s. You were right. I was—feeling you out.”

“I know.”

“But you didn’t want it—me?”

“I did. I did so much it terrified me, and—it was too fast. I needed to slow down. It was important to me. What we seemed to have, what we were becoming, it was important to me.”

“I’ve spent eight years thinking you didn’t want me, Sherlock.”

“And if I’d responded in kind that night…?”

“What?”

“If I’d flirted, licked my lips, slid my hand beneath the table to stroke your thigh?”

John’s lips part, his cheeks take on a slightly pink tinge. He sucks in a breath, quivers out on the exhale. “I don’t know.” There’s an honesty, threaded through with a twinge of sadness to it that twists up under Sherlock’s heart like thorn.

“You don’t know?”

“I don’t know, Sherlock! I don’t know because I’ve never…” He stops short, swallows. “I’ve never let myself…” He looks back down in the fire. “Listen you probably can’t understand this, but I—it’s not that I didn’t know, that I don’t know. I know, I just… Somehow I always find a way to—not.”

“What?”

“Be! Be who I am. I…” He pinches at his brow. “Jesus, I don’t even know what I’m trying to say, except that—maybe you’re right. Maybe I would have backed away. Maybe I would have been the one putting the breaks on. But eight years is a bloody long time, and I think I would have liked, just once, to have had a second chance.”

Sherlock sets his violin back in it’s case, and stands up again. “And now you do.”

He watches as John blanches. He can see the struggle warring beneath his skin, like it’s a physical thing.

“Yeah,” he finally whispers. “Yeah, I…” He drops into his chair, sits on the edge of the seat, hand clasped between his knees, and stares down at the carpet.

“John…”

He looks up.

“What do you want?”

“You.” John says without hesitation.

The certainty in it takes Sherlocks’ breath away.
He smiles fondly. “You have me.”

John smiles back through what looks like an almost unbearable burden of pain. “I’ve always know the ‘what’, the ‘who’, Sherlock. I just… It’s not the ‘what’, it’s the ‘how’ where I start to…”

“It’s alright.”

John’s eyes fill. “It’s really not,” barely a whisper.

“Then we’ll figure it out.”

“This really isn’t a ‘we’ thing.”

Sherlock must show too much, because John races in to clarify. “No, no, I just mean… There’ll be a time when you come into it, ‘course there will. That’s the whole point, but—there’s things I have to figure out on my own. I owe you that, and… Just let me do that, okay.”

Sherlock nods. “Alright.”
Sherlock wakes late to an empty bed and a text from Lestrade.

There’s a case, a good one. It’s the sort of case where he misses John especially, the sort that makes him feel instantly off kilter, wrong-footed, where he craves and needs John’s grounding presence by his side. But John doesn’t work many cases with him these days, what with his determination to work regular hours at the surgery and a child to tend to and support. It is what it is. But he’d be lying if he said he didn’t miss their partnership terribly.

- High profile client: Holdernesse, a politician.
- A missing boy—his son.
- Boards at school, only home on holidays.
- Also missing one of the schoolmasters. Subject: German. An unpopular man, though one that came with excellent references.
- Boy not in any of his classes.
- Mother and father recently divorced.
- Mother relocated to the south of France.
- Father too busy to be properly involved in his son’s life.

Sherlock goes to interview him, but is only permitted an audience with his secretary. It’s unsatisfactory, but he learns enough to determine that the boy’s sympathies in the split had lain with his mother and that other than being inexcusably absent in his son’s life, Holdernesse is quite fond of the boy, and quite innocent.

Still, it seems wrong, wrong somehow, because there is something—something about the whole situation that doesn’t sit quite right.

Truthfully, it’s mostly the boy he can’t get out of his mind. Only ten years old, no one left in the world who has a care for him. He thinks about him captive, alone, afraid in the dark, the cold, the damp, no hope for rescue or release, and It gets under his skin and won’t let him go. He feels unhinged, like he wants to claw out of his own skin and crawl bloody and raw into some tight, dark corner, and never come out again.

It’s ridiculous, of course, because at this point it isn’t even definitively an abduction. There’s still a chance that the boy has just run off in an attempt to contact his mother. Lestrade’s people are confirming there.

Still, there are things he needs to do. He needs to go to the school, to see the boy’s room, interview the other students, learn more about the German professor, Heidegger by name. And he needs the correspondence between the boy and his father, his mother. Lestrade has that.

Sherlock is in a cab on his way back to The Met from Parliament, when he suddenly remembers Watson. It’s past his time to fetch her. He has the cab change routes on the spot, but is still unacceptably late, which means that the nursery has called John, who no doubt had his phone turned off because he was in therapy, and when they get no answer there, are obliged to stay late.

Sherlock is met with a very irked carer when his cab finally skids to a halt in front of the school an hour past his time, and all his best excuses and well-practiced charm do nothing to assuage her bitter
feelings, or propensity to lecture.

By the time he is finally able to rid himself of her, there’s no time to go back to the flat before Lestrade is off for the evening, so he texts John to ignore any calls he may have received from the nursery, and totes Watson along with him to The Met.

She’s tired and hungry, and he’s already regretting the decision as he all but drags her down the corridor on his way to Lestrade’s division, her piteous whinging drawing stares and glares alike. It fills Sherlock’s head with the sort of buzzing static that is bound to make him unravel, that will lead to him snapping, crumbling, *failing* if he doesn’t find a way to settle her soon.

He kicks open the door to Lestrade’s division with the sole of his shoe and heads toward his office, trying to ignore the added buzz of 85 florescent bulbs, the clatter of 35 keyboards, and the constant low-level hum of conversation.

He spots Sally Donovan as he approaches the office, and sees an out. Scooping Watson up in one quick motion, he holds her out in front of him like a piece of sour laundry.

Sally takes a step back, hands up in front of her. “Not a chance. I don’t do kids.”

It’s Greg who comes to the rescue, in the end. He takes everything in in a glance, and appears out of his office with smile and a lolly for Watson, and a curious, concerned look for Sherlock. “You got news for me?”

“Of course. Why else would I be here.” Sherlock snaps and pushes past him to flop down in the nearest chair. He’s overwhelmed with relief when Lestrade finally shuts the office door behind him, effectively plunging them into silence, save for the whir of the climate control and Watson’s continuous sniffling.

Greg pulls Watson up onto his lap, and doesn’t even bat an eye when she starts playing with his tie with sticky fingers. “What’s going on?”

“What do you mean?”

“Where’s John?”

“He was busy this afternoon. I promised to fetch her.”

“Okay… You just seem a little—on edge.” He can feel Greg’s eyes on him, sizing him up, making assumptions.

“It’s not what you think?”

“Oh yeah? Good. So what is it I’m supposedly thinking.”

Sherlock looks down at Watson sucking on her cherry lolly, eyes drooping with exhaustion, and then looks up at Greg, willing him to understand: *Not drugs. Not anymore. I wouldn’t do that to her. To John.*

He nods. “Ah right. Good. So what’s up, then?” Casual. Not a care in the world.

“I would think you would be a little more concerned about this case. It *is* high-profile.”

“I am concerned. I’m plenty concerned. Kind of hard not to be with your brother breathing down my neck.”
“Mycroft? What’s he got to do with this?!”

“Think Holdernesse is a colleague.”

Sherlock rolls his eyes. “Of course.”

“Sherlock, why are you here? Why aren’t you home getting this one her tea?” He smiles down at Rosie and ruffles her bunches. One of them is hanging lop-sided, hair tie hanging on by a thread. Greg pulls it out, and then starts to gather her hair up and refasten it.

Sherlock huffs. “I need the boys correspondence, all the letters he’s received in the last month. I need to go to the school, and I need you to let them know I’m coming. I’m not about to go all the way to East Yorkshire just to be turned away, and they’ve already wasted too much time with the local investigation. I don’t need anything else slowing this down.”


“Must have missed the part where he was ever a suspect.”

“Yes, you must have done.”

Lestrade finishes with Watson’s hair and pats her on the head. “Go home, Sherlock. There’s nothing more to be done tonight, and this one’s done in, aren’t you Bug?”

“I want Daddy.”

“See.”

“Yes, well…”

“How are things?”

And this really is too much. “Fine. John’s fine. I’m fine. We’re all fine.” He stands up. “I’m leaving.”

“Fine.” Greg follows suit, and sets Rosie down before going to open the door to his office. “I’ll call the school first thing in the morning, let them know you’re coming. Let the local investigative team know too. They may not be too pleased.”

“They never are.”

Sherlock watches Rosie out of the corner of his eye, as she wanders out on the floor, iridescent, unicorn rucksack dragging on the floor behind her, hands covered in cherry lolly. She wanders up to Sally’s desk and stands there staring at her as she types up reports.

“Tell John I said hi. Tell him he owes me a drink.”

“He’s cutting back,” Sherlock replies absently, eyes still on Rosie. Sally’s noticed her now. Her nose wrinkles, and she pulls a packet of wet wipes out of her desk, and starts wiping Rosie’s hands.
“Oh yeah? Well good for him. Still owes me a night out though. Can catch a football match maybe.”

Sally is holding up the soiled wipe and making a face, and Rosie is laughing. Sally grins, bins it, and then reaches into her desk and pulls out a sheet of adhesive name tags. She writes something on one with a biro, and then peels it off and sticks it on Rosie’s cardigan just as Sherlock walks up.

Rosie smoothes her hand over the hastily drawn police badge, and then looks up, her face bright with excitement. “Papa, I’m police.”

Sally looks up at him, and must see something. Her brows knit as she looks from him, down to Rosie, and back again. “Sorry. That was me probably. Wasn’t sure what she calls you.”

“It’s fine. Thank Sargent Donovan for the badge, Watson.”

“Thank you.”

He reaches down and takes Rosie’s hand, and heads for the door.

“Holmes.”

He stops and looks over his shoulder. “You’re really good with her. She’s a lucky kid.”

Sherlock doesn’t know what to say.

Sally just snorts after a moment’s silence, and waves her hand dismissively. “Go on then. Don’t need you two hanging around here under my nose all night.”

The sun is setting by they time they get in a cab, and Sherlock realises he hasn’t had a single text from John. He gets Rosie settled in the backseat of the cab, and then pulls out his phone.

**Headed home. Be there in 20 min. 30 if traffic is bad.**

He waits. Nothing.

He tries not to worry. Therapy can be taxing. Perhaps John is sleeping.

Traffic *is* bad, and Rosie is sound asleep by the time they pull up in front of the flat. Sherlock glances up at the windows as he balances a groggy Rosie on one hip and pays the cabbie with the other. Dark.

The whole flat is empty. No Mrs. Hudson (*gone to her sister’s he suddenly remembers*). No John.

“Where’s Daddy?” Rosie asks sleepily.

“I’m not sure. Though, he’ll be back soon, I imagine, so we’d best start warming leftovers for his tea.”

Tea is finished, and Rosie is sitting on the lounge floor playing with her Duplo bricks, listening to
Sherlock screech away distractedly on the violin when a cab finally pulls up outside the flat, and John emerges with arms full of shopping bags.

When he finally appears after slowly limping his way up the stairs, Rosie scrambles to her feet, and rushes to greet him. “Daddy, daddy, look! I’m police!”

John pats her head, and sets the bags down. “That’s nice, Luv. Let Daddy get some food in him, okay.”

“Your hair.” Sherlock states stupidly as he joins them on the landing. John has had it cut—a short and slightly tousled crew cut. In fact Sherlock doesn’t think he’s seen it so short since they met, and certainly never with this hint of wave, small licks of hair, scattered across his crown that make Sherlock ache to run his hands through them. The last of John’s blonde went with the chop too, it seems, leaving nothing but brilliant silver. It makes his eyes pop marine blue, even in the dim of the foyer.

John lifts a hand to his head. “Yeah, bit of a whim. Wanted a change.”

Rosie yanks on his trouser leg. “Donna made it.”

“What’s that, Luv?”

“Donna made it!”

“Oh yeah?” He looks up at Sherlock. “Who’s Donna?”

“Donovan. Sally Donavan.”

John frowns. “Wait, you had her at The Met?”

“Unavoidable.”

“And you were late picking her up, too?”

“It was taken care of.”

“Jesus, Sherlock. Never on a case, we decided that early on.”

“It’s not as though it was a crime scene. We were sitting in Lestrade’s office.”

Rosie has moved on to rooting through the shopping bags. “Toys?”

“No Bun, clothes for Daddy.”

“I was worried. You weren’t answering your texts.”

“Yeah, I—Sorry. Got distracted.”

“Clothes shopping?”

John’s cheeks colour a little. “Yeah, I…”

“Daddy, Daddy, Daddy…” Rosie yanks on his trouser leg.

“Christ! Not now, Rosie!”

She blinks, and then lets go of his trouser leg, sticks her thumb in her mouth, and walks back into the
lounge without another word.

“Fuck.” John drops back against the wall, and covers his eyes with his hands. “Fuck.”

“You were shopping all this time?” Sherlock asks, taking in the slump of his shoulders, the trembling of his hands.

John takes a few long deep breaths, and then drops his hand. “No. Course not. I was in Lewisham.”

Sherlock waits for an explanation, but John doesn’t offer one.

“Are you alright?”

“Not really.” John swallows, and lifts his head to stare off over Sherlock’s shoulder at nothing in particular. A muscle in his jaw jumps.

“What’s in Lewisham?” Sherlock finally dares to ask quietly.

John shakes his head and crosses his arms over his chest, lifting one hand to squeeze at his bad shoulder. “Hither Green. Dad’s buried there.”

“Oh.”

“Had never been.” John drops his hand from his shoulder, and tucks it back up against his ribs. “Bit bleak.” He sucks in a trembling breath. “Still better than he probably…” His hands clench into fists beneath his elbows.

“Thought maybe it would change something, going there, knowing he was lying there. Bones and dirt. Didn’t. Still…” He shakes his head, and doesn’t finish.

Sherlock can see John folding in on himself, his body language growing more and more insulating.

“I have to go to East Yorkshire tomorrow. Near Malton.”

John’s head snaps up. He looks relieved at the change of subject. “Oh. Yeah? What, a case, or…?”

“Yes. High profile. Possible child abduction.”

John’s head turns toward the lounge where Rosie is so quiet Sherlock wonders if she’s even still there. He turns back. “So—you going to be gone long, or?”

“The weekend.”

“Right. Okay. Well, I can just…”

“Come with me.”

John’s eyes snap up to his, and Sherlock holds them, like he used to in the old days, the look that could make John drop everything and do anything, go anywhere.

John licks his lips, before tearing his eyes away. “Yeah, I—I would love to, Sherlock, but Rosie.”

“We’ll find someone to watch her.”
John glances back toward the lounge again. “I don’t spend enough time with her as it is…”

“The local police are already down on London getting involved. There will be no cooperation, and it’s helpful to me to have someone on whom I can thoroughly rely. I—I would be grateful if you would come.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes.”

John looks back toward the lounge again.

“Go be with her. I’ll heat up your supper. Just—think about it.”

John nods, already pushing away from the wall, no doubt having noticed the abnormal silence, just as Sherlock had. “Yeah. Yeah, okay.”

They part ways, Sherlock going into the kitchen, and John into the lounge, when Sherlock gets to the table, John is standing in the middle of the lounge, looking around himself. He turns back to Sherlock with a shrug. “Where is she?”

Sherlock takes a step into the room, and nods to the small lump under the desk.

John leans down to look. “Jesus.” He pulls out a chair. “Sweetheart, come out here.”

Rosie pulls her thumb out of her mouth, uncurls, and climbs out dragging the plush cat Harry had given her along the floor.

“Come here. Daddy’s sorry.” He reaches down, and she allows herself to be picked up, pulled into his arms.

Sherlock turns back to the task at hand. He can hear John talking to her, quiet and close, as he turns the oven back on and fills a small pan with food.

“Daddy shouldn’t have shouted at you. I was wrong. I’m sorry. You wanted to tell me about going to see Sergeant Donovan at the Met today? She made you a badge?”

Rosie just pops her thumb back in her mouth, and lays her head against his chest.

By the time Sherlock takes the food out again, plates it, and walks back into the lounge to give it to John, Rosie is sound asleep on his chest. John has his nose buried in her hair, and a hand over his eyes.

When he looks up, eyes haunted, Sherlock can’t breathe.

“Go put her to bed.” He offers. “I’ll keep this warm.”

John goes.

Sherlock covers the plate with kitchen foil, and listens to John whispering to Rosie on the baby monitor.

“Daddy’s going to do better, Bun. Promise. Daddy’s going to…”

Sherlock hears him sniff. Hears the soft shuffling of blankets, the click of the nightlight, the slight squeak of the door as John pulls it shut behind him, and then John’s slow tread on the stairs.
When he reappears at the door to the kitchen, he looks lost. “I’m going to eat and go to bed. You leave tomorrow?”

“Yes. The ten o’clock from King's Cross.”

“I’ll meet you there Saturday, if I decide to come.”

Sherlock fights back the disappointment.

John leans against the door jamb. “Where are you staying?”

“I don’t know yet. I’ll text you.”

“Okay.”

Sherlock fetches the food from the oven, pulls off the foil, and lays it out on the table with a fork and knife.

“Ta.” John goes for the cupboard, pulls down a wine glass, goes to the pantry and stops. “Didn’t we have wine?”

“I gave it to Mrs. Hudson to take to her sister’s.”

He sees a muscle in John’s jaw twitch. “Right.” He goes for the cabinet over the sink where he keeps his scotch, only to find it gone too. He freezes, hand still on the cabinet door. His head drops.

“Sherlock. I don’t need…”

“You would do the same for me, John. You have done.”

John clears his throat, returns to the table, stabs at the potato gratin with his fork rather more violently than necessary. “It’s not what you think.”

“Alright.”

John sniffs and cuts into his chicken cordon bleu. He eats in silence.

Sherlock traces on the tabletop with his finger. He dares a glance now and again, and admires the line of John’s jaw and throat, the way the new cut of his hair accentuates the expressiveness of his brow, and square strength of his features. There’s something different about him he can’t quite nail down. It’s not just the hair.

John gets up, takes his empty plate to the sink, gets a glass of water, and leans back against the counter.

Sherlock looks up from the table top, and John sets the glass down, leans back to grip the edge of the countertop with both hands. “It’s not you, okay.” He reaches up and scratches at the back of his neck. “It’s been awhile since I’ve talked to anyone about anything, and… I don’t know, maybe we tried to cover too much, today.”

Sherlock sits up a little in his chair.

“Talked about Dad and Mum, talked about Mary, and Harry, and— and me and you, and when I got out of there, I just—I just drove. I drove, and drove and I ended up in Lewisham, like I said. I don’t really even remember going, just left Ella’s and then there I was.”
Sherlock waits.

“Felt strange being there. I don’t think about him. I just don’t, Sherlock. And I stood there, and I stared at this pathetic, unkempt grave, and I just—I don’t know, I just felt so fucking angry. I just feel like.” His voice breaks and he stares down at his hands, picks at a hangnail along the side of his thumb. “I feel like I don’t even know who I am. I’m 46 years old, and I don’t even know who I am, and it’s because it wasn’t an option I knew I had. He had his ideas, and that’s how it was, and that’s what you did, and so I did, and now here I am, just maybe figuring things out and…”

“There’s time, John.”

John sniffs and smiles weakly up at him. “When I left, I—I went shopping.” He huffs out a nervous laugh. “Got my hair cut. Sounds mad, but I just wanted to do something he had no say in, wanted to take something back somehow. But then tonight I came back here, after all that, and I—I failed again—with Rosie. And it just reminded me of how much I never wanted…” He’s gone pale, and Sherlock wants to get up, to reach out, and pull him against his chest, but he doesn’t know if it’s the right thing, if it would make this better or worse, so he doesn’t move.

“I didn’t want her, Sherlock.” He whispers fiercely. “I love her, and I’d die for her, kill for her, do anything to do better by her than I have done, but I never wanted her, never wanted to be a dad, and I—I still don’t!” It’s ragged and raw, and he drops the terrible secret at Sherlock’s feet like it’s a poison he’s horrified to have carried so long, horrified even more that he’s carrying still.”

“I’m just so scared I’ll…”

“John.”

“All the time. And then you get after me about the drinking,” He carries on without stopping. “Which you should have done, Sherlock. You—you should have done. I need help. I do. I know that. But it just reminded me how much I’ve become like…”

Sherlock shakes his head. “John, you have to stop…”

“Him, and i just can’t…”

“John, you’re not your father!”

John’s mouth clamps shut. He looks down and shakes his head with a huff. “Sherlock you have to stop saying that. It’s not helping, okay.”

“And constantly comparing yourself to the man who abused you is!?”

Sherlock regrets the words the minute they’re out of his mouth.

John looks stunned.

He blinks, his grip on the counter behind him, growing so tight Sherlock wonders if a chunk might not break off in his hands. His knuckles are blanched white. His bad leg trembles.

“That wasn’t my place.” Sherlock hurries to correct. “Forgive me.”

“It wasn’t always…” John whispers.

“Yes.”

“He was…”
Sherlock nods.

“It wasn’t what you think. Sometimes he just got… And after awhile I just couldn’t be there anymore, so I…” John’s arms are starting to tremble.

“Alright.”

Sherlock gets up from the table, walks over, stops and looks down at him. “I like it.”

John looks confused.

“Your hair.”

“Oh.” John is clearly thrown by the change of subject, but it’s too late, and John is too exhausted to go through the door Sherlock had inadvertently opened with his ill-timed words a moment before.

He reaches up to rub at his nape. “Yeah?”

“Yes.”

John’s mouth stretches into a crooked smile. “Feels good to have a change.”

Sherlock nods.

John looks up at him with a look he can’t quite interpret, like he’s sad, and fond, and sorry all at once. After a moment the smile fades, and John’s eyes drop to the centre of Sherlock’s chest. His hands let go of the counter, drop to his sides. He takes a step forward, his tongue sliding out to press against his bottom lip, as he lifts a finger to the front of Sherlock’s shirt, and presses it against a single button, slides it down to the next.

Sherlock is stunned. How many times has he held John now? At least a handful, and it was always natural, almost easy in it’s rightness, but this—John initiating, John touching him—it’s almost unprecedented. He’s overwhelmed, undone.

Somehow he manages to get his body to respond despite the shock, lifts his arms to wrap around John’s waist, pressing his head to his chest and holding on tight. A police car rushes by outside, sirens wailing, and John exhaled, hot breath through the thin fabric of Sherlock’s shirt, and holds on tighter still.

Sherlock is stunned. How many times has he held John now? At least a handful, and it was always natural, almost easy in it’s rightness, but this—John initiating, John touching him—it’s almost unprecedented. He’s overwhelmed, undone.

Somehow he manages to get his body to respond despite the shock, lifts his arms to wrap around John’s back, presses his cheek to the top of his head. His hair smells of posh hair product and the backseat of stale taxicabs. It makes Sherlock want to touch, to set to disarray.

John’s hands, hot and strong, splay against his lower back, press just enough to keep their bodies close, just enough to make John’s intention clear: *I want this. Stay. Just like this.*

He’s impossibly warm, the heat of his skin passing through his clothes, to Sherlock’s, and through that to Sherlock’s skin. Sherlock can imagine what it would be like to hold John close with nothing between them, how John’s heat would brand itself against his skin, claim him, warm him until he wasn’t sure where John ended and he began.

He’s more sturdy than Sherlock imagined, too, more solid and muscled than his outward appearance suggests. One more way of learning to disappear, Sherlock wonders? People underestimate him
until it’s too late, until he sucks in a breath, stands at attention, clenches a fist and barks out an order.

He can feel the tension of those muscles now, the way John holds himself up, holds himself in. And Sherlock wonders how it is he isn’t constantly in pain what with exercising so much, such consistent, subconscious control, because even when John explodes in a burst of action, he is controlled, always so controlled—until something in him snaps.

Sherlock has seen it, admired it, submitted and yielded in the face of it, but now he has John close, feels that tension pressed against him, contained, all but vibrating with the need for release, he wonders what John might look like, feel like, were he to ever come wholly undone, not in a moment of desperate, broken rage, but raw, vulnerable, open instead. Safe enough, ready enough to be—to just be.

John’s fingers stir near his spine. Two are dipping down into the gap between Sherlock’s spine and his belt. John’s fingers are short, and Sherlock’s belt tight. He can’t reach far, but he starts to stroke gently along his spine, the tip of his finger teasing at the top of Sherlock’s intergluteal cleft through the cotton of his shirt, with each pass.

Sherlock sucks in a ragged breath, wills himself not to make a sound, but John hesitates anyway, slowly retreats, hands returning to his lower back, and then suddenly squeezing, firm, kneading the muscle either side of his spine and pulling their bodies achingly close.

It catches Sherlock off guard. His balance shifts, and John moves, and suddenly Sherlock’s thigh is between John’s legs, and he can feel—everything. He’s not hard, but he’s hot and full; a delicious, yielding weight against Sherlock’s leg, a heft and shape that suggests something much more impressive than any of Sherlock’s wildest fantasies given John’s height and build.

John goes still, but his grip on Sherlock’s back remains and then tightens. Sherlock flexes the muscle in his thigh on instinct, and a breath explodes from John’s lungs in a small, breathy grunt. The sound bursts in Sherlock’s veins like fire. He turns his head a little to bury his face in John’s hair. His face is burning, and his head is light, and it feels like every drop of blood in his body is racing downward. It takes all his not inconsiderable focus to not move again. To stay very still and let John settle, let him decide.

John breathes quick and shallow against his chest. Every muscle tense, perfectly still save for his lungs, his ribs contracting and expanding in a heady rhythm that makes Sherlock’s body itch to move and match it.

“God,” John’s voice is a surprise, sudden, ragged and hungry. “God, Sherlock, I want…”

Sherlock exhales against John’s scalp, drags his nose through his hair, breathes in, rubs his cheek along the side of his head and breathes out against the shell of his ear.

John gasps.

John twitches, and throbs, and hardens against his thigh.

He’s trembling, now, the effort of restraint unbearable beneath the weight of what is passing between them. John stays perfectly still, but trembles, and trembles, and grows impossibly harder against him, and Sherlock aches at how much he wants, how much they both want, and yet…

John seems frozen now that they find themselves here, on the brink. He wants, but he can’t. He wants, but he’s finding all those old familiar reasons to not.
“John…” Whispered into his hair.

And John lets out the smallest of sounds, something almost like a sob.

Sherlock slowly shifts his leg back, instantly misses the hard, hot line of John throbbing against him, but John doesn’t surge forward, or tell him to wait, to stop. He lets it happen, lets Sherlock retreat.

Sherlock lifts a hand to stroke over his head. “There’s time.” He murmurs against his forehead. “It’s alright. There’s time.”

Chapter End Notes

A huge thanks to Khorazir on tumblr, who has drawn this gorgeous illustration for this chapter. I am in awe!: 
Hey all, a brief update: I’ve bumped the Chapter total up from 12 - 20, on this fic because I’m realising that it's going to take longer to develop.

Also, because I have been so overwhelmed by the response to this story, and all the amazing comments you’ve been leaving, and because I’ve not had the time to properly thank each and every one of you individually, please know how much I appreciate you and your engagement with this story. It’s not easy to write at times, and knowing that it is touching people is such an encouragement. So thank you!

One final note: If you read the last chapter right after I posted it, you might notice that the location of the school has changed from that chapter to this. I simply changed my mind on where to locate it, and I've updated Chapter 9 now, but if you read it early, you probably saw the original. Shouldn't effect your enjoyment too much, I hope.

John and Rosie are both gone when Sherlock wakes the next day.

It’s late, so late he knows he’s likely to miss his train. He has no text, no note from John, no indication if he will come at all. It puts him in a foul mood.

Things had been strange the night before. Not awkward exactly, but still, laced through with a sort of undefinable tension that went beyond the obvious that their mutual states of unsatisfied arousal would suggest.

They had parted ways, John to the loo for a shower, and Sherlock to the bedroom to prepare for bed. Sherlock is certain that John must have done in the shower, exactly the same thing he had hastily taken care of in the bedroom. It hadn’t taken long of course, and he was quite tidy and all tucked into bed by the time John had come out of the bath and climbed into bed himself.

He’d rolled onto his side, rather than lying on his back as he usually did, rolled away from Sherlock, rather than toward, and lain there still and quiet. Sherlock had fallen asleep wondering if John regretted what had passed between them.

And now he is alone.

He throws a couple of day’s worth of clothes into a satchel, rushes for the train station and just makes his train by a hair.

It’s a miserable, damp, slate grey day, with little punctuations of early spring green racing by outside the train window in a mottled blur. The train is only moderately full, but every ringing mobile, every child’s cry, every cough, seems to set his brain to buzzing.

Honestly, he can’t wait to be off, and settled into his room at… And then he remembers. He forgot to book a room. He can’t be bothered now. He’ll just have to try to find something when he arrives.
He tries to sleep, but can’t.

When his phone rings, he snatches it up and answers without thinking. “John.”

“Hello brother.”

He scowls with a huff. “Mycroft. What do you want?”

“Just checking in.”

Sherlock leans back in his seat and crosses his legs. “This case—is it you?”

“I haven’t the slightest idea what you’re talking about.”

“Holdernesse.”

“Well, it is an election year.”

“What aren’t you telling me?”

Mycroft sighs, a long, drawn out, unnecessarily dramatic thing. “It’s a delicate matter, Sherlock. You can’t go bungling in like you so often do. This isn’t one of your amateur little puzzles. This is the abduction of the only child of one of the wealthiest and most influential men in England. Take it seriously. Use discretion. He won’t appreciate a show.

“He’s a private man, and this is a private matter, which is why he is quite livid that the headmaster contacted the London Met, and by extension, you. Though, If you can manage to behave yourself, there’s a rather substantial reward in it, so I hear.”

“You know I don’t care about that sort of thing.”

“Yes. And I also know that you suddenly have a family,” The word twists in his mouth like it’s a bitter, poisonous thing, “of sorts, to support. And you and I both know that Dr. Watson is really in no condition to be holding down regular position at present, so…”

“I’m sorry, I must have missed the part where anything about my and John’s life was any of your business.”

“Consider it, Sherlock. Given your rather dingy little flat, and the frankly appalling way you take care of your person, the amount he’s offering should hold the three of you over a good while. Or you could do better still and just tuck it away for the child’s education.”

“Good-bye, Mycroft.”

“Sherlock, Holdernesse is a personal friend. I am ordering you…”

“Ordering?”

“Requesting, that you commit all your energies to this. I’ve promised him you’ll make good, and if the honour of your only brother’s word, or a powerful man’s reputation doesn’t motivate you, then at least think of the child.”

“I am thinking of the child. He’s the only one I’m thinking about, as it seems I’m the only one actually considering him at all.

“He’s ten years old, Mycroft. Ten years old, and he’s most likely been ferried off to god knows
where, and under what conditions. No doubt he is cold and hungry, afraid and alone. And yet the only thing anyone seems concerned about is reputation!”

Several heads turn in Sherlock’s direction, and he suddenly realises just how loud he’s got.

“Don’t make this personal, Sherlock.”

“Personal?”

“You know what I’m talking about.”

Sherlock rolls his eyes and huffs. “Good-bye, Mycroft.”

Outside the rain stops, and the clouds start to clear.

The train pulls into the station in York and Sherlock sighs, bone weary at the prospect of hiring a car, driving to Malton, and then trying to find a place to stay before he heads for the school. He scans the platform for signs indicating where he can hire a car, and sees nothing. Inconvenient. Also possible he’s just overlooked it, and is (panicking), getting irritated for no reason.

He disembarks, and wraps his coat a little more tightly around him, clamps down on the strap of his overnight bag with an iron grip, and presses into the seething throng of humanity, jostling, shouting greetings, and generally descending into one, giant sea of sensory static.

He is desperately scanning the perimeter of the station for an exit, or a loo, or even just some dark corner where he can tuck himself and recover a little of his composure, when his eyes stop dead at a beam of late afternoon sun shining down from the skylights and cutting through the dim interior of the station. In the centre of it, glowing like a beacon of calm, is John. He’s wearing a black collarless shirt and jeans Sherlock has never seen before, and has his hands shoved casually into his pockets.

He grins, a grin that spreads wider as Sherlock approaches, no doubt looking completely flummoxed.

John reaches out and takes his bag, slings it over his shoulder, and places a hand lightly on his elbow to guide him (he hopes) towards the exit.

He waits until they’re outside and walking toward the comparable quiet of the carpark before bothering to explain. “I drove. Faster than the train. Didn’t seem right not to come. It’s been awhile. Been too long, really.

“ Took Rosie to Harry’s.” He looks up at Sherlock’s face, and must see the surprise there. “Yeah, I know. But like you said, she’s been clean for over a year. Time for second chances, maybe. She’ll probably spoil her rotten.”

Sherlock stares down at the top of John’s head, at the way he’s tried and failed to style his hair exactly the same as the hair stylist had the day before. But even so, it’s been a valiant attempt, and he still looks striking, his hair brilliant silver in the bright afternoon light.

They draw stares, and Sherlock stands a little taller and a walks a little closer as they pass by a group women who don’t even attempt to disguise their appreciation. John notices and nods. “Afternoon ladies.”

Sherlock feels a twinge of… Something. Jealousy? Pride? There isn’t time to think about it, because then they’re stopping in front of John’s car, and John is putting Sherlock’s bag in the back
along with his.

Sherlock slips into the front seat, gratefully. It’s quiet and warm in the car. It smells of John, and Rosie—as of home.

John gets in on the driver’s side, and shuts the door behind him. “Talked to Greg. Got the details, and called ahead. They’re going to let us stay at the school. Figured that would be more convenient than an inn. Hope that’s okay.”

Sherlock swallows down a fresh wave of anxiety, and nods. “Yes. Fine.”

“You hungry? We can stop for something to eat.” John starts the car, and cranes his head over his shoulder as he pulls out of the parking space. “Actually, you know what, I’m starving. I’m going to find somewhere to grab a bite, you can eat or not. Up to you.”

“Fine.” Sherlock is overwhelmed. Completely and wholly overwhelmed with gratitude at John’s presence, his thoughtfulness, his care. He had known that he missed this, John’s regular presence by his side on cases, but now that John is here, arranging transportation, lodgings, ensuring that they are fed, Sherlock realises just how great the hole was that John left when he’d decided to live a more solitary life.

John pulls out of the station and heads northeast toward the A64. “Sorry about this morning. I just had so much to arrange, and I figured you could use the sleep.”

“So you weren’t simply avoiding me?” Sherlock has no idea where the comment comes from. His hands are shaking, he stuffs them under his thighs, sees John glance over at him out of the corner of his eye, a slight wrinkle forming at his brow.

“The truth?” And when Sherlock doesn’t respond, “A little bit. Probably, a little bit, yeah.”

Sherlock looks over at him, and John briefly catches his eye before turning back to the road. “I needed… I need time to process what happened last night.”

Sherlock nods.

“And not because,” John rushes to add. “Not because I didn’t want it. Okay?”

He nods again.

“Hey…” It’s soft, and careful, and Sherlock both hates and is grateful for it.

“What?”

“You okay?”

“Fine.”

“I mean—with last night.”

Sherlock looks over at him, but they’ve pulled out onto a busy thoroughfare, and John’s attention is wholly on the road. He can’t find the words, and so he does the only thing that comes to him. He reaches out and lays a hand lightly on John’s thigh, for the briefest of moments, and then lets go again.

The car slows and John pulls down a narrow side street. He looks over at Sherlock and smiles softly. “Yeah? Okay.”
He stops in front of a McDonalds.

Sherlock rolls his eyes, and huffs, and John laughs. “What, I’m in the mood for a Big Tasty. Chicken Selects for you, I know.”

“The sweet chilli…”

“Dip, I know. You want fries?”

“Of course.”

“Okay. Be right back.”

Sherlock watches John dash into the restaurant, admires the way his new trousers cling to his bum and thighs, and then catches and wills himself to behave. Not on a case. Never on a case. Most especially not on this case.

They’re back on the road in no time, John wrestling to eat his hamburger while driving, and Sherlock relaxing back into the seat more and more, letting the sound of the road beneath their tires lull him as he nibbles at his food.

“You talked to the headmaster yet?” John asks around a mouthful of burger. “Bit of an anxious bloke.”

Sherlock shakes his head. “No, though he is the one who contact the Met, which I gather the father of the boy isn’t too pleased about. Too much exposure during an election year, apparently.”

“Bit suspicious isn’t it?”

“Mmm?”

“Well, you’d think his priority would be finding his son, not his election prospects.”

“One would think.” Sherlock sighs, and lets his eyes slide shut. “Though, it’s unlikely the father’s behind it.”

“Oh?”

“Not directly, at any rate. I met with his personal secretary in London. According to him, the marriage was fractious, a recent split. It’s possible the boy ran off to be with his mother in Italy, though there doesn’t seem to be any evidence of it so far.”

“You think maybe she abducted him?”

“Possible, but not probable.”

“Mmm…” They’ve finally reached the A-Road, and John merges onto it, and then seems to relax fully. They have almost an hour’s drive to Malton, and Sherlock suddenly realises that unless he plans to sleep, he and John will be stuck in a car together all that time, with nothing else to do but talk.

He crosses his arms over his chest, slumps down in his seat and closes his eyes.

John turns on the radio, flips through the channels for a moment or so, and then turns it off again, when he finds nothing to his liking. “The headmaster didn’t seem to keen on us coming, when I called this morning. You think maybe the Duke’s putting pressure on him?”
“Duke?”


“Oh. Is that his title?”

John huffs out a laugh. “Yeah.”

“So, you talked to him then?”

“No, to the headmaster. That’s how I arranged for us to stay at the school. Here, you sure you’re okay?”

“I’m fine.”

“Hey…” John’s hand slips over Sherlock’s thigh, and Sherlock’s eyes snap open.

John’s brows are knit. “Sure?”

“It’s been a very trying morning. You know how I hate public transit.”

John removes his hand, and places it back on the steering wheel, and Sherlock has to resist the urge to lean over and snatch it back.

“Yeah. Should have woke you, I guess. Not sure what I was thinking. Not sure I was thinking at all, really…” John swallows, and rubs at the steering wheel with his thumbs.

Sherlock can tell he’s thinking, that there are things he wants to say, and doesn’t know how, and it seems a foolhardy endeavour to try to broach such a conversation now, when they’re on a case and when neither of them can extricate themselves from the situation, should the conversation go—badly.

“Listen, umm—I just want you to know that…” He swallows, tightly. “What happened last night, it’s… Well, I’ve wanted it for a really long time, and I just…”

Sherlock sighs, and draws his knees up to his chest, scoots further down in the seat.

John goes silent, glances over at him, and then… “Yeah, okay. We don’t need to talk about it, I guess.”

“Not on a case, John.”

“Right. Right. Yeah.” And then in a tone that makes Sherlock burn with regret. “Sorry.”

“It’s—fine. It’s fine, John.”

“Yeah, okay.”

They drive the rest of the way in uncomfortable silence, and it isn’t until they finally wind through the vast park, pull around the circular drive, and up to the public entrance of the huge manor house that now serves as a preparatory school, that John whistles low, and speaks. “Posh, isn’t it.”

“Rather.”

“Suppose it would be for a Duke’s son.”

“Yeah, okay.”

“Parents who want to unburden themselves of their spawn often like to assuage their guilt by
ensuring their child’s prison is the best that money can buy.” He gets out of the car the minute John pulls to a stop and is met by a member of the staff, descending the front steps.

“Can I help you.”

“I’m Sherlock Holmes. This is Dr. John Watson. We’re here about Arthur.”

“Lord Saltire, of course. The Headmaster has been expecting you. He and the Duke are waiting in his study. Come with me.” The man waves to a younger man jogging up the gravel drive toward them. “Peter, park this vehicle in Lot A behind the stables.”

The man leads them down the long corridor to the headmaster’s office. Warm limestone floors polished smooth with a century and a half’s foot traffic, polished oak-panelled walls, the long line of portraits of headmasters—past getting more and more modern in style the closer they get to the headmaster’s office. Sherlock ignores the last of them, as the office door swings open revealing a duo of raised voices, that of the Duke’s personal secretary, Mr. Wilder, and the very red-faced, and very agitated current headmaster.

“Ahh, Mr. Holmes. I’m afraid there’s been a mistake. I’m afraid you’ll have to leave,” the headmaster sputters.

Sherlock cocks a brow. “Pity. We’ve just arrived.”

Mr. Wilder steps forward. “I do hope you can see how impossible it all is, Mr. Holmes. The Duke is absolutely adamant that as few people as possible be taken into his confidence, and this whole situation has already gone so far beyond the bounds of discretion, that one can hardly allow you and your colleague to running about the countryside, stirring up all sorts of rumours.”

Sherlock smiles, and turns back to the headmaster. “Well—as I’ve said, we have come all this way. I believe we will at least take a day or two to enjoy your quaint little village and perhaps hike the moors. Who knows, we may even stumble across your missing Professor Heidegger, holidaying himself.”

“This is not a trivial matter, Mr. Holmes.” The well-dressed man who had, until now, been hovering silently by the window, turns and speaks. It’s a deep voice, clearly one used to oratory, but it has a softness about it here in the privacy of the headmaster’s office, and a tone that might even be interpreted as sadness.

“How truly gratifying to know you think so.” Sherlock feels John take a step closer behind him, hears him clear his throat in warning.

The Duke’s eyes travel to John, linger for a moment and then return to Sherlock. “If you meant to imply something by that remark, Mr. Holmes, I’m afraid you’ve quite lost me.”

Sherlock swallows down the bile in his throat. “Your only child has disappeared, your hopes, your future, and yet… You speak only of your reputation, your desire for privacy. How can any of those things take precedence over the life of your son?”

The man’s eyes drop. He’s strides to the window, stares out it for some seconds, and then turns back to the room, and his secretary. “There’s no need to send Mr. Holmes and his colleague away, James.” He turns to the headmaster. “Dr. Huxtable, you’ve already bungled this whole affair terribly. London is aware. The damage is done. We might as well avail ourselves of their services, now they’re here.”

He returns his attention to Sherlock. “Mr. Holmes, my personal secretary, Mr. Wilder, whom I
believe you have already met, is at your disposal, as is my home, which is just over the hill, should you and your colleague require a place to stay.”

“That is very gracious, Your Grace, but I believe it will be more advantageous to our investigation if Dr. Watson and I stay here at the school, as planned.”

“Of course, whatever you deem best.” He nods to his secretary, and they head for the door, the headmaster following meekly in their wake.

“Your Grace…” They turn just as they reach the door. “May I ask if you have any theories as to what has happened to your son?”

Holdernesse looks down at the ground for a moment, before looking back up and meeting Sherlock’s eyes squarely and with confidence. “No Mr. Holmes, I do not.”

The same man who had met them when they arrived bustles back into the room. “Peter has done you the courtesy of taking your bags to your room. I can show you there now. Supper is at eight, and you will be dining with the headmaster. Someone will come to fetch you.”

They follow the man back down the long corridor from the headmaster’s office, through the foyer, up the great stone staircase, through the second floor gallery, and then turn down a narrower corridor with several rows of doors. “We use this wing for guests. You are the only ones a present, so you should be relatively undisturbed.”

They stop in front of the third door down on the left, and the man unlocks it, and swings it wide. It is similar in decoration to the rest of the school. The same heavy, wood panelling on all the walls, wool, winter-weight curtains, and a huge fireplace which already has a fire crackling invitingly in the hearth.

The room, Sherlock is chagrined to observe, also has two single beds covered in paisley damask bedspreads.

“Make yourself at home, gentlemen.” And with that their escort is gone.

John strides across the room to the window, parts the curtains with one hand, to stare out over the lawn, and then turns, picks up his overnight bag, and begins to unpack. “Bet this beats the local inn.”

“Mmm.” Sherlock wanders about the room, running his hands over the wood panelling, the wallpaper, the old gas wall sconces that have long ago been converted to electricity. He presses his hand against the wall by the door, listens to the distant, muffled sound of boys changing classes, and wonders if time and memory can haunt a place, can be absorbed into the very physical fabric of the place somehow, all the emotional energy of over a hundred boys, times nearly 100 years…

“Sherlock?”

“Mmm?”

“You okay.”

Sherlock snaps out of his revery. “Fine. I believe I’ll go take a look at Heidegger’s room. No need for you to come.”

“Oh. Yeah, okay. I’ll just…” John waves a hand at their packed bags. “And I’ll see you at supper.
Sherlock walks out without another word.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

**Author’s Notes:** Please note the added tag here of #Implied/Referenced Sexual Abuse.

I want to talk about this tag up front, because I know this is a HUGE trigger for a lot of people (yours truly included), and so I’m going to be a little spoilery here, but I want you to know exactly what this tag is about.

* This is something that happened in the past.
* This is not something that happened to either Sherlock or John.
* This is not something that happened to the child in the case they are investigating.
* This is not something that features heavily in this chapter, but there will come a time in a later chapter when Sherlock will finally talk to John about it.
* The abuse in question is and never will be described in any kind of detail.
* The focus here is on how Sherlock was affected by his friendship with the child being abused (both boys being the same age, and the abuse occurring off-and-on when the boy was 11-13).
* I do lightly touch on the aftermath of the abuse, in the sense of how it affected the child psychologically, as well as certain tells that Sherlock picked up on, but again, I try to do so as gently as possible, and again there is never at any point, and never will be, at any point, any sort of description of the details of the abuse.

I understand if this now makes this story a hard ‘no’ for you. I really do. Please don’t feel badly if you want to stop reading. First and foremost I want you all to be safe.

Also, please know that I am willing to answer any specific questions about the content privately. If you would like even more detail than what I’ve provided here, you can Private Message me on tumblr, username: sussexbound.

Heidegger’s room proves fruitful, and Sherlock regrets not bringing John to take down notes.

However, grateful as he had been to see John at the train station earlier, he is finding it more and more difficult to have John here, now they’ve arrived at the school. He aches for his nearness, even as he buzzes with agitation, and has to fight every instinct to not lash out.

John is clearly making an effort, and all he wants to do is run. He’s wanted this between them for longer than he can remember, and now he all but has it, and he’s ruining it!

He returns to their shared room, even though supper is still hours away, and finds John sitting cross-legged on one of the beds, with his laptop propped open. “You’ll never guess what I found out about the Duke’s family.”

“There’s no need, as you’re clearly going to tell me whether I care to hear it or not.”

John ignores the petulant comment, and points at something on his laptop screen. “Says here that if you go far enough back, the Holdernesse family were a warrior class of ancient Britons that made all
their wealth stealing other people’s cattle.” He looks delighted. “I mean obviously there’s been more respectable ventures since, but that’s the root of it. “Oh,” he continues, looking more delighted still. “And there are also rumours that in the mid 18th century, one of the Holdernesses was a member of something called the Hell Fire Club. It was run by some Dashwood bloke, and they got up to all sorts of secret filthy business. Apparently this Holdernesse was one of their wilder members. Committed all sorts of wicked transgressions.” John winks at him, and Sherlock feels his cheeks go warm.

John grins. “What about you? Find anything useful?”

“Heidegger didn’t take the boy. He followed him, I believe, but the boy snuck out on his own. Why, I don’t know. We should talk to the other boys in his dormitory, see if they heard or know anything.”

“Right. We can probably track down one of the staff who can show us to his room. Oh, and I got a text from Greg. There were multiple sightings of a boy and a man travelling together the morning after he went missing, but none of them match the description of Arthur or Heidegger.”

“Good.”

“Good?”

“It confirms my suspicions. I don’t think they went on foot, not for long, at least, and I don’t think they left the area by train. Why would they? Look at the surrounding area, John. To the south, the village. They wouldn’t have gone there. But if you head north of the school, less than 30 minutes by car, you are in the North York Moors. Easy to lose yourself there.”

“So you think he just ran away?”

“I think he was lured away.”

“So—abducted, but not by Heidegger?”

“Yes.”

“But there’s been no request for ransom.”

“I know. It’s curious. Whoever it is, they don’t want to be found, and…” He squeezes his eyes shut and sucks in a deep breath in an attempt to wash away the wave of anxiety that washes over him. “It’s possible that the motivation isn’t a desire for money, but simply to hurt the father, which means that the boy…”

“May already be dead.”

Sherlock nods. “It makes the mother even less of a suspect. From what I gather she wasn’t too keen on leaving Arthur here, and only did so because of his education. She doesn’t strike me as the sort who would kill her own child just to spite his father. Very few mothers would.”

John nods. “You up for trying to track down the boy’s room before supper?”

“Yes.”

It doesn’t take them long to track down the headmaster, who somewhat begrudgingly agrees to show
them to Arthur’s room. It’s private, typical given his station Sherlock supposes, but hardly advantageous when it comes to making friends.

“Was he a popular boy?” He asks as he roots through his school chest, runs a finger over his unmade bed, the cluttered desk beside the window.

“This was his first year here. He wasn’t unliked.”

“That’s not what I asked. Did he have friends, was he involved in activities outside his lessons, or was he a solitary child?”

Sherlock stops, hand hovering over an opened envelope on the desk. He picks it up, and finds it empty. The address suggests it came from the Duke, the postmark that it was likely delivered the day he went missing. “Did Arthur often get letters from his father?”

“One a week. His Grace is very traditional. He doesn’t believe in technology.”

Sherlock huffs, and holds up the envelope. “He received this the day he went missing. It’s empty.” He shuffles through the few papers on the desktop, and in the desk’s two small drawers. The trash bin is empty. “Would this have been emptied since the boy’s disappearance?”

Huxtable shakes his head. “The room has been left wholly untouched.”

“And yet, the letter this envelope contained is nowhere to be found, which suggests he took it with him.”

There is a family portrait on the desk, as well, the size of a child’s hand, in an ornate silver frame. The Duke, his Italian wife, and the boy—thin with his father’s wide, pale eyes, and his mother’s dark, wavy hair. He looks sad, Sherlock thinks, and then chastises himself.

The sounds of boyish laughter float in from the next room, and Sherlock glances toward the room’s second door. “This room adjoins to another?”

“Yes. The one next door used to be the dressing room for this one. There are two boys sharing.”

“Could we ask them a few questions?” John asks.

“Of course.”

The two boys are rough-housing when they enter, and they break apart, instantly, stand up straight, attentive.

“Harry, Clive, this is Mr. Holmes and Dr. Watson. They are here looking into what happened with Arthur. You will answer any questions they might have to the best of your ability. Is that clear?”

“Yes, Sir.” The two boys answer in tandem.

Sherlock strides to the window, opens it and looks down at the roof just below, the way it leads along a gradual slope to a metal drain spout, which is screwed into the stone wall with steel bracket, an even intervals.

“You boys both deep sleepers, then?” John asks behind him.

“Not particularly, Sir.” Clive pipes up. “There are mice in the walls behind the beds. Keeps us up sometimes. We try to guess how many by the amount of scratching.”
“That so? So then, you must certainly hear things from Arthur’s room?”

“Yes Sir.” Harry cuts in. “Usually we hear the door creak when he comes in or out. But we didn’t hear anything the other night.”

“Didn’t even hear him crying,” Clive adds.

“Crying?” John asks.

“Yes, he cries an awful lot, Sir.”

“I see.”

Sherlock walks out. He can hear John and Huxtable extending their thanks to the boys as they leave, and then John’s footsteps racing up behind him. “Here, what was that about? You okay?”

“He climbed out the window.”

“What?”

“Arthur. Something in the letter he received from his father motivated it. Perhaps a pre-arranged meeting. Oh, I may have complete mis… He crawled out the window at the assigned time, went across the roof, down the drainpipe and then met someone… But who? Who?!” He stops mid-stride, spins and pulls hard at his hair, willing it to focus his scattered brain.

“Hey.” John reaches out and places a hand on his shoulder, but he tears it away.

“I’ve been a fool, John. A fool!”

And then John is crowding against him, turning him, and he is about to lash out again, in spite of himself, when he hears Huxtable.

“Everything quite alright?”

“Fine, Dr. Huxtable. Fine. I think we’ll both feel better after we have some food in our stomachs. Supper’s in one hour, yes?”

“Yes, in my private dining room. The other professors will be there as well.”

“Okay. In an hour then.”

He lets John guide him through the corridors, every fibre of his being screaming to get out, to get somewhere quiet, and lonely, and dark. Away. Away from this. All of this.

A door clicks behind them, and suddenly he is being pushed gently against the wall, and John is there in front of him, brow knit, hands reaching up to feel his forehead.

He slaps his hand away without thinking, and John frowns and takes a step back.

“You’re not okay. What’s going on?”

“I’m fine!” He practically spits.

John sniffs, clenches his jaw, and takes another step back. His eyes take in the whole of him. It’s a doctor’s eye, assessing, diagnosing.
“Last time I saw you like this was Baskerville. Wasn’t too keen on how that played out. Would like to avoid it happening that way again if I can.”

“Don’t be stupid.”

John stands a little straighter. “Go to bed.”

Sherlock blinks.

“I’m not going to ask you again. Go to bed. Rest for an hour. I’m going out. I’ll come back and get you for supper.” And with that he turns, walks across the room, yanks the curtains closed, and then grabs his coat off the bed and leaves.

Sherlock does go to bed, but not because he wants to. He flops inelegantly into the bed John had been occupying earlier, and curls tight in the dark. He curls tight and wills the fire to stop crackling, and the boys to stop chattering out in the gallery, and for the wind to stop wuthering in the eaves. He hates everything, and Mycroft most of all, for being right about the case. It is effecting him, and it’s weak, and stupid, and wholly unbearable.

He had been doing well since the Culverton Smith case—calm, collected, and even starting, he thought, to find a sort of balance, an ability to care without the spectre of hyper-empathy that had haunted his youth coming back to haunt him. But this case… This case is bringing it all back, throwing him wholly off kilter.

His eyes fill and spill over. It’s hateful.

He thinks of things he hasn’t thought about in decades, and he feels cold, and sick, and terribly afraid, and he misses with an ache he had all but forgot.

He misses Victor Trevor horribly.

“Sherlock…? Sherlock, hey…”

He opens his eyes to John, who sits down on the side of the bed, and presses a cool hand to his forehead. He smells of bracing evening air.

“How are you feeling?”

“Fine.” And he does feel better, he realises. Exhausted, but relatively calm.

“You up for supper? I can bring you something back if you’re not.”

“No. We should go. It could be useful.”

“Right. Okay. We expected to—I don’t know—dress for dinner?”

Sherlock smiles fondly. “A jacket, perhaps. Trousers instead of jeans.”

“Okay.” John gets up off the bed, and moves to the wardrobe, and all of their clothes which Sherlock suddenly realised John unpacked when they arrived, hung up side by side. John’s jacket next to his. Their shirts, side-by-side. Their trousers hung together over one hanger.

He’s overwhelmed with a wave of gratitude. John is clearly out of his depth socially, but he’s here
anyway, and Sherlock knows, without a doubt, that there is no level of discomfort that could ever motivate John to go. He feels undeserving.

“John?”

“Yeah?” He’s holding up two different shirts against a forest green jacket.

“I’m sorry.”

John’s head snaps up.

“I’m sorry for earlier.”

John looks stunned. He swallows. “Yeah. Okay.” His hand drops, the bottoms of the shirts he’s holding dragging on the floor. “But, just keep me in the loop, okay. I can’t help if I don’t know what’s going on.”

“I know. It’s just…” And he can feel all the anxiety rising up to suffocate him once again.

John hangs the shirts back up in the wardrobe, and walks over to sit on the edge of the bed. “Talk about it after supper? We don’t want Huxtable getting into more of a huff than he already is, and you need to eat.”

“Yes. Of course. I’m sorry.”

“We’d best hurry. Don’t want to be late.”

The meal is excellent without being too sumptuous, and the other professors prove, for the most part, to be amiable and genuine. Sherlock can see John relaxing the longer the conversation swirls around them. It allows Sherlock to sit back, and listen.

John regales them with the details of his internet sleuthing earlier in the day, and finds a raucous audience in the men around the table, all save Huxtable who has been looking more and more constipated with every passing moment.

“What is wrong, Dr. Huxtable?” Sherlock finally asks when the man’s visible irritation becomes more than he can continue to ignore.

“Nothing.”

“Clearly something.”

“No, no. I’m sure I expect to much.”

“Oh? Well then, by all means, do share your expectations.”

He feels John’s foot press against his under the table.

The headmaster’s face goes quite red. “I don’t expect miracles,” he states tightly. “But the fact is, we have not learned a single thing since engaging London, not a thing save two absolutely unfounded and squalid rumours about His Grace and his esteemed family! I did not invite you or the London police onto this case simply to spread unfounded and disgraceful rumours about one of this school’s greatest patrons!”
Some of the other professors look uncomfortable. Sherlock sees John shrink slightly beside him, and that simply won’t do.

“Ahh… Calm yourself Dr. Huxtable. You’ll be pleased to know that we have discovered much more than that. For instance, I can give you a very clear picture of what transpired that night, and also of the behaviour of your excellent and faithful German professor.”

“Faithful!” The man sputters.

“Indeed.

“When I investigated Heidegger’s room today, I found two curious things. Firstly a broken sherry glass on the floor. Second a desk lamp with a burned out lightbulb, and a new one lying on the desk beside it.

“I also found Professor Heidegger’s laptop. It was a simple thing to guess his password, of course. And what I found there was any email account filled with assignments that required marking, as well as an open paper, which had last been annotated at eleven o’clock on the night in question. Thus indicating that the good professor was up quite late.”

“Yes,” one of the other professors interjects. “He was duty round master that night. He likely wouldn’t have got back to his room until almost eleven, as you say.”

Sherlock nods in acknowledgement and continues. “When he entered the room, he poured himself a glass of sherry, and then sat down to mark papers. However, the bulb in his desk lamp appears to have burnt out. So, he got up, and went to the dresser by the window, where he kept extras.

“While there, he saw young Lord Saltire climb out of his window, a few yards away, climb down the drain spout, and race off into the night. I believe he may have gone to the edge of the park where he was met by whomever it was who arranged the meeting.

“Understanding the seriousness of what was happening, Herr Heidegger raced out of the room in pursuit, and knocked the sherry glass off of his desk in his haste.”

“But why on earth would Lord Saltire do such a thing?” The headmaster asks, seeming to have forgotten his earlier anger.

“I believe it was all pre-arranged. Something in the letter he received from his father earlier in the day.”

“Mr. Holmes, if you are suggesting…!”

“No, he is not.” John interjects.

Sherlock cocks a brow and leans back in his chair.

“And so?” Huxtable insists.

“So?”

“Where has he gone?”

“Ahh well, that is as far as we’ve gotten so far, I’m afraid. John and I will go north, tomorrow and continue our investigation in the North York Moors.”

“You think he’s gone there?!”
“I suspect he has been taken there.”

“By whom and for what purpose.”

“I don’t know!” Sherlock snaps. “You can’t possibly expect me to have unravelled the whole of it in a single afternoon, when all of the local police, and London beside, haven’t been able to do half as much in five times the number of days!”

John’s leg presses even more firmly against his. “I am sure that we will have much more to tell you in the next day or two,” he assures the headmaster as only John seems able to. “I assure you that we want to find the boy, and for this whole situation to have a happy ending, as much as you do.”

“Well, I hope so, Dr. Watson. I very much hope so.”

The mood of the evening having rather soured, they all disperse to their respective corners of the school. Sherlock tries not to grow impatient at John’s seeming curiosity and gawking at literally everything, his continued awe over their surroundings.

They’re halfway back to their room, and John has stopped for the umpteenth time to admire a set of mounted swords, when Sherlock decides he needs space. “I’m going to the loo.”

He disappears into the nearest one without waiting for a reply from John, enters a stall, puts the seat down, and sits on the cold porcelain and tries to will his hands to stop shaking. It’s getting unsustainable. It will be good to be away from the school tomorrow, out in the countryside, alone, with John.

The room reeks of antiseptic cleaner, and he can’t bear to stay there long. When he steps back into the gallery, it’s to the sight of John standing in front of one of the class pictures, a strange look on his face, and with a sinking feeling, Sherlock knows exactly what he’s looking at.

He takes a deep breath, and John must hear him, because he turns a crooked half-smile on his face, and nods toward the photo. “Is this you? Here in the third row. Looks like you, and it says, William S. Holmes.”

“Of course it’s me.” Which is, of course, a rather stupid thing to say, for how on earth could John ever have deduced that they had spent the last 7 hours investigating a child abduction at his alma mater?

“You went here?”

“Obviously.”

“Jesus, Sherlock. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“It didn’t seem relevant. It still doesn’t.”

John moves on to the next picture, dated 1987. “Here you are again.”

“Yes, well spotted. Can we go back to our room, now?”

“You could say that. Our room?”

“Right, right.” John gazes longingly at the remaining photos. “How many years? The full five?”

“Three. In ’89 Mommy decided to have me tutored privately. She was vastly unimpressed with the Educational Reform.”

John doesn’t say anything in reply, but Sherlock can see him looking at him as he hurries through the gallery and down the corridor to their room.

Once they reach it, they go their separate ways, John to the loo, and Sherlock in the bedroom to undress, and change into his pyjamas. He gazes longingly at John’s small bed, but it is quite obviously too small for two grown men, and so he crawls into the other, and waits for John to come out of the toilet.

When he does, Sherlock goes in to do his own nightly ablutions and by the time he’s back out again, John is in his bed, head propped up slightly, reading a book. “You mind if I stay up for awhile? The light won’t keep you up?”

“Of course not.”

“Okay. ’Night.”

It feels like a dismissal. “Good-night.” Sherlock tosses rather violently for a moment or two, occasionally punching the pillow to fluff up the down, but mostly to telegraph to John how unsatisfactory the sleeping situation is, how very much he needs…

What exactly?
In truth he doesn’t even know.

Finally he settles, thinks about other nights lying alone in the dark under this same roof, far away from home, his room, his dog, everything familiar. He remembers the aching loneliness of it. He remembers the anxiety, the tears, the feeling of being completely and utterly insignificant, unwanted.

He remembers the first night Victor came to his room, in the dark, trembling all over, blonde hair askew, hands ice cold, and begged to be allowed to sleep there. Of course he had said yes. He had laid up half the night, listened to his breath even out, only to catch and grow quick again, listened to him whimpering in his sleep. Had felt relief when he had settled fully just before dawn, and gotten some real sleep.

He remembers all the nights Victor had shared his bed after that. Always unpredictable, always unexpected, but never unwelcome, never unwanted. And then he remembers ‘that night’, and missing him, too, when suddenly he was no longer there.

He falls asleep in a sea of memory, a sea that swells and grows stormier, and stormier, the deeper he falls.

He wakes in the wee hours, to sound of his name, and a warm hand on his shoulder. “Sherlock?”

He sucks in a deep breath, suddenly realising that he had stopped breathing at some point. He’s shaking all over, and drenched in sweat.

“Hey…” John’s hand strokes down his arm. “You were dreaming I think. You okay?”
Sherlock can’t speak, not yet, and he hopes that John will somehow see, will understand—will stay.

“You’re safe. We’re at St. James’, remember? The case? You’re safe.”

And oh how he wants to shout, and rail, and cry that there is no place on earth so unsafe as a boarding school. But John wouldn’t understand (*thank god*), and so he stays quiet.

“Sherlock?” John’s hand slides from his shoulder to the centre of his back. “You want me to stay here? Close squeeze, but I think we can fit.”

Sherlock nods, but John must not see him in the dark.

“Sherlock?”

“Please.” All he manages, and then John is crawling in behind him, a warm, comforting, anchor, drawing Sherlock back against his body, wrapping an arm around his waist, and burying his face in Sherlock’s nape.

“Maybe try to sleep, okay. I’ll stay.”

And as he starts to drift again, it’s to the question of whether he had been this for Victor those two, unbearably long years. Had he been an anchor? Had he been enough? Because in the end it had felt as though he had been anything but, as though he had failed him in every way you could fail a friend.
Sherlock wakes again in the wee hours. He’s hot, and his arm is asleep, but as he comes slowly awake, he remembers.

*John.*

John is still there, spooned behind him, arm draped over his waist, warm breath wafting against his back, just above his shoulder blades. And in that safe, sweet spot between waking and sleep, Sherlock forgets everything surrounding him, all the reasons he has to be afraid, and he rolls over, pulls John in against his chest, and falls back asleep.

John’s phone alarm wakes them both several hours later. It’s across the room on the the other nightstand, and John leaps up, stumbles and nearly falls over Sherlock’s shoes, which are sitting neatly by his bed, throws himself across his bed, and shuts it off with a groan.

“Shite. Forgot I had that set.”

Sherlock throws a hand over his eyes and tries not to be disappointed by the rude awakening. “An early start might not be a bad idea.” He reaches over and picks up his phone, and sees that it’s only 5:00. “Though perhaps not this early.”

“Gotta take a piss.” John announces and disappears into the loo.

Sherlock lays in bed, and stares up at the ceiling. Listens to the muffled echo of John urinating in the next room. It’s still dark outside. The school hasn’t yet begun to stir (well not upstairs at least). It’s quiet.

John comes back out of the loo, and hesitates for a moment. The bed issue, Sherlock realises. He supposes it’s rather bold of him, but he scoots over on the mattress, and pulls the blankets back.

“Hurry. You’ll freeze.”

And John comes, without further hesitation, as though glad the decision has been made for him. He snuggles down beneath the blankets pulls one up to cover his nose, and looks quiet ridiculously, inarguably endearing.

Sherlock smiles rather drunkenly, still too sleepy to hide.


“There is, gas furnace, I imagine, but the windows are only single glazed, and then there is all the heat going up the fireplace floos. The great downside to being Grade 1 listed. We should have drawn the curtains last night.”

“Right.” John huffs into the sheets, and then pulls them back down over his nose and grows silent. After a moment he stirs a little. “Can I ask you something?”

Sherlock swallows, apprehensive at his tone, like it’s something rather momentous, something that isn’t easy for him to ask.

“I suppose.”

“Your three years here?”
Sherlock’s stomach knots. “What about them?”

“Were they happy?”

“I was here to get an education, I hardly see what my…”

“Yesterday,” John interrupts. “When we were in Harry and Clive’s room and they talked about hearing Arthur crying at night, you just walked out. You’ve been short, and snappish with me, with Huxtable, even with Holdernesse. Last night you were talking in your sleep, clearly nightmares. And you’ve been—not yourself, since we got here. So, I was just wondering, if…”

“It’s nothing. Nothing more than any child experiences during their school years.” It’s a lie, but preferable to trying to exorcise a childhood’s worth of ghosts.

John’s fingers stir, and he slips his hand over Sherlock’s. “Yeah, see—I’m not as clueless as you think I am, and I don’t think you’re quite telling me the truth.”

“You’re entitled to think what you want.”

“I just want to help.”

“You always do.”

John’s hand leaves his. “Okay. You don’t want my help. Okay. So—do you want me to go back to London, or…”?

“No!” Sherlock blurts before he even has time to process the question, raw instinct. He can feel his cheeks heat at how needy it sounds, at how much it reveals. John is quiet. After several long minutes during which a bird starts to sing atop the bedroom’s chimney pot, and the sound of a door slams out in the gallery, John shifts. Sherlock thinks he’s going to get up and leave, but he only adjusts his position in the bed, tucking his arm under his head, and lifting his other, to sweep a curl off Sherlock’s forehead, before retreating again.

“If you don’t want to talk about, fine. We don’t have to talk about. But there is something, isn’t there? I’m not imagining it?”

Sherlock’s chest feels tight, his throat dry. He shivers, and John must notice, because the hand that had just retreated, returns to the top of his head, stays there, a comforting weight, John’s fingers tangled lightly in his hair, his thumb moving almost imperceptibly against his scalp in the smallest of caresses.

“Yes.” It’s barely a whisper. “There was something.”

John’s thumb stops. “Okay,” murmured back, low and intimate. “Will you promise me something? Will you tell me if it gets to be too much. We can leave. We can…”

“We can’t leave.”

“It’s just a case.”

“A child is missing, John!”

“Yeah…” He seems to catch himself, or perhaps he is just taken aback by the vehemence of Sherlock’s reply. “Yeah, that’s true.”
“It’s fine. I’m being ridiculously, unforgivably overwrought, I know.”

“No.”

Sherlock doesn’t know what to say in response, but he doesn’t have to in the end, because John continues. “No. It is what it is. See, I seem to remember this brilliant bloke telling me, once, that everyone of us is human from time-to-time. And I tell you what, that same person was, and is, the most human human being I have ever known. So, if this thing, whatever it is, is hard—that’s okay. Just—don’t shut me out.” And when Sherlock doesn’t say anything in response. “Please.”

“Yes. Alright.”

“Okay.”

Sherlock thinks that perhaps they should get up, start off for the small villages at the border of the park, but John makes no motion to do so. He stays where he his, fingers in Sherlock’s hair, face hovering achingly close.

The room is growing lighter now, the muted, silver-grey of dawn, and John is looking at him, looking at him like he wants to unwrap him, to solve all the mysteries, deduce all the secrets, and then take him, vulnerable and raw, and keep him; pull him under his skin, shelter him beneath his ribs, mend together all the cracked and broken bits with little pieces of his own soul.

Sherlock knows he’s doing it again, what his brother warned him about. He’s making things personal, he projecting, John likely doesn’t want any such thing. Just because he wants a thing, looks at John, and wants to rend the flesh from anyone who would dare to harm him, wants to be a safe place (no such thing, you stupid boy), wants to, wants to simply LOVE, in the truest, wholest sense of the word, doesn’t mean that…

John’s fingers rub against his scalp. John’s forehead tilts in to press against his. He can feel his breath on his lips. He can breathe the air John exhales between them, even as John inhales his.

John’s pupils are dark and wide, his breath impossibly shallow, but his hand against Sherlock’s scalp is steady and sure. He leans in closer. His nose brushes against Sherlock’s.

“Should we talk about this?” He whispers.

“This?”

John nudges his nose gently against Sherlock’s cheek, and Sherlock is reminded of submissive puppy, eager for affection, but afraid they’ll be met with punishment instead.

“This,” John says, slipping his hand from Sherlock’s hair, to smooth down the side of his head, thumb moving in a crescent against his cheek.

“No.” Sherlock decides most definitively.

John kisses him.

It’s not what he thought their first kiss would be. He had imagined a carefully arranged evening, a little candlelight, a little conversation, or perhaps a spectacular case, the thrill, the adrenaline of it racing through their veins. He had imagined an expanding, thrumming lust between them, like the night in the kitchen, John pushing him against the wall, maybe, pressing his hand between them, maybe. John a raging wildfire of passion unleashed.
A fantasy. Obviously.

Reality is different, and somehow all the more precious for it.

John’s lips press against his, warm, and dry, and almost chaste. John’s thumb rubs circles at his temple. His lips tremble, and then pull away, only to return and place another kiss in the corner of Sherlock’s mouth, another over one closed eyelid, and then the other; one on his forehead, one on his cheek, one at his temple, fingers back in his hair.

Sherlock is lost, wholly and completely lost to it. It isn’t so much arousing as it is ecstatic, gentle waves, a heady, tranquil, full-body hum, ebbing and flowing, John everywhere, over, around.

Sherlock reaches out, pulls him closer, and starts to kiss him back. He pulls John as close as he can, and cups his head in his hands, and mirrors everything that John has done (something he observed years ago— that people often give what they hope to receive). He feels every muscle in John’s body let loose, even those that are always tense always ready to run.

John melts against him, and when Sherlock is finished kissing his chin, his lips, the corner of his mouth, when he has brushed his nose along John’s cheek, and his lips along his jaw, when he has kissed his temples, and buried his nose in his hair as he breathes against his forehead, he kisses each closed eyelid and he tastes wet and salt.

The room is rose gold with the rising sun as Sherlock pulls away and stares down at John until he opens his eyes, lashes damp, and huffs softly with a smile that is somehow shy, and relieved, and still a little hungry all at once.

Sherlock smiles back.

“Come here…” John whispers, intimate, quiet.

Sherlock goes, and John tucks him up under his chin, and smiles into his hair, and they lie like that until the sounds of the school coming to life around them can no longer be ignored.

Eventually, John stretches, looks down at him, and grins. “Should get going, I guess.”

“Yes. The shops will be opening in the villages soon, and I want to question the locals before we go into the park.”

“Right. I’ll try to track down some food we can take with.”

“Alright.” Sherlock sits up reluctantly. “Be sure to dress for walking.”

He gets to his feet and heads for the loo.

“Sherlock?”

He turns. “Mm?”

“I love you.”

The wave of emotion that washes over him is unexpected. He swallows it down, but the image of John sitting on the edge of their small, shared bed swims anyway. “And I love you.”

John smiles, the crooked little smile that Sherlock loves so much, and then gets to his feet, and heads for the wardrobe.
John does manage to get them two sack lunches, some coffee and two scones for the road. He’s already eaten one, and is eyeing the one Sherlock’s left untouched on the console between them, when Sherlock speaks.

“Let’s try Pickering, and Newton-on-Rawcliffe first.”

“Just continue on this road?”

“Yes.”

“What exactly is it we’re looking for?”

Sherlock looks down at the scone, picks it up and then thinks twice and hands it to John, who grins. “Ta. You’re going to eat lunch though, yeah?”

“Yes. And as for what we’re looking for…” Sherlock sighs with a twinge of chagrin. “I’m not sure.”

John arches a brow and nods. “Right. Okay.” He takes a hearty bite of Sherlock’s scone.

“We’ll question the shop owners, see if anyone can tell us anything interesting. Heidegger had a German accent, apparently. That’s bound to stand out in these parts. If we can locate him, it will at least give us an idea of the route the boy’s abductor took. Unfortunately, I very much doubt we will find him alive.”

Their little excursion proves fruitless and Sherlock is in a foul mood by the time he and John get back into the car at the sixth village of the day. He can see John glancing at him out of the corner of his eye, and it only makes things worse.

“Maybe they did leave the area entirely.” John tries. “Maybe they drove to the coast and got a boat across the channel?”

“Don’t be stupid.”

John scowls. “I’m just trying to help.”

“Well, don’t.” He flops back in the seat and curls away from John, tucking into himself, forehead pressed against the window. He hears John sniff behind him.

“Hey.”

He doesn’t reply.

“Hey!” John repeats, a little more adamant this time.

“What?”

“Look at me.”

Sherlock unfurls slowly and turns.
“Don’t talk to me like that.”
Sherlock blinks.
“I mean it.”
Sherlock just stares.
John looks away, grips onto the steering wheel and stares out the windscreen. After a moment more, he turns the key in the ignition, and pulls out of their parking spot in front of the village pub.

“Eat your lunch.” He orders nodding to the paper sack on the console.
Sherlock does.

They’ve been on the road for about 15 minutes when John finally speaks again. “I have a thought—about the case. You want to hear it, or no?”

Sherlock licks the salt from the crisps in his lunch off his fingers and stares at John’s profile. He’s sitting straight as an arrow, hands perfectly placed on the steering wheel. Alert. Tense. Sherlock feels a twinge of guilt.

“Yes.”

“You sure?”

“Yes.”

“What if they didn’t go North. What if they went West, into the Howardian Hills. All those farms and villages. Dozens of places to hide, livestock roaming everywhere, would obscure footprints, too.”

It’s a promising suggestion. “Yes.”

“Yes what?”

“Yes, you could be right.”

John cocks a brow. “Well, ta.”

Sherlock stares at John. His hands are trembling against the steering wheel. He lifts one, flexes his fist, and then places it back on the wheel again.

“No time left today. We’ll go tomorrow. Back to the school now, if you don’t mind.”

“It’s only just after two o’clock?”

“Get’s dark faster here in the North.” Which is ridiculous, of course. They aren’t that much farther North. But John doesn’t question it.

When they get back to the school, classes are still in, and so they are undisturbed as they make their way to their room. The beds have been made up in their absence, Sherlock notices, as they enter. He locks the door behind them and leans against it, watches John throw his coat over the back of a chair, toss his phone and car keys on the desk by the window, lean down and poke at the smouldering coals in the hearth, and then put the poker back in it’s rack.
Sherlock pushes away from the door, throws his own coat on the bed, and just as John turns, crowds him a little to left and back against the wall. John’s eyes go wide.

He puts on his best look of contrition. “I’m sorry.” He pushes in closer, until their bodies are flush, and their breath mingling.

John grins. “I take it this means you were okay with this morning.”

Sherlock stares at John’s mouth, and leans in closer.

“Kisses aren’t a get-out-of-jail-free card, just so you know.”

Sherlock looks up, meets his gaze. “I am sorry.” He reaches down, takes both John’s hands in his, and lifts them up between them. They’re still shaking.

John stares down at them and shakes his head. “I don’t know.” He looks up. “It’s okay. I’m okay.”

“I get—foocussed and I start to feel…” Sherlock tries.

“I know.”

“But you’re right. It’s no excuse for me to…”

“It’s okay.”

“It’s not.”

John turns his hands, and takes hold of Sherlock’s. “Yeah. It’s not.” He sucks in a stuttering breath and squeezes. “But this case—it’s personal to you, yeah? I get it.”

Sherlock looks away, and John hurries to continue. “You don’t have to tell me about it, just—like I said last night, when it gets to be too much, tell me.

“We can’t quit, we can’t give up, there’s a boy’s life in danger, I get that. But you can take a break, Sherlock. You’re not a machine. You can’t expect yourself to have the endurance of one.”

John takes Sherlock’s hands and pulls them to his chest. “So—you gonna kiss me now, or…?” And then John grins, something suggestive and just this side of saucy, even as his eyes drop away still strangely shy.

Sherlock doesn’t need any more invitation. He dips down and brushes his nose through John’s hair, it’s enough for John to look back up at him, lick his lips slow in anticipation. Sherlock leans in, hovers for a moment, mouth barely touching John’s, tasting his breath on his tongue, and then he parts his lips and kisses him, the smallest taste, tongue sliding almost imperceptibly along the seam of John’s lips. He feels John’s breath catch, feels him surge, and melt, and open to him.

And then, just like that, in one glorious sweep of tongue, he’s inside him. John sucks in a sharp breath through his nose, and then whines in the back of his throat as his tongue tangles with Sherlock’s and his arms drop to wrap around Sherlock’s waist and pull him closer.

It’s the deepest beneath another’s skin Sherlock has ever been permitted, his tongue in John’s mouth, tangling, tasting, thrusting. John moans, his hands dropping to the rise of Sherlock’s arse, just below his belt, fingers flexing, scrambling, but not quite taking hold. Finally he grabs onto Sherlock’s belt, and pulls him him toward him with so much force that Sherlock grunts softly as their bodies collide.
John lets out a ragged, high-pitched sound, shifts so he is straddling Sherlock’s leg, like the night in the kitchen, and Sherlock, lifts it, gives John something for friction. John’s growing hard already, a hot, hard line between them.

He stops then, fingers gripping white-knuckled around Sherlock’s belt, pulls away from the kiss and buries his face in Sherlock’s neck. It’s warm, and damp, and John pants against Sherlock’s skin like he’s just run a marathon. “I want…”

“I know.”

“I…”

“It’s alright. Whatever you want.”

John rolls his hips, and huffs against Sherlock’s neck, swallows. “You?”

“Mm?”

“What—what do you want?”

“I…”

“This okay?” John rolls his hips again and Sherlock feels him throb against his thigh.

His head goes light as blood rushes downward. “Yes.” He clings to John like he’s drowning.

“You sure, ‘cause I… If I let myself, I’m not gonna—I don’t think I can… Christ!”

John twitches against his thigh again, not even moving, and surging with desire. He’s trembling with the effort of holding back.

Sherlock’s body burns, and his brain races, and his heart feels suddenly like it might burst. “I—I…”

John lifts his face from Sherlock’s neck. “You okay?”

To his mortification Sherlock can’t seem to find a single word. He doesn’t know, he suddenly realises. He doesn’t know if it’s okay—if he’s okay. He suddenly feels nothing but a sort of mad, overwhelming, internal noise.

“Hey… Sherlock?” And when Sherlock just continues to stand there dumbly, “Jesus, I’m sorry,” John pulls away, and Sherlock wants to reach out, to pull him back in close, but he can’t seem to… And John is stepping back, out into the room. He paces to the window and then turns, still breathing hard, erection flagging, but still visibly tenting the front of his trousers. His cheeks are brilliant red. “I’m sorry,” he repeats, takes a step toward him, and then seems to think twice and goes to the loo instead. He shuts the door.

Sherlock walks to the bed, lays down, curls tight and stares at the Spring clouds skittering by outside the window. A bell rings in the gallery, and soon the sound of over a hundred boys filling the corridors drowns out anything else.

Sherlock closes his eyes.

He remembers blond hair, and wide, dark blue eyes. He remembers first day of second year, Mycroft bringing him, because Mummy and Dad had been in America on holiday, and couldn’t be bothered to come home to see him off, even though they knew, they KNEW, that the year before had been hell. He had begged them for two months to not make him go back, all to no avail.
He remembers being bowled over from behind, slammed into the browning grass of the lawn by 65 lbs of copper fur, and lapping tongue, and a voice, “Good lord! Redbeard get off, get off!” A hand reaching for his. “Here, I’m horribly sorry. He’s big, but still a puppy, and he doesn’t quite know his own size.” A hand brushing over his arms and back, brushing the grass away. “Are you alright?”

He remembers nodding and thinking how wonderful it would be to have a friend who looked like this boy looked, who had a voice that sounded like his voice sounded, who would touch you as casually and kindly as this boy had just touched him.

The door to the loo clicks open, and John emerges. He goes to the chair by the desk, takes up his coat. “Listen, I’m going to go out for awhile. I’ll just—leave you alone.”

He goes, and Sherlock doesn’t try to stop him, because he doesn’t know what he would say, and he’s equal parts confused and mortified. He wanted it. He did. He has, for so long. He’d started it, for heaven’s sake, so what on earth is the matter with him?!!

He remembers how fortunate he’d felt when Victor had started to seek him out, how it made the year easier. And then he remembers how things began to change, and how he would see a look in Victor’s eyes, sometimes, a look like the one he’d just seen in John’s eyes: shame, fear, avoidance.

Back then he’d thought it was his fault, that somehow Victor must have realised that sometimes Sherlock looked at him and thought of how nice it might be if Victor were to hold his hand, or put his head on his shoulder, or brush his hair back from his face. But then he had learned the truth, that it wasn’t him at all who was causing Victor to slowly but surely shrink inside himself. It was something else, those ‘adult things’ that Mycroft had occasionally sneered at, and which Mummy and Dad refused to discuss. And he hated it, how it broke something inside of Victor, how it built a wall between them, and shut him out.

He scrambles to his feet, and goes to the window. He can see John striding down the long drive, heading for the park. His hands are thrust deep in the pockets of his coat, and his posture is military stiff.

Sherlock grabs his coat, and runs after him.

John is walking fast enough that it takes Sherlock some time before he catches up to him. He sees a flash of movement through the trees, John standing beside the pond in the woods, one of Sherlock’s old haunts—lovely, but rarely frequented by anyone.

He’s picking stones up off the bank and skipping them across the surface of the water.

He turns as Sherlock comes through the trees behind him, still panting from the exertion. His cheeks colour again and he turns back to the water. “You didn’t have to come looking for me.”

“John.”

“No. No. It’s fine, really. I shouldn’t have…”

“I started it.”

“And then you changed your mind at some point, and I didn’t notice. I’m sorry.”
“John.” Sherlock reaches out and gently takes his wrist. John looks down at his hand and then furtively around them.

“No one ever comes out here,” Sherlock assures him, and sees him relax. “I don’t know what that was, what happened. I wanted it. I want you, I…”

John sniffs, pulls his hand away from Sherlock’s, and wipes at his nose with the sleeve of his coat. When he finally looks up at him, his eyes are red.

Sherlock’s heart aches. “Nothing that happened back there was your fault.”

“Felt like my fault.”

Sherlock shakes his head. “No.”

“Mary and I had stopped having sex.” Sherlock just stares, and John shakes his head, stares down at his feet. “I mean before the thing with the girl on the bus. Before she shot you. It started on our honeymoon, and just…”

Sherlock has no idea why John is telling him this, but he listens. It’s the least he can do.

“I’m not good with people. It’s why my girlfriends never lasted long. It was good while it was casual and we were having fun, but then… I don’t know. I just always fuck it up, and I don’t want to fuck it up with you.”

“You haven’t.”

“Sherlock, I—It just always feels unwanted.”

“What does?”

“What I have to give.”

“It’s wanted.”

“Not just with you. With everyone—eventually. As a doctor, as a soldier, hell, even as a father, my body is this tool, it has a purpose. Okay. Good. Easy. But when it comes to…”

“I want it.” Sherlock assures him.

“But, you don’t!”

Sherlock feels desperate. “John, my reaction a few minutes ago, that wasn’t about you. It was…”

*What was it, really? He still doesn’t even know.*

John’s brow furrows, and Sherlock realises he’s shaking.

“It was…” He sucks in a breath that seems somehow too deep and not deep enough, and he sees something like revelation dawn on John’s face.

He takes a step forward. “Breathe, okay. We don’t have to talk about it.” There’s something of the doctor in John’s look—calm, steady, but beneath it Sherlock can see the soldier too, something fierce and lethal.

He sucks in another futile breath. “It’s not what you think.”
“Okay. But still breathe for me. Even in and out.” John takes another step forward, reaches out and takes Sherlock’s hand. “In and out. Right. Like that.” He squeezes. “I shouldn’t have walked out. You have a right to change your mind, and if you don’t know why—okay. It’s okay. You don’t have to have a reason, an explanation. It’s okay.” It’s soft, and careful, almost pitying. It’s hateful.

“It’s not what you think!”

“Okay.” John looks around them. “If I…” He lifts a hand to lightly skim Sherlock’s waist, and then drops it again. “That okay?”

Sherlock can’t think.

“Come here. If you want.”

Sherlock does want. He walks into John’s arms, breathes in the safe, familiar scent of his hair as he speaks. “I do want you—all the time.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes. And I don’t want you to feel…” He swallows tightly, presses his nose deeper into John’s hair. “Ashamed.” His voice breaks, and he feels horribly embarrassed. This! This is why he doesn’t do relationships, doesn’t do…

John holds him tighter. “Okay.”

“No. No!” Sherlock pulls back, and John looks up at him, shocked, no doubt, at the fact that he’s crying. “When I first told you I loved you, you said you weren’t sure if you could love me in the way you thought I needed. I knew what you meant. It was fine for everyone else, but not for you. Yes. And you didn’t know why. Okay. It was fine. It’s still fine. But I do—feel things, John. For you. And if you never want to act on them, or you do want to act on them, then that’s fine, but I never, ever, want you to feel as though… When I look at you, when I touch you, I don’t want…I know it’s difficult for you! I know! And when you touch me, and I get… I just don’t want you to think that, I—I…”

“Sherlock, I don’t know what you’re trying to say.”

“I know. I KNOW!” He spins away, retreats to the edge of the trees a few feet away, and pulls at his hair, hard, willing his scattered thoughts to order themselves, to stop being ruled and drowned by this overwhelming wash of emotion, this utter panic.

“I DON’T KNOW HOW TO REACH YOU!” John suddenly shouts from the pond’s edge.

Sherlock swings around. John looks stricken, and desperate. “I’ve never known how to reach you. That first year and a half, I tried, and I tried, but I alway seemed to get it wrong, and you never seemed to want it, but now you say you do, and I—I thought that this morning was something…” John takes a deep breath, sighs, and brings a hand up to cover his eyes.

He drops it again. “This morning was special to me, Sherlock. I’ve never—I’ve never been that way with someone before. And this afternoon, you were flirting, and I thought… And I wanted you, so I… But maybe it was too fast—for both of us. Fine. Okay. We slow down.”

“I don’t know what’s wrong with me,” Sherlock blurts, and hates the wet heat of tears he feels spill over to track down his cheeks.

John’s face softens. “And I don’t know what’s wrong with me, but here we are.” He shrugs, shakes
his head. “I know I love you.” He smiles crookedly. “I guess we’ll just have to figure the rest out as we go.”

“But the sex.” Sherlock knows it sounds infantile, but he needs to know.

John huffs. “Sherlock, it’s just sex.”

“You don’t believe that.”

He shrugs. “It’s nice, Sherlock. I’ll admit that. I’m not going to lie and say I don’t like it, want it, even need it sometimes, but honestly, I’m pretty shite at it.”

Sherlock must be staring at him stupidly, because the corner of John’s mouth twitches upward, and he huffs out a laugh.

“I don’t think so.” Sherlock admits, quite seriously.

John’s face does something Sherlock can’t interpret. “Yeah, well—was just kissing, and a bit of fooling around so far, so… Not sure you’ve had enough of a taste to…”

“It’s been wonderful.”

John looks stunned for a moment, and then a soft, shy smile spreads over his lips and his eyes flit away.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for your patience in waiting for this chapter. As always I am so grateful for your encouragement, and all your kind comments.

Please note that this is the chapter where Sherlock recalls what happened to Victor, so please be safe. I have gone into as little detail as possible, and it’s more Sherlock relaying, quite plainly and succinctly what happened to Victor, and then, in more detail, how it affected him (Sherlock) emotionally.

Still, if this is a triggering topic for you at all, please exercise caution.

This chapter also includes a new tag #Minor Character Death. Again, if grief, grieving or guilt related to death is triggering for you, please exercise caution.

They are required to make an appearance at supper again, of course. It puts Sherlock in a foul mood, because they wasted a better part of a day with no progress (save John’s suggestion on where to start the next day), and with the headmaster already champing at the bit it’s an unpleasant thing to have to tell him they’ve come up short.

And then there is the constant reminder that every moment they waste, is another moment that Arthur, wherever he is, is alone, possibly injured, being mistreated, or… And Sherlock has to damp down all that rises with every thought of that. It’s becoming harder and harder to do, the longer things drag on.

By the time they get back to their room, all Sherlock wants is a long, hot shower, and to go to bed.

He heads straight for the loo, and shuts himself in before John even has a chance to ask if he’s alright, which was coming, Sherlock is quite sure, as John had been ridiculously, almost irritatingly attentive over supper, pressing his foot against Sherlock’s under the table whenever someone said something irrationally stupid, or refilling Sherlock’s wine glass whenever it’s level went down even the slightest, even nudging the back of his hand against the outside of Sherlock’s thigh when he could sense things about to get heated.

He turns on the water, and lets it run hot. The copper pipes knock in the walls as they heat, and Sherlock steps gratefully under the steaming flow, so hot it almost scalds. It will make his skin pink, and his scalp tingle. And he wants it, wants the sensory distraction to help him ignore the emotions that continue to threaten to overwhelm.

When he gets out he realises that he forgot to bring his hair products. And it’s the last straw really. Just the very last straw. He wraps a towel around his waist and swings the door open with a huff.

John is sitting in bed reading. He looks up and freezes, eyes wide, mouth slightly agape. His eyes travel the length of Sherlock’s body. He blinks, licks his lips. “Everything okay.”

“No it is not. I’ve nothing for my hair.”

John frowns. “Sorry?”
“The product, John. The product I put in my hair. It’s in London, and now I will have to walk around looking like a fool.”

The corner of his mouth twitches, but to John’s credit he damps down the grin threatening to escape. “Could use some of mine. The stylist had me buy all sorts of nonsense. I’m not really even sure what I’m meant to do with some of it. It’s in my grooming kit.”

Sherlock doesn’t say anything, just spins around, and goes back in the loo, catching the towel around his waist, seconds before it falls. He tucks the end in more firmly and starts to root about where John directed him.

“Hey.”

He spins around. John is leaning against the door jamb. “Why don’t you come to bed. You can re-wet and style it in the morning.”

“It will be a mess.”

“So it’s a mess.” John just shrugs. “Kind of lonely out here. Trying to ask you to bed.”

Oh.

Sherlock can feel the blush start to spread across his chest, up his neck, if not for the fact that he’s already rosy-pink from his shower, it would be embarrassingly revealing. “John, I—I’m not really…”

“Not like that.” John rolls his eyes and smiles. “Just like usual. Kind of getting used to you being there.”

“It’s rather a tight fit.”

“You’re the 6 ft menace who likes to hog the covers, and you don’t hear me complaining. But if you don’t want…”

“No! It’s fine. I—I’ll be right there.”

John looks pleased as he turns and wanders back into the bedroom.

Sherlock hurriedly shrugs into a t-shirt and pants, brushes his teeth, and then steps back into the bedroom. John’s still reading, but he shifts over when Sherlock appears, pulls back the blankets, and sets his book down. “You ready to sleep.”

Sherlock nods.

John reaches over and clicks off the lamp just as Sherlock is crawling beneath the covers. He’s grateful. It’s easier in the dim glow from the dying embers in the hearth, curling up next to John, sharing one pillow, so close he can feel John’s breath on his lips again, remembering that morning, and then all that had happened when they got back from their excursion.

“So we going to head West tomorrow? Same time as today?”

“West. Yes. But for god sake turn off that ear-splitting alarm.”

“Done.”

“Good. You always wake up at 6:00, anyway. No alarm needed.”
“That so?”

“Yes. Left over from your army days, I imagine.”

“More like held over from three years of having a baby in the house.”

It’s a boring explanation. Sherlock decides to ignore it. “At any rate, you will get us up, and I’d much rather you, than the alarm.”

“Mm, I’ll remind you, you said that.”

A silence descends between them. Outside it is raining, a soft patter against the single-glazed windows, and a distant staccato on the chimney pots. John shifts a little. It brings him closer, and Sherlock wants to reach out and… He reaches between them and lays his hand over both of John’s, where they’re tucked up by his chest.

John’s eyes flit down briefly, and then back up. “Can I tell you something?”

“Of course.”

“Might sound a bit stupid.”

“A great many things you say sound stupid. It’s never stopped you before.”

“Oi!” John scowls and Sherlock grins.

John’s face softens. “You’re a real cock sometimes, you know that.” He huffs, shakes his head with a smile of his own, and then looks back up. “Promise you won’t laugh?”

“Why would I laugh? Is it funny?”

John sighs and rolls his eyes. “No, it’s just…” He sighs again. “I’ve always loved your hands.”

It’s an oddly intimate admission, John’s eyes drop again, the moment the words are out of his mouth.

Sherlock looks down at his hand, covering over both of John’s. It’s rare he gets a compliment. People are usually hurling insults at him, or if the compliments do come, they’re meant as manipulation, being twisted into something far from desirable, used as a weapon rather than bestowed as a gift. He shivers at unpleasant memories, and then runs his thumb along the back of John’s hand. “And I’ve always loved the nape of your neck.”

John’s eyes snap up. “What? Really?”

“Yes. Just before you need a hair cut your hair starts to form a wave there. It’s the shape of a musical brace. I used to lay on the sofa in the afternoons while you were blogging, and stare at it, wait until I could hear the music. I composed a great deal while contemplating your nape.”

John looks stunned, and Sherlock suddenly realises just how much he’s let show. “Forgive me. If that was too…”

John shakes his head. “’S okay. I just…” His fingers stir beneath Sherlock’s hand. He pulls one hand free to rub at the back of his neck. “Guess I never really thought about it. Not like you’re ever just staring at the back of your own neck.”

“True.”
John grins the grin that's starting to become quite familiar—a little charmed, a little shy, undeniably fond. He huffs a small laugh through his nose, and then tucks his hand back beneath Sherlock’s.

Outside the rain has picked up. “Not good for evidence.” Sherlock nods in the direction of the window.

“Will definitely wash away tracks or footprints.” John scowls at the window as though it’s personally offended him. It’s gratifying to think that he would take offence at the weather, simply because it was thwarting Sherlock’s ability to solve the case in a timely manner.

“John…”

“Yeah?” He looks back up.

“If we don’t find him soon, it may be too late.”

“It’s only been two days.”

“And a week before that, where the local police wasted precious time.”

John’s eyes drop. He nods. “And that is not your fault.”

“Fault finding will hardly help Arthur—wherever he is.”

John shifts a little, his forehead pressing up against Sherlock’s. “Hey…”

And Sherlock can’t meet his eye, for some reason.

“Hey.”

“What?”

“Look at me, okay.”

Sherlock forces himself.

John looks very serious. “If we don’t find him, I don’t want you blaming yourself.”

“And just who else would be to blame?”

“Whoever took him. The school. Christ, I don’t know, maybe even his family—but not you.”

“I’m the only one clever enough to find him, John. If not me, then who?”

And John has nothing to say to that, of course. “Just…” John’s hand turns in his, slides up, fingers meshing with Sherlock’s. “I know this is personal, somehow, and…”

Sherlock sighs, and pulls his hand away, rolls over and away, and almost falls out of the bed. John grabs him around the waist, and pulls him back in against his body. “Idiot.”

Sherlock doesn’t say anything.

“We’ll do our best to find him. It will have to be enough.”

“And if it’s not?” Sherlock mumbles into the pillow.

John pulls him closer still. “It will have to be.”
“It wasn’t before.”

He hadn’t meant to say it, but it’s out now, hanging between them in the close dark. John says nothing, just tightens his hold around Sherlock's waist, breathes into his nape.

He thinks of John standing on the bank of the pond earlier, a look of desperation on his face: ‘I don’t know how to reach you!’

He thinks of another set of blue eyes, wide and desperate. ‘I can’t. Don’t ask me, I can’t tell you.’

“You okay?” John whispers against his neck.

“I didn’t have friends.”

John’s hand slides up to rest against his chest, right over the spot where Mary’s bullet had nearly killed him. “When? When you were at school, you mean?”

“Yes.”

John’s fingers brush lightly over the bullet scar. “Must have been lonely.”

“After the first year, I begged Mummy to not make me come back, but they were old when they had me, and they were too tired to have a child as troublesome as me about the house. My pleas fell on deaf ears.”

John’s fingers still.

“But my second year started off more fortuitous than I could have imagined. I was tackled to the lawn by a dog the very first day, before we’d even had opening chapel.”

John huffs against his spine. “And that was a good thing?!”

“The dogs owner was the good thing.”

He feels a tension wash through John’s body. Slightly jealous, even of ghosts. “He became a friend then?”

“Indeed he did. We got on quite well. Similar interests.”

“Murder?”

“Not at that age, for heaven’s sake.”

Sherlock can feel John grinning against his skin.

“Pirates.”

“Sorry?”

“We were both rather fascinated with pirates. We would spend hours in the library pouring over all the pirate lore we could get our hands on—fictional or not.”

“Oh, so murder and theft, then.” He feels John smile wider. “But seriously?”

“Mm.” Sherlock cranes his neck to look over his shoulder. “Why do you sound so surprised.”

John shrugs. “Don’t know. You’re brother mentioned something about you wanting to be a pirate
when you were a kid. Thought he was just having me on. I guess I never really thought of you as the kind of kid who would have been into imaginative play.”

“It wasn’t play. We were exchanging facts and stories.” Sherlock lets his head fall back to the pillow.

“Right.”

“At any rate, I felt I had found a friend in him.”

“That’s good.” John’s arm tightens around his ribs again.

“It was late in the first term that he first slipped into my room at night.”

The tension in John’s body grows, his breathing stops.

Sherlock reaches down and lays his hand over John’s in assurance. “It’s not what you’re thinking.”

John sniffs and then relaxes again.

“I had my own room that year by some weird luck rather than privilege. They’d gotten the student count off, had forgotten to assign me a room, and so had to make one, makeshift, from what I think used to be some sort of oversized storage area under the stairs, but it had a window, and it was a homely sort of nook, and I rather enjoyed it, truth be told.

“The first time he came it was a surprise, but he was clearly upset, shaking, cold. Of course I let him crawl under the covers with me. He didn’t say anything, just lay very quiet until he fell asleep. When I woke up in the morning he was gone, and he didn’t bring it up later when we met in the library, so I assumed that meant it was something he would rather not talk about.

“It happened off and on that whole quarter. His grades had started to suffer. He would skip class, and no one knew where he went. He stopped coming to the library.

“Once I came up behind him on the green, and hopped up on his back, as we were both apt to do, and he turned and threw me down violently, without thinking. When I looked up at him, confused, I realised that he was as stunned as I was. He ran off and missed supper that night.”

John shifts behind him, spoons their bodies closer still, and then stills and waits.

“I thought that I had somehow misread everything, that perhaps he didn’t consider me a friend at all, or had in the beginning, but I’d done something to put him off. But then he asked me home with him for Christmas.

“It was a whole week at his house. Rather grand compared to my own, and parents who were rarely around. We had full run of the place, and he was more his old self again. We would run off all day into the barren woods, and come back just before dark to warm, simple food which we would eat in the kitchen with the staff.

“We shared a room. There was a trundle they pulled out for me. Christmas Eve he had a nightmare, and crawled down into bed with me again, for the first time since we’d left school. I stupidly asked him why he had started the habit in the first place. He begged me not to ask.

“It was the most horrible feeling, John, to be shut out that way, to know without a shadow of a doubt, that something was horribly, painfully wrong, but that you were missing something essential, that the person you cared about most in the world could not tell you, and that you were failing,
failing them! That it was essential you reach them, that if you didn’t it could all end very, very badly.”

He rolls over. The coals in the hearth have all but died, but they’ve forgotten to pull the curtains again, and there is just enough light that he can see the way John’s eyes search his in the dark, looking for answers, wanting to help.

“I think—I think I’ve done the same to you since we got here, and I’m sorry.”

John’s leg slots between his, and he lifts a hand to brush the hair away from Sherlock’s forehead. “Okay. It’s okay.”

Sherlock shakes his head, and then John is dipping down and kissing him, soft, and slow. When he finally pulls away Sherlock realises his eyes are full.

John looks worried. “When we went back to school everything got worse,” he whispers. “He would seek me out directly after class and beg me to go out into the woods with him until supper. He slept in my room more nights than he didn’t. I could tell he was desperately afraid of something, that he was doing everything in his power to avoid being about the school building alone, but I was too young and too naive to understand why. Or perhaps…”

“Perhaps?” John’s urges when Sherlock falls into silence.

Sherlock sucks in a shaking breath. “Perhaps I was just as guilty as our—history professor who was—abusing him, or our headmaster, who suspected and did nothing… Because I think in my own way, I knew. Somehow I knew. But I wanted him too, and he sensed it, maybe, and he—he couldn’t trust me, couldn’t trust me enough to tell me, to…”

John’s brow is knit. “You were a child.” And when Sherlock can hardly breath, can hardly speak, or think beneath the assault of the spectres haunting the periphery of his memory. “Jesus Sherlock, you were a little boy. You were both kids. You can’t—you can’t put that on yourself.”

“He died.” It takes Sherlock a moment to realise that he’s the one who’s said it. “He came to my room one night and told me he was going. It was storming, pouring down rain late February, freezing cold. I told him I didn’t want to go, that I’d go with him in the morning. I let him go. He went by himself, and…”

John’s hand finds his under the blankets. A small, square anchor of strength and warmth.

“He died.” Sherlock hates how pathetic he sounds, how small, and lost. He doesn’t know why he’s told John at all. He’s never told anyone. He’s tried very hard never to think about it at all.

“What happened?” John whispers and squeezes his hand tight.

“He just disappeared. For years they didn’t know what had happened to him, then when I was sixteen it was in all the papers, a farmer clearing a bit of land that had laid fallow for decades, found human remains.

“He’d gone cross-country. I don’t know if he even knew where it was he wanted to end up. He was just running, and it was dark, and foggy, and slick, and there was an old well.”

He stops to suck in air, to try to push down all the things he hadn’t even realised were still stirring, just waiting for a tiny crack to come rushing out, to drown him, to destroy him again, just when he’d
been doing so well, so well…

“He was alone. Alive for days, they said. A broken leg. Cold. Frightened. In the dark. Crying for help. And—and all I can think of is that I said ‘no’. That he’d wanted me to come with him, and I said ‘no’, and I should have known, but I didn’t see, and I—I loved him, and it killed him. I killed him.”

“Jesus.” John drops his hand, reaches out, pulls him close. “No you didn’t. Come here.”

“I can’t…”

“Shhh..” John breathes into his hair.

“I’ve done it to you too.”

John goes still. “What?”

“Moriarty.”

“What are you talking about?”

“That first year. His game. I missed so much, until it was too late, until the pool. Because I wanted you, because I couldn’t think, and you were—you were… And then it was too late, and you were standing there, strapped to a bomb, and… It’s dangerous, don’t you see. It’s dangerous to me, to you! I wanted you, and I didn’t see, and he—all the time he was planning… And he hurt you.”

“He didn’t. I was fine.”

“I couldn’t let him! I couldn’t let him hurt you, and I’m sorry I—I was stupid. I was so stupid, and I didn’t see until it was too late, and then I had to jump, to leave you, and I—I didn’t mean to leave you alone.”

“I know. That’s enough now, okay. It’s enough.”

“I’m sorry…” He whispers.

“There’s nothing to be sorry about.”

“I didn’t know what to do. I couldn’t…”

“I know. Shhh…” John’s fingers card through his hair. It hums against his scalp, soothing and calm. The rain picks up outside, soft, white noise, drowning out everything else.

“Sherlock?”

Sherlock tilts his chin up.

“What was his name?”

“Victor. Victor Trevor.” It’s the first time he’s said the name aloud in 25 years.

In the morning Sherlock feels heady, and drained. They don’t talk about it, and it suits him fine. John gets two paper cups of bracing tea for the road, and they head West, where they encounter
village, after village, question shop-keepers and tourists alike, and all to no avail.

John insists on stopping for lunch at the Kirkham Priory ruins. They stroll about, John stopping to look at every little thing. It’s a spectacular waste of time, but Sherlock finds he can’t bring himself to rush when John is looking so utterly relaxed; even, dare he say, happy. The rain of the night before has washed the air clean, resulting in a beautiful sunny day, cool air but warm sun, puffy white clouds skittering across a brilliant blue sky. The pause in their schedule serves to clear his head as well. He’s grateful.

Unfortunately, the cheer doesn’t last long. When they go back to the car for their sack lunches, John realises he’s forgotten them on the bed back in their room. And then it’s several minutes of him pouring over Yelp and Google maps, looking for something local, and punctuating each broken link, or one star review with a staccato of profanity.

John finally decides upon what will probably prove a rather sad sort of a pub in one of the farther flung villages, but it’s still deeper into the areas they have yet to cover, and closer than retracing their steps, and he absolutely insists. Sherlock simply sits back in silence, and lets John take them where he will.

When they arrive, the pub is closed.

“It’s three in the bloody afternoon! Why would any pub be closed at three in the fucking afternoon?! There’s not even a sign on the door!”

“Mmm.”

“Of course you’re not upset, because the Great Sherlock Holmes never eats on a case, the Great Sherlock Holmes is above food!”

Sherlock points up at the sign over the door, a cock in fighting stance, the words, CHAMPION JACK, emblazoned over it, and beneath that: Proprietor: Reuben Hayes.

“Perhaps we could ask about, see if someone is familiar with the proprietor?”

John scowls at the unassailable logic, and then turns without a word and marches up the gravel road that serves as the thoroughfare between two rows of rather ramshackle looking cottages. Sherlock follows in his wake, taking in their surroundings. It’s a far-flung, bleak sort of a place, precisely the sort Sherlock hates, where it’s all too easy for people commit atrocities with complete impunity.

When they reach the last building on the left, something that looks more like an old smithy, than a house, a man pokes his head out of the door. “What da you want?”

John stops dead. “What?”

“Yer not from ‘round here.” The big, lumbering, wall of a man is dressed in a grease-smeared pair of dungarees, their state likely due to the motorcycles he appears to be working on in the shop behind him. His voice is slightly slurred.

John stands to his full height. “You know Reuben Hayes?”

The man’s eyes flit to Sherlock, and he scowls with an air of disgust before turning back to address John. “Who’s askin’?”

John sniffs, and his hand balls into a fist at his side. “You run the pub, just there?” John jerks his chin back in the direction they came.
“When it suits me.”

“Listen, we’ve driven a long way today, and we were hoping to get some food.”

The man sneers, spits into the dirt at his feet, and then nods back toward the pub. “You want to eat you’ll have to ask the woman.”

“And what woman would that be?” Sherlock asks, drolly.

“My woman.”

Sherlock glances over his shoulder to see a rail-thin, middle aged mouse of a woman, poking her head out of the window over the pub door. She pulls in again, the minute she catches him looking, and slams the window behind her.

By the time Sherlock looks back, the man has disappeared inside the shop, and John’s fist is white knuckled. “Arse,” he mutters under his breath, and then swings around. “Come on then.”

He marches back toward the pub, pure soldier, and Sherlock has to remind himself not to gawp.

The woman Hayes had referred to comes out the door just as they reach it. “There’s not aught in the kitchen, but I can do me best to pull ya together somethin’.” She has bruises circling her wrists, and Sherlock sees John notice.

“Anything would be fine, Miss?”

“It’s Missus. Mrs. Hayes, like me man said.”

“Right. Well, anything will do.”

She turns and disappears inside without another word, and they follow her. The pub is small and run down, dusty, too, so it appears they’ve been closed up for at least a week or two. John walks over to the table in front of the room’s one window, pulls a chair down off the table top, and plops down into it with a huff.

Sherlock does the same.

John sighs. “Another waste of a day.”

Sherlock stares around them. “Oh, I wouldn’t say that. Lucky thing, your insatiable appetite. We’d not of found this place otherwise.”

“Thought you said I didn’t eat enough lately, and just what’s so great about this place?”

“Highly suspicious, John. Highly suspicious.” He winks just as the front door to the pub swings open and the proprietor blusters in. He slams two pint glasses down on the table in front of them, and then goes back to the bar, presumably for a pitcher of what will most certainly be very mediocre beer. When he returns he goes to fill John’s glass, but John covers it over with his hand. “None for me, thanks. Water if you have it.”

“What? You teetotal or somethin’?”

“Water will be fine.” John repeats with a sniff, and this time it’s Sherlock pressing a foot against John’s under the table.

“Suit yerself.” The man leans over and fills Sherlock’s glass instead.
“That’s quite the wound.” John says, casually, nodding toward the man’s neck.

Hayes jerks back at the words, stands to his full height, and levels an icy glare on John. “It’s naught.”

“I’m a medical doctor, and I’m telling you it is. You really should have it looked at. What happened?”

“Dogs.” And then he’s gone again.

John glances over his shoulder, making sure the man has left, and then leans in over the table. “That was no dog. Three-pronged slash.”

“Champion Jack, perhaps?”

John sighs. “I’m serious, Sherlock. And then there’s the wife.”

Sherlock nods. “She’s afraid of something, and not just her husband, I think.”

The woman appears from the kitchen and sets a plate of something that looks quite inedible in front of John. He looks down at it, brows knit, and then back up at her. “What is it?”

“Stew.”

John’s mouth forms into a silent ‘O’, and he nods, and then smiles crookedly. “Well, ta.” She disappears into the kitchen again, and John takes a bite, pausing the minute it’s in his mouth.

“How is it?”

He swallows with difficulty. “Disgusting.”

Sherlock smiles sympathetically. “You’ll be glad of Huxtable’s obligatory supper tonight, I imagine.”

John sets his fork down, reaches across the table and takes a swig of the beer sitting in front of Sherlock. “Those scratches…”

“What about them?”

“’Bout a week old. Could have been done by human hands.”

“Well spotted, Doctor.” Sherlock grins and John huffs and then looks back down at his plate with a small smile.

He pushes the food around it with his plate, and risks a few more bites, evidence of just how hungry he is. “Don’t know—this feels like something, like maybe the first good lead we’ve had.”

“I agree. I think we should take a look around. After you’ve finished eating, of course.” John grimaces and pushes the plate away from himself, throwing a few pounds down on the table. He gets to his feet.

“Let’s go.”

They wander the streets of the small village on foot, but most of it seems to be abandoned. Younger generations having moved on to the cities, no one left to tend the surrounding farmland. Most of it is probably let out to one or two farmers in the area.
They reach the end of the village’s tiny excuse for a high street where the finer gravel of the village road dissolves into coarse gravel and dirt. Sherlock leaves the road and crests the nearest hill, surveying their surroundings. There’s nothing but farmland, divided by low stone walls, and the odd copse of trees here or there, spread out before him.

John comes to stand beside him. “What do you think?”

“I think that we should go there.” Sherlock nods to a line of trees in the distance, where a black cloud of crows is circling. “And see what we see.”

The line of trees happens to be running along the upper edge of a deep ravine. They battle brambles, and thick undergrowth, and John slips once, requiring Sherlock to reach out and grab him by the belt to prevent him from taking what would most assuredly be a very unpleasant tumble. Eventually they reach a relatively clear spot where they can see what has so captured the carrion crow’s interest.

At the bottom, between two large rocks, there is clearly a body. A man, not a child, Sherlock observes with a flood of relief.

“Heidegger, do you think? What the bloody hell was he doing way out here?” John turns to him, and reaches out to brush his arm. “You okay?”

“Of course. We should—go down and see if we can determine cause of death.”

It takes a few minutes to pick their way down the steep slope. They both halt in front of the sad remains of what is most certainly Huxtable’s wayward German professor, though the crows have done their work well, and if not for the fact that the man is still wearing his school tie they might be less sure in their assessment.

John kneels down beside the corpse, despite the smell, and the constantly hovering crows, and squints at the man’s neck. “Strangulation by the look of it. His eyes scan the rest of the body. Torn knees in his trousers, so a scuffle maybe.” He glances around them, and then pulls a pocket knife out of his coat, and scrapes a little from under the man’s nails. “Skin and blood, by the looks of it.” He looks up at Sherlock. “Remember the scratches on Hayes’ neck?”

He fishes around in his pocket and pulls out his phone, snaps a few photos of the unfortunate corpse, and then holds it above his head, moving it this way and that. “We should go back to the village, and find someone to come and get him, I’ve got no signal out here.”

“Yes, text Huxtable too, and then make an appointment with Wilder. We need to speak to Holdernesse.”

“Okay, and what are you going to do?”

“Think, John. Think.”
John gets a signal by the time they are out of the ravine and halfway down the road. Sherlock fights to tune him out as he rings the local police and they hurry down the road to the village.

So, Hayes possibly killed Heidegger, but why? What possible motivation could this insignificant man so far from the school and with no obvious association to Holderness have for killing him? Was Hayes the one who abducted Arthur? If so, one would think him the type to ask for ransom. Unless… Unless he wasn’t working on his own. Unless he was simply hired muscle, and there was money in it up front, no ransom required.

In that case, Heidegger’s death was probably unplanned collateral damage, making whoever is really behind Arthur’s disappearance, now an accessory to murder, as well as abduction.

John is talking to Wilder now, and they’ve reached the car.

“Yeah. We can. Sure. We can come right now. We just have to wait for the police to get here, so we can show them where, and then… Yeah. Yes. Near Scackleton. Okay.”

John hangs up. “Wilder says Holderness wants to see us. It’s about 20 minutes from here.”

“Yes, I imagine he does.”

“His Grace will be with you in a moment.”

The Duke’s butler hurries away, and leaves the two of them in an expansive gallery, bigger even than the school’s. Sherlock takes a moment to investigate the long line of portraits hung upon the walls, generation after generation of Holdernesses, stretching all the way back to the 17th century. It’s a motley crew at times, but there are some clear genetic traits that show up again, and again. The long, straight nose with elongated nostrils, the pointedness of the chin, the gentle fold at the top of the right ear.

John is busying himself perusing an assortment of glass display cases, filled with all the trappings of the family’s high standing, and even some more personal memorabilia, when a different member of the staff appears, and ushers them into a rather grand office, roaring fire lit in the expansive hearth, stained glass windows behind the desk at which Holderness sits, very straight, and very grim.

“Mr. Holmes. What news do you have?” He motions to the two chairs the other side of his desk.

Sherlock and John take a seat.

“A great deal, your Grace. But first, if I may, I would like to speak to Mr. Wilder regarding the posting of the letter you sent to Arthur the day before he disappeared.”

“Oh course. I’ll ring him at once.”

“Thank you.”

He presses a button on his desk, and then leans forward, hands clasped upon the desktop, eyes steely and serious. “You’ve found Heidegger?”
“Yes. Somewhat too late, unfortunately.”

“And Arthur?” It’s the first time Sherlock has heard something approaching sincere sentiment in the man’s voice. Worry, laced through with a grief he’s unwilling to let himself feel, worried, perhaps, that it will usher into the existence the very thing he fears beyond all else.

“I have high hopes, your Grace.”

He sees some of the tension fall from the Duke’s shoulders. He glances toward the office door with a scowl, and pushes the button on his desk again.

“If Mr. Wilder is otherwise occupied, perhaps you can answer my question.”

“Yes, if I can.”

“Who posts your letters?”

“James—Mr. Wilder. He handles all my correspondence.”

“And would anyone else have had opportunity to touch the letter you sent to your son?”

“Just the postman or courier. James delivers them directly into their hands. I often have important documents I need to post, and the fewer hands on them the better.”

“I see. So no one else but Wilder and the postman or courier would have touched the letter you sent to Arthur?”

“Not to my knowledge, no. What is this about?”

“I suspect, Your Grace, that the letter your son received was not the one you posted.”

“What?”

“When I spoke to Wilder in London he mentioned that your son was a very practical boy, that he would not have been prone to running off with strangers. However, if something exceedingly dear to him was used as a lure, it is possible that he would forget common sense.

“I suspect that the letter he received the day he went missing contained instructions, a late night rendezvous. Perhaps promises of the boy being able to see his mother. It would explain why Heidegger saw him climbing down from his window in the dead of night, actions I suspect Arthur would not have been prone to under usual circumstances.”

“No, he mostly certainly would not have been. But what proof do you have?”

“None, but it seems logical.”

“Who would have done such a thing, and for what purpose? Huxtable? He hardly seems the sort to tamper with mail. Good lord! I had my doubts about sending Arthur there after all that nonsense that came out a few years back, but Huxtable always seemed so…”

“Forgive the interruption, Your Grace, but Huxtable is innocent.”

“Then who?”

“You’ve already answered the question. Who is the only one, other than the courier or postal service, who would have had access to your correspondence?”
The man sits a little straighter in his chair as realisation dawns. “Mr. Holmes, if you are suggesting that my private secretary would…”

“And yet here we sit, you having rung him twice, and he is nowhere to be found. Come now, Your Grace—it is quite clear that James Wilder is behind this, and not only that, but he is something more than just your secretary, I think.” He sees John turn to stare at him out of the corner of his eye, his mouth slightly agape.

Something like panic races across Holdernesse’s face, and then vanishes just as quickly. He gets to his feet. “I don’t know what you are suggesting, but you have no right, no right to…!”

“The paintings,” Sherlock states calmly. Also getting to his feet. “The ones in the gallery. Likenesses of nearly 500 years worth of the Holdernesse clan, and unchanged, over all that time, some very distinct features of the bloodline.”

“Get out.” The man pulls himself to his full height. Sherlock doesn’t move, and when the man leans over the desk as though he might be thinking of physically removing them, John stands up and leans in, putting himself ever so slightly between Sherlock and Holdernesse.

“Your Grace…” Sherlock urges gently.

The man’s face is slowly turning purple, but after a moment he seems to see reason, and drops back into his seat in defeat, burying his face in his hand.

Sherlock sits back down and John with him.

“Then, James Wilder is your son.”

John’s head snaps around to stare at him again, and Sherlock glances over briefly, takes in the surprise and something else too, something that reminds him of their old days together, something that almost looks like awe.

Holdernesse drops his hand and leans back in his chair, shoulder’s slumped, gaze distant and sad. “When I was a young man—I loved… There was a girl, who I loved with the kind of love that only comes once in a lifetime.”

The Duke’s eyes flit to John, and then back to Sherlock again. “I asked her to marry me, but she refused. Her reason being that she felt that she was a danger to me, that her background might—mar my political career, that my acquaintance with her, my love for her, might ruin me.” He smiles, pensive and full of regret. “If she had lived, I certainly would never have married anyone else… But, she died.”

Sherlock hears John sniff beside him as he shifts a little in his seat.

“All I had left of her, was the child—James. Obviously, I could not admit paternity, but in all other ways, I have treated him like my son.”

Holdernesse looks up. “He has required, but not warranted, a father’s forgiveness many times over the years, and I have always forgiven. Always.” He sits up a little straighter in his chair. “He was all I had after she was gone, and he was family. It was the right thing to do, the proper thing to do. My duty!” But then some of his confidence seems to wane, and he slumps back in his seat again. “In retrospect, perhaps I have forgiven too much.”

Sherlock sits forward. “Your Grace, you must see that you have done all you can for Mr. Wilder. His choices are his, and this time—this time there will, of necessity, be consequences. He has
conspired to abduct Arthur, he is most likely an accessory to Heidegger’s murder, however unwitting. We must find him, before…”

“Would he harm, Arthur, do you think?”

“If properly motivated—yes.” John speaks up. “He’s proven himself, repeatedly. He’s shown you who is, and believe me, Your Grace, that is something you want to take seriously, before it’s too late.”

“And do you have any suggestions as to where we should start looking, Mr. Holmes?”

“The pub where John and I had lunch today. The proprietor had scratches on his neck, and when we found Heidegger’s body he had blood and skin under his fingernails. We informed the police of that fact before coming here, but if they are as slow with Heidegger’s murder investigation as they were with your son’s disappearance, then it is possible they have not yet made an arrest.

“If this man, Hayes, is the one who murdered Heidegger, then it is a fair assumption that he was hired by James to abduct Arthur, and it is also a fair assumption that he knows where Arthur is. Though if James has already bolted, it is most likely to fetch Arthur, and I can only pray we aren’t too late.”

Holdernessse bolts to his feet. “Then no more hesitation. Let us go at once.”

It is nearly dark by the time John turns their car onto Scackleton Lane. A single light flickers to life some distance ahead, and then starts coming toward them, at high speed. The motorcycle roars by, halfway up the lane, and Sherlock cranes his neck around to follow it’s route in the gathering dusk. “Hayes. I hope that doesn’t mean we’re too late.”

“Should we go after him?”

“No. Leave him for the police. We have to find the boy.”

John skids the car to a halt in front of the pub and they both dash to the front door, the Duke and several rather burly members of his staff right behind them.

John throws himself against the door and it pops open easily. Hayes obviously having left it unlocked in his haste to escape. Above their heads there is a desperate knocking, and muffled sounds of distress.

“Arthur!” Holdernessse bolts for the stairs, but John steps out in front of him, before he can reach them.

“It won’t do him any good bursting in, if he’s not in there alone. Let me go first.”

“A captain in Her Majesty’s army, Your Grace.” Sherlock adds. “You’d do best to heed him.”

The Duke nods, and John goes on ahead, ascends the narrow, rickety staircase, the Duke and Sherlock just behind. He holds out a hand for them to stop when he reaches the top, checks the corridor, and then disappears. There is the sound of a door opening, and then the distressed calls grow louder.

“Jesus.” Sherlock hears John mutter.
“Clear?!”

“Yeah, yeah. It’s Mrs. Hayes.”

Sherlock hurries toward the sound of his voice, pushes inside a small cramped bedroom, and finds her on the floor, bound and gagged. John is already kneeling before her, untying the gag. She’s bruised about the face, her eyes red-rimmed.

John smooths a hand along the side of her head, carefully examines a couple of the worst looking bruises. “Let’s get you out of these.” He murmurs gently, and moves on to the ropes binding her wrists. He takes out a pocket knife.

“The boy, he was here?” Sherlock asks.

She looks up at the Duke and grows pale.

“It’s alright,” he urges. “It is quite clear you were coerced into this. But madam, it is of the utmost importance that you tell us what you know.”

She nods. “He was here.”

“Someone came and got him.” Sherlock urges.

She nods.

“The Duke’s secretary? Mr. Wilder? Tall man, sharp features, dark hair.”

She nods again.

“Dear God…” Holdernesse mutters.

“And which way did they head?”

“Towards the Chesterfield Road.”

“There are caves north of there.” Holdernesse interjects. “Not well-know and well hidden. A bit of a family secret. A spot where we used to shelter cattle, but their location and general layout would be familiar to James.”

“Then let’s go there now, and finish this.” Sherlock urges.

John has finished untying Mrs. Hayes. “Will you be alright if we go?”

She nods.

“Yeah, okay. Let’s go.”

John and a couple of the other men are the only ones with torches. Others, Sherlock included, use their mobile phones to light their way as they push through the cramped, damp passages of the cave. They have been walking for nearly 10 minutes, when one of the men stumbles, knocking a large rock down a nearby crevasse. It echoes as it falls.

They all pause, and then a few seconds after the last of the clattering dissolves into silence, the distant
voice of a child echoes in the darkness.

“Help! Help me!!”

“Arthur.” Holdernesse whispers fiercely.

Sherlock pushes past John and dashes into the darkness.

“Sherlock wait!”

He stumbles and almost drops his phone, but recovers his footing and continues on, blindly, not even sure if he’s headed in the right direction, but he can hear footsteps slapping against wet stone behind him, so he knows he’s not alone.

“Help!!”

And then a man’s voice, unintelligible but angry.

There is the sound of falling water, too, growing louder the deeper they get into the cave. Sherlock’s lungs burn, and his knuckles feel bruised from knocking and scraping against the narrow walls as he races through. He slams into a particularly narrow opening with a grunt, forces himself through, and then gasps as he suddenly finds himself in a vast expanse, the meagre light from his phone finding nothing but thick blackness.

“Sherlock!” And then suddenly John is at his side, torch in hand. “For fuck’s sake, you have to stop running off like that!”

Sherlock reaches down and grabs his hand, guides the torch light out in front of them. It sparkles and bounces off falling water several yards away, and a steep, rock face slick with water and mineral deposits.

“Help!”

John tears his hand from Sherlock’s and points the torch higher still, as the Duke and his men finally begin to gather around them. At the furthest most reach of the beam, the light catches two figures. A young boy, in what appears to be school uniform, and behind him, nudging him upward, rather roughly, is Wilder.

“James, let him go!” Holdernesse bellows into the darkness. “Come back down here at once!”

“No! You shall not have him!”

“James, I will not ask you again!”

There is a suddenly exclamation of alarm, followed by a torch, bouncing down the rock face, and disappearing into the pool below with a splash. Arthur cries out, and one of the Duke’s men immediately points their own torch upwards. Wilder’s feet dangle mid air, oxfords slipping against the slick rocks, desperately seeking purchase.

Sherlock toes off his own shoes, snatches the small torch from John’s hand, and dashes for the wall. He holds the torch in his mouth and uses both hands to climb. The rock is horribly slick, but his socked feet are giving him more leverage than his shoes ever could. He is vaguely aware of John shouting his name, but above him he can hear Arthur crying in terror now, Wilder no doubt reaching out for him, blindly, in his panic, looking for anything to hold onto. It spurs him on.
Suddenly there is a terrified cry, and a shadow races past him in dark, followed by the sickening crack and crunch of bone against stone. Arthur screams above him.

Wilder then…

He picks up his pace, the boys frantic crying growing louder and louder over the roar of the water. And then suddenly he is there. There is a small stone ledge tucked just to the right of where the water is pouring over the edge of the wall, and Arthur is there, drenched to the bone, shivering, body pressed as close to the stone wall as he can.

Sherlock pulls himself up, arms burning and lets the torch drop from his mouth onto the ledge. “It’s alright now, Arthur. Your father’s here, and I’m going to get you down, safe and sound. But perhaps take your shoes off. I find it’s much easier that way.”

The boy blinks at him, tears still squeezing out at the corners of his eyes.

“Best to hurry, though. One can only hold on up here for so long.”

This seems to spur the boy into action. He takes off his shoes, and reaches down to pick up the torch.

“Tuck it in the knot of your school tie, lens downward, and then climb down here, between me and the wall, that way you’ll light our way, and if you slip, I’ll stop you.” It’s a lie. Sherlock knows that if the boy slips, they will likely both go down, but best to give the child a false sense of security rather than none at all. He’s already shaking all over, and any more nerves are apt to be detrimental—perhaps lethally so.

Arthur lives up to his level headed reputation. He manages to calm himself enough to do exactly has he’s been instructed, and though there are a couple of very close calls, one which elicits a shout from John and strangled cry from Holdernesse, yards below, they do make it to the bottom in one piece in the end, Arthur running into his father’s arms, and Sherlock turning to look around for John, only to find him kneeling on the damp stone beside Wilder’s body, covering his face with a jacket.

He gets to his feet, and completely ignores Sherlock as he passes, moves on to Arthur who is still clinging to his father. Holdernesse smoothes a hand over the boy’s head. “Arthur, let Dr. Watson take a quick look. We’ll have Dr. Graves give you a thorough examination when we get back to the house.”

“I can stay, then?” The boy sounds desperate and hopeful

“We’ll discuss it in the morning, Son. But for tonight, yes, of course you can stay.”

“Let’s take a look then,” John motions for the boy to come over, and then glances over his shoulder at Sherlock. “Come hold this torch.”

Sherlock goes, does as he’s told, and watches John thoroughly assess the boy. He takes his own coat off and wraps it around his shivering shoulders, pulls the hair back from his forehead to look for scrapes and bruises. Palpates his joints and muscles, and asks the boy questions about his treatment in low, soothing tones.

Sherlock watches as Arthur slowly calms.

After a few more minutes of careful assessment, John pats him gently on the shoulder. “Good news, Arthur, everything is there and accounted for. Now best to go home and have a nice bath, get some rest, and then eat a good hardy breakfast in the morning.”
Holderness steps forward and pulls the boy in against his side. “Mr. Holmes, Dr. Watson, do come back to the house. My personal physician will be there, and at your service, and I believe we should also inform the police of Hayes’ escape?”

“Yes.” Sherlock agrees. “As soon as we have a mobile signal. But we’ll come to you tomorrow. Tonight I believe it is best we go back to the school and get a good night’s sleep ourselves.”

“Of course. Suit yourselves. On the ‘morrow then.”

They walk back to the car in silence. When they are both inside, and settled in, John turns on the interior light, and reaches for Sherlock’s hands. It’s only then that Sherlock realises they’re bleeding.

“Arthur’s shirt was covered in blood, but he wasn’t bleeding anywhere.” John says by way of explanation. “Figured it was yours.” He places Sherlock’s hand back in his lap, shuts off the interior light, and starts the car. “You need to clean those out good when we get back. God knows what was growing on the walls of that cave.”

“Alright.”

They drive the whole way back to the school without speaking a word to one another. Sherlock gets a mobile signal halfway back, and calls the police to report Hayes’ escape and have an ambulance dispatched to pick up Wilder’s body.

John is quiet and still in that way that feels like a storm about to break. He’s coiled tight, and Sherlock doesn’t know why.

When they get back to the room, John disappears into the loo. “Come in here and rinse those scrapes.” He reappears at the door. “I’m going to see if I can track down some food. I’m starving.”

He’s shivering all over, cold no doubt, from having left his coat with Arthur, and being so damp from the cave.

“You’re cold.”

“Nope.” John sniffs, and pushes past him, heading for the door.

“John.”

“Just leave it.”

Sherlock’s instinct it to stride forward, reach out, and—and keep him, keep him close, keep him warm. But…

“Are you angry?”

John’s hand freezes on the door handle. “Am I…?” He turns around, mouth a tight line. A muscle in his jaw jumps. “Am I angry!?”

Sherlock feels a rush of anxiety. He’s missed something. He’s missed something incredibly important, and now John is—fraying.

John’s nostrils flare. “What do you think?” It’s low, and dangerous, and Sherlock desperately wracks his brain for what he’s missed.
“I—I don’t know. I can’t think. I need you to tell me what it is I’ve done.”

John sniffs, and turns his back on him. “I need you to leave me alone.”

“Now, or…?”

“Now. Right now. Go in the loo and wash your hands. Soap and water. Let the water run over them. Bandage them up. Do it.”

Sherlock doesn’t wait to be told twice. He goes. He does exactly as he’s told. It hurts. He washes and scrubs anyway. He scrubs until he is sure there can’t possible be a single microbe, parasite or bit of bacteria left. His hands are shaking by the time he is done and attempts to bandage them.

“Let me see.” John appears beside him. He lays his hands in John’s outstretched ones. His knuckles are starting to bleed all over again. “You washed them well?”

Sherlock nods.

“Lots of soap?”

He nods again.

Some of the anger seems to be fading now, but John’s hands are still shaking, almost as much as Sherlock’s. He dabs gently at Sherlock’s knuckles with a piece of gauze from the first aid kit balancing on the edge of the sink. He presses down, applying pressure. Finally he applies bandages as best he can to each injured knuckle, and then takes both Sherlock’s hands in his, and doesn’t let go.

He holds his hands and stares at the middle of Sherlock’s chest. “You could have died.”

“What?”

“Tonight. Those rocks were slick. You saw what happened to…” John sucks in a sharp breath. “You didn’t even think, just… Thought it was you for a minute—when he fell.”

And with a sick flood of realisation, Sherlock sees everything.

John’s shout in the cave. John’s silence in the car. His hands shaking against Sherlock’s. John shaking everywhere. It’s not cold. It’s shock.

The guilt hits Sherlock like a physical blow. He had been thinking of nothing but getting to Arthur, blind, once again, to John’s concern, anxiety, to the very raw trauma that he himself had caused all those years ago. Without a conscious thought, Sherlock drops to his knees on the cold tile, wraps his arms around John’s legs, and presses his face against his body. His senses are instantly flooded: sweat, and musk, and adrenaline.

John doesn’t say anything, only makes a small, strangled sound, bit off at the end like he’s tired of carrying this thing, tired of it coming back to haunt him again, and again, and again. And then a single hand drops to the top of Sherlock’s head, fingers weave between his curls, fist, pull slow and sure until Sherlock’s breath catches with the surge of sensation it elicits: more than pleasure, less than pain. John let’s go again, gently scrapes his nails along Sherlock’s scalp, soothing, lighting up every cell in his body.

“I didn’t think. It was thoughtless.” He breathes against John’s inner thigh.
“Yeah, it was.”

Sherlock opens his mouth to apologise.

“Don’t. Don’t say sorry. I don’t need apologies, Sherlock. I need you.” He hears John swallow, suck in a shaking breath, exhale with a quiver. “I need you here with me. Not lying dead—“ his voice breaks. “At the bottom of a waterfall, on the blood-stained sidewalk, on the floor of some blokes office, on the table in an operating theatre, in some foreign country where I’m not even there to…”

Sherlock nods against him, and John’s fingers tighten in his hair again, ease his head back. The eyes that meet Sherlock’s are hollow and red-rimmed. “Come up here.” It’s barely a whisper, ragged and raw.

Sherlock scrambles to his feet, and then stands, arms limp at his sides and stares down at John’s face, fierce and fond, hungry and haunted all at once. John lifts a hand to slide down the placket of Sherlock’s shirt, the tip of his finger pausing over each pearly button, his eyes following the trail it takes.

When he looks back up again it’s pleading, desperate. “Need to see you.”

And Sherlock nods, because how could he ever say no? Why would he ever want to?

John’s fingers shake as he looses first the top button, and then another, and another. Sherlock’s shirt parts slightly, the cold air of the bathroom stealing beneath and between, peaking his nipples and drawing gooseflesh over his skin.

John parts the fabric with his thumbs, stares at the round, red bullet scar. Steps closer leans in, presses his forehead against Sherlock’s clavicle and breathes against it—long, quiet minutes. “Sorry.” His lips whisper against Sherlock’s skin. “I’m sorry… I’m so sorry.”

It’s the first time John has ever apologised for it. And though it is not his sin to atone for, it touches Sherlock none-the-less. He lifts a hand and places in on John’s head. “I know.” And then drops it again, reaches down and pulls his shirt out from under the waistband of his trousers, exposing the last couple of buttons for John’s fingers to find and loose.

And John doesn’t waste time. He undoes each one, and then reaches out for Sherlock’s hands, holds them briefly in his, before turning them over and loosing the buttons of his cuffs. Finally, he reaches up and eases the shirt over Sherlock’s shoulders, letting it drop to the floor.

He looks, and Sherlock lets him look his fill, let’s him reach up and graze the back of his fingers over his ribcage, lets him walk around behind him, take in the map of old scars on his back, trace the roads they make, wrap his arms around his waist, press his face between his shoulder blades and cry.

Sherlock reaches down and cover’s John’s clasped hands with his own.

“Was proud of you tonight, too, you know.”

Sherlock doesn’t know what to say.

“Saved his life, probably.”

Sherlock feels completely thrown by the praise. “It was nothing. It was—what I do.”

John’s arms tighten around his waist and then let go. He pulls gently at his hip, urging him to turn,
and then looks up at him and smiles. “What you do is amazing. I don’t tell you enough.”

Sherlock blinks. “That’s not true, you…”

“I used to tell you. Used to.” John reaches out and presses his palm against Sherlock’s chest. “Was in awe of you the night we met, and here we are, almost eight years on and I’m still in awe.”

Sherlock can feel his face heating. The corners of his eyes prick.

John reaches down for Sherlock’s belt.

“John.”

He looks up again, and Sherlock smooths a hand over the buttons on the front of John’s shirt, hesitates. An unspoken question. He waits.

And this is somehow more difficult, more vulnerable. He sees the battle it is for John, to nod, to accept, to lay himself bare, literally and figuratively. After a moment he takes a deep breath, and nods.

Sherlock presses a finger against one of the buttons, a mirror of John’s actions the first time he’d touched Sherlock in this way. “Are you sure?”

He sees John consider it a moment more. He nods again.

And now it’s Sherlock’s turn to feel anxious. It seems a great gift and responsibility, being given permission to strip away the armour. John—always so buttoned up, always so careful, held in tight, and now his hands have dropped (his walls have dropped), and he is standing before Sherlock, almost shy, waiting…

Sherlock decides to be efficient. Much as he would love to draw it out, it seems almost a cruelty this first time. He reaches out and unbuttons John’s shirt quickly, pulls it carefully from beneath the waist band of his jeans, and then walks around behind him, to pull it off over his shoulders, and toss it over the edge of the sink.

He pauses, gives John a moment to acclimatise to being half naked in such close proximity to him, and then steps forward and lays a hand on John’s good shoulder, strokes a thumb over the soft skin there.

John nods, and Sherlock lifts his other hand to rest atop the other, smooths his hands down the length of his arms and then steps forward to wrap his arms around his waist, and pull him close.

John’s back is cold against the warmth of Sherlock’s chest, and the tension he can feel in John’s body as he first draws him in dissolves almost immediately with a deep sigh, like it’s a relief to finally be like this together, skin-to-skin, pulse-to-pulse. Sherlock tilts his chin down and buries his nose in John’s hair.

“Know it’s not a pretty sight.”

It takes Sherlock a moment to realise that John is talking about the scar on his shoulder, or perhaps the other scars that Sherlock had noticed briefly, small pocks along the tops of his arms, some on his lower back, the sort left by burns from the butt of a cigarette, one larger, round, like it maybe came from the cigarette lighter in an automobile.

“Beautiful.”
John huffs. It sounds wet. “’M not.”

“Yes. You are.”

Sherlock steps back a little, traces a finger between the scars, drawing a constellation on John’s skin, and John draws in a shaking breath, shivers.

“I love you,” Sherlock murmurs just behind his ear.

“Sherlock, I’m—I’m old,” John whispers raggedly. “Broken.”

“And so am I.”

John turns, suddenly, looks up at him. “You’re the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.”

It is so forceful, so earnest it leaves Sherlock stunned.

John steps forward, reaches for Sherlock’s belt, and Sherlock nods in assent, feels a race of anticipation and slight anxiety, as John looses it, pulls it free, tosses it on the floor and then undoes the flies of his trousers and pushes them down over his hips. They fall to the floor with a whisper, and Sherlock toes out of his shoes and socks, and stands there in the middle of the white tiled room, cold and exposed in only his pants.

John reaches out and takes his hand, guides him into the next room, stops in front of the hearth, where a fire still burns, low but warm. He goes across the room, and shuts the curtains, and then returns toes out of his own shoes and socks and quickly divests himself of his own trousers.

It’s pleasantly warm by the fire, and Sherlock feels warmer still for seeing so much of John. Strong thighs, the plane of his belly, flat but soft. Sherlock has to resist the urge to step forward, and peer down the expanse of John’s back to take in all there is to see of his arse, still clothed in soft, navy blue, cotton pants.

John’s brow wrinkles, and he steps forward and strokes Sherlock’s upper arm with his fingers. “You’re bruising.” He looks down. “Your knees too.”

“It’s nothing.” John’s fingers are cool against his skin, he hopes they’ll linger.

“Could we—go to bed?” John looks as anxious as Sherlock feels, and so he nods. It may be easier close together, under the blankets. He feels quite ridiculous, a grown man acting like a callow school boy, but John seems just as tentative, and there is a kind of comfort and camaraderie in that.

The sheets are cool, and crisp, but they soon warm from the heat of their bodies. John reaches for him the moment they are both under the covers, wraps his arms around his waist, tangles their limbs, pulls him close and kisses him. It’s slow, and sweet, and lazy. They take their time.

John’s fingers trace lightly over the scars on Sherlock’s back, and Sherlock thrills at the sensation of John’s spine beneath his fingers, vertebrae strung like pearls down the long curve of it, nothing but a thin layer of skin between Sherlock’s fingertips and John’s sinew, bone, nerves.

John’s lips break away from his, eyes heavy-lidded he nudges at Sherlock’s jaw with his nose, and then dips in to kiss his neck. This is something new—wet, open-mouthed, a smooth and almost soothing swipe of tongue. Sherlock lets out a breathy exhalation, and John sucks down, eliciting perfect, aching pleasure over the spot his tongue has just been. Sherlock whines, and John echoes in a moan.
He pulls him closer, hands sliding down Sherlock’s back, the tips of his fingers dipping just under the waistband of Sherlock’s pants, and stopping.

“John…” Sherlock breathes. “Please.”

John’s fingers are cold against the heated skin of his arse. He gasps quietly, and then sighs when John squeezes and pulls him close enough for Sherlock to feel him half hard against his stomach.

He takes John’s face in his hands, and kisses him deep, moans into his mouth so that John will know, how it is he wants him, what it is he does to him, what it is John is to him.

“Want you,” John gasps.

“I know.”

He feels John smile against his mouth. “Arrogant sod.”

“What? I do.”

John huffs against his mouth, and kisses him again. “I know you do. I know.” And then suddenly John is moving, flipping Sherlock onto his back, straddling his hips and grinning down at him. “Can still surprise you, though.”

Sherlock blinks up at him, eyes wide. His cock taking decided interest in this new turn of events.

“You okay?”

Sherlock nods, his mouth quirking into a grin of his own.

“Good.” And then John is kissing him again, hands braced either side of his head, thighs clenched tight against his hips, as he kisses, and kisses, and kisses him.

He kisses him until Sherlock isn’t conscious of anything but the sensation of John’s lips on his, the heat, and hardness, and softness, and perfect weight of John’s body atop his, and the way John is smiling against his mouth, breathing happiness into Sherlock’s lungs, lighting up his brain, and something deeper still, something Sherlock had thought he’d lost so long ago it almost seems more fantasy than memory.

*Is this joy?*

*He’d forgotten.*

John’s hands find his, fingers mesh with his, and he pins their joined hands either side of Sherlock’s head, rolls his hips, and sighs against Sherlock’s mouth. “Want it.”

It’s not a question, but Sherlock can’t help a, “Yes.”

“Want you.”

Sherlock flexes his fingers against John’s, tries to lift his hands, but John pins them again. He pulls back and stares down at him.

Sherlock’s brain is white. A pleasant sort of emptiness he’s only experienced during a few rare highs. He doesn’t struggle. He lets go, and stares up at John half drunk with whatever it is. It’s like floating. it’s like the most perfect calm he’s ever felt.
John smiles down at him. “Want you.”

Sherlock’s lips part.

“Wanna see you.”

Sherlock nods.

John’s eyes rake over his body, linger on his lips, his throat, glide over his chest. John’s mouth parts when he reaches Sherlock’s navel, the sight of their erections resting side by side, separated by nothing more than two thin layers of cotton. He licks his lips.

“Wanna see you,” he says again, slides his hands downward until he reaches the top of Sherlock’s pants. Sherlock’s brain whispers like rushing water. “Yes.” He manages. And then John is pulling his pants down over his hips.

The moment he springs free and the cool air hits him, he gasps. John’s mouth drops open further, and when he licks his lips again, Sherlock is mesmerised by how wet it is. It’s surprising, and thrilling, and arousing all at once.

He stares at John’s face staring at him, and a wave of want washes over him. His cock throbs against his belly and John let’s out a breath in a rush. “Can I…?”

And Sherlock doesn’t care what it is he’s asking for, he wants. All he knows is that he wants it all. He nods.

“Christ,” John whispers, drops his hands to Sherlock’s hips, slides down, and takes Sherlock in his mouth.

It’s totally unexpected, and Sherlock lets out a sound that would be embarrassing if not for the fact that his whole body has just lit up like a tree at Christmas and his brain gone totally offline.

John moans against him, and he feels it all the way to his core. His mouth is hot, and wet, and tight, and it’s the best thing he’s ever felt, nothing at all like anything he’s ever been able to do for himself, and he’s wanted this for so long, and with such intensity that he realises the moment John takes him in hand, and hollows his cheeks that there is no way he’s going to last.

“John!”

John pulls off. “You okay?”

“Don’t stop,” Sherlock says, and wonders why.

John grins, sinks down again, taking him in, and Sherlock grips the pillow, either side of his head, lays back and lets it come, lets the waves of pleasure roll and build, and when he feels himself coil tight, he reaches down and grabs onto John’s hair, pulls him off, and barely manages to bite back a shout as John strokes him once, twice, still slick with saliva, and he comes so hard his toes curl, and tears squeeze from the corners of his eyes, as he pulses in John’s hand, thick white stripes painting his belly and chest.

And somewhere through the white noise in his brain he can hear, can feel John murmuring against his hip. “Jesus, look at you. Jesus Christ, you’re… God.”

He’s not sure if he falls asleep, or if he just somehow loses time, but when he opens his eyes again, it’s to John hovering over him, smoothing a warm flannel over his chest and belly.
“I love you,” He says, because it seems like the most important thing in the most vital of moments.

John’s hand stills. “Hey.”

“Hello.” He sounds drunk, he thinks.

“You okay?”

He nods.


Sherlock’s eyes drop to John’s swiftly flagging erection. He reaches out for his thigh, but John just slips a hand atop his. “It’s okay.”

“You don’t…?”

“I do, I just—I think I want to wait until we get home. Want it to be our flat, our bed.”

Ours.

“That okay?”

Sherlock nods. “John.”

“Mm?”

“Come here, please.”

John smiles, drops the flannel on the floor, and crawls back under the covers, wrapping Sherlock up, pulling him close, and kissing him all over again.
Chapter 15

John is asleep.

It’s early yet, but the sun is starting to glow behind the room’s heavy curtains, and Sherlock can hear the muffled, distant sounds of the school starting to come to life. He would stay in bed all day with John if he could, now that their case is essentially over, Arthur safe and found, and Heidegger’s murderer (hopefully) being pursued by the police. But there is the little matter of his promised visit to Holdernesse Hall.

He slips from bed as carefully as he can and goes to shower. When he gets out John is still sleeping, and it seems a bit of a miracle, so he lets him sleep and goes in search of food.

The kitchens are a mad bustle, but one of the members of the staff proves sympathetic, and puts together two plates on a tray for him, and so it is that he gets to wake John with the enticing scent of a full English breakfast, and fresh-brewed coffee, and enjoy the bleary-eyed confusion that gives way to surprised pleasure.

“You hardly ate yesterday. I assumed you’d wake up starving.”

John pushes himself up in bed, still blinking sleepily. His hair is sticking straight up one side, and there are wrinkles in his cheek from the pillowcase. He graces Sherlock with a lopsided grin. “You brought me breakfast?”

“So it seems.”

John sits all the way up, props a pillow behind his back and lets Sherlock set the tray on his lap. “Christ, that smells amazing.”

Sherlock grabs his own plate of toast and cup of coffee, and sits on the other bed. “We’ll need to go see Holdernesse in an hour or so, and then I thought that we might head home. No point in spending another day here. If the local police can’t handle tracking down Hayes then that’s their problem. He takes a sip of coffee.

“Mmm, fair point.” John takes a bite of egg. “Bout a four hour drive, if we don’t stop. Could be home in time for tea.”

“Good. I’m sure Watson will be pleased to see us. Have you heard from your sister?”

Something passes over John’s eyes. He lifts the cup of coffee to his lips. “Mm-mm.”

It’s guilt, Sherlock suddenly realises. John hasn’t thought of her at all while they’ve been here, and it’s guilt.

“Well, I’m sure they got on fine.”

“Sure. Should maybe ring her and check in though…”

“Before we leave, perhaps.”

“Right.” John picks around his plate in silence. Occasionally he will bring a fork full of food to his lips, but for the most part he’s only picking at it.

“Are you alright?”
“Hm? Oh, yeah. Fine. I’m fine.”

“John.”

John looks up from his plate of eggs, brows knit. “Last night…”

Something bitter twists in Sherlock’s belly at his tone. “Yes.”

“I, umm…” John pushes the beans around his plate with his fork. “I didn’t mean to get so carried away.”

“Oh. I see.” Sherlock is pleased at how cold, and detached it sounds, rather than reflecting the pathetic level of hurt he can feel curling tight in his chest and biting at the corner of his eyes.

John’s head snaps up. “No, I—I just mean…” He swallows tightly. “Are you okay?”

Sherlock blinks at the sincerity, the concern in his voice.

“What?”

“Are you okay?” John repeats. His brow is knit, mouth pressed together with guilt, and suddenly Sherlock realises that the guilt he had seen earlier wasn’t about Watson, but…

“Oh. I see.” Sherlock is pleased at how cold, and detached it sounds, rather than reflecting the pathetic level of hurt he can feel curling tight in his chest and biting at the corner of his eyes.

John’s head snaps up. “No, I—I just mean…” He swallows tightly. “Are you okay?”

He sees some of the tension drop from John’s shoulders. “No, you didn’t. You didn’t, I just—I wanted to make sure.”

“Well now you have, and I assure you I am very much ‘okay’. Better than.”

John nods, and smiles Sherlock’s favourite smile, before looking back down at his plate and stabbing at a tomato.

“Are you alright?” Sherlock asks.

John nods in his mouth, and nods.

“Sure?”

He nods again. “Yeah, just—never done that before. Wanted to, but just never…” He’s looking at his plate.

“And… How was it?”

John looks up. When he see the expression on Sherlock’s face he grins. “Pretty fucking fantastic, actually.”

“Yes, it was.” Sherlock winks at him, and John huffs out a small laugh. His relief is palpable.

“Best hurry and eat if you want to shower. I’ve already done.”

“Yeah, right.”
Holdernesse has tea waiting when they arrive.

“And how is young Arthur, today?” John asks, once they have settled into the three chairs set up around the hearth in the Duke’s office.

“Quite exhausted, but my personal physician confirmed your assessment of last night. Physically, he is relatively unharmed. However, it has been rather the upsetting experience.”

“Rest is good,” John asserts.

“And so he shall have it. A month off school, and then we shall see. His mother is coming back from Italy to be with him, which will be, perhaps, the best medicine.”

“I’m sure.” Sherlock nods.

“One can hope that Francesca will see her way to forgiving me, too. I have wronged her. James was the rock upon which our marriage was repeatedly dashed. An immovable obstacle. His jealousy—of her, of Arthur…”

“Was it jealousy that motivated him, do you think?” John sits forward a little in his chair.

“Jealousy, yes. But more the desire, or perhaps even the need for power. He delighted in exercising power over me, power I believe he always felt was his birthright, but which I had denied him.

“He saw it something akin to a social contract, or so it seemed from the way he talked about it. He was my firstborn son, and as such, I had a duty, an obligation to give him the sort of life that position promised. My love for Francesca, for Arthur, it seemed an affront to him, and if I would not love him, and give him the life he saw as his, then I suppose he felt that Francesca and Arthur did not deserve that life, or my love either.

“Though I must admit that I never could have guessed how far he would go.”

“Love, jealousy, they can be vicious motivators.” John adds, and Sherlock turns and looks at him.

“So it seems,” Holdernesse agrees. “And now, Mr. Holmes, I believe we have one more thing to settle before we go.”

He gets to his feet, and John and Sherlock follow him to his desk. “If you will provide your banking information to my interim secretary, we will have the funds wired to your account today.”

“Of course.”

“You have done me a great service, and no amount could ever come close to repaying you. But I do hope that this will ease your way. You have saved my son, my future. I am in your debt, Sir.”

“It was our honour, Your Grace. I am only relieved that the whole affair has come to such a happy conclusion.”

John is in a talkative mood on the way home, and Sherlock sits back and enjoys listening to him ramble on about this, and that. It’s nothing of importance, but there is a soothing quality to his voice, and Sherlock is rather tired, now that everything is said and done.

His phone vibrates in his pocket, and he pulls it out, looks at the alert from his bank, and then thumbs
“Everything okay?”

“Mmm, just the bank alerting me Holdernesse’s wire has gone through.” He logs in and then blinks down at his balance. “And it appears he has been very generous.”

“Oh yeah? How much?”

“2.5 million pounds.”

John laughs. “Oh good, let’s retire!” He reaches down and takes a sip of coffee from his paper cup in the console between the seats. “Seriously, though. How much.”

“I am serious. The pay was promised at half that, originally, but…”

John laughs a high, slightly manic sounding thing. “What?”

“I’m serious.”

“Give it here.” He holds out his hand, and Sherlock hands him his phone. John glances down at the screen. “Holy shit.”

Sherlock smiles. “How does it feel to be a millionaire?”

John huffs and hands the phone back to him. “How do you feel, more like. It’s your money.”

“It’s our money.”

John glances over at him, brow furrowed, and looks quickly back at the road as they come to a tight curve.

“I couldn’t have done this without you, John. You do realise that?”

“Me? What did I do?”

“You—you held me together.”

John’s eyes flit briefly to his. The road continues to be difficult, and is taking all his concentration. “I don’t really feel like I did anything.”

“You were there when I needed you. And you contributed your insight and expertise. Also, we’d have likely never found Hayes if not for your incessant need to eat.”

John scowls. “Yeah, well—probably chance, that.”

“Mmm…” Sherlock closes the app and re-pockets his phone. “We should probably put aside a hundred thousand, or so, for Watson’s education.”

“Sherlock.”

He looks up from his phone. “Not enough?”

“I—God yes, but that’s not… I can’t possibly ask you to pay her way through school. That’s not your responsibility.”

“You haven’t asked. I’ve offered. Consider it a gift, then. I am allowed to give her a gift, am I
not?” He doesn’t wait for John’s answer, simply turns away to stare out the window at the outer suburbs of London starting to race past.

“Hey…”

Sherlock doesn’t feel like talking anymore.

“Hey.”

He tucks the heels of his shoes up on the seat.

“You not talking to me now, or…?” John sighs. “I’m sorry. I—I don’t know what you’re so upset about, but—of course you can give her a gift. Of course you can. But a gift is something like a teddy bear, or tricycle, not a free ride through Oxford.”

“Cambridge.”

“What?”

“She would be better suited to Cambridge.”

“How can you possibly…? You know what, never mind.” He hears John sniff. “I don’t know what we are, okay. I mean—I don’t know how this works, now we’re…”

Sherlock uncurls a little.

“Just agreed to move back in, haven’t even put my flat on the market officially yet, and then there’s this case, and we’re—we’re sleeping together, and your money is my money, and you’re talking about paying Rosie’s way through uni, and I…”

“You’re having second thoughts.”

“What? No. No, Sherlock. I just… Listen, can you look at me, please.”

“Why? You’re driving. It’s not as though you can look back.”

“Sherlock.”

Sherlock sighs, and unfurls.

John glances over at him the moment he turns around. “What is this to you?”

“What is it to you?! a few days ago you told me that I was your home, your family. I thought that was what we were, but if it’s not, then…”

“But Sherlock, you can’t possibly want to be saddled with…”

“With what?”

“A child, an old…”

“I don’t see her as a burden, John. I love her. I love her the way I love you, the way I loved Mary. She’s a piece of you, and she—she’s quite remarkable in her own right. She is a challenge, yes, but she’s a joy.”

John rubs his hands over the steering wheel. “I was lucky Harry is between jobs, and could take her
spur of the moment, on a whim. That won’t always be the case, and it might mean that I can’t be there with you on cases, or that we might miss out on cases altogether, and the responsibility will get to be more, rather than less, as she gets older. I can’t do that to you. I can’t ask that of you.”

“You haven’t. I’m offering. John, I—I’m asking.”

John’s hands tighten. He keeps his eyes trained on the road ahead, and doesn’t say anything.

“What did you think I would be to her? You agreed to move back. We would all be living together. Who was I meant to be?”

“I hadn’t thought that far.”

“I see.”

They drive in silence for the next half hour, until they arrive at Harry’s flat.

“I’ll go and get her,” Sherlock announces as they pull up. John doesn’t reply, so he gets out the minute the car stops.

Harry’s eyes go wide when she opens the door, and sees him. “Oh thank god.” She’s grinning, and there is the sound of some children’s show echoing into the foyer from the lounge, so it seems all is well.

“Auntie time’s been fun, but Auntie’s ready to get back to the usual. What a joy and a terror. Clearly she takes after John.”

Sherlock smiles. “So, I’ve observed.”

“Speaking of, where is my brother? Didn’t even want to pop up and say thanks?”

“I’ve worn him out, I’m afraid.”

“I bet you have.” She winks and leads him into the lounge.

“Hey Cricket, look who I found.”

Rosie looks up from her colouring book. “Sher!”

“Hello, Watson. Time to go home, I’m afraid. Did you have a good time with your Aunt Harry?”

“We made Jelly!”

“Is that so.”

“And cake!”

“Going up for Britain’s next top baker, are we?” Sherlock asks.

Harry rolls her eyes. “Hardly. But if it comes in a box I can usually manage.”

“There will be no living with her when we have to go back to broccoli, you realise.”

“Aunties are meant to spoil. You two boys will manage. Let me just go get her things.”

Harry disappears, and Rosie gets up and brings her colouring book over for him to see. “Look, Papa.”
“You’ve done an excellent job, Watson. The purple fur on Captain Barnacles is a daring, but fitting choice.”

“Where’s Daddy?”

“In the car, keeping it warm. We should be home in time for tea, and I imagine that Mrs. Hudson will have something special in store.”

“Cake?!”

“Perhaps.”

“Here we are.” Harry reappears with a lavender overnight bag and a child seat. She hands the items off to Sherlock and kneels down in front of Rosie. “It’s been a smash, Luv. Hope you’ll come again.”

“You could come.”

“Come visit you?”

Rosie nods, and Harry looks up at Sherlock.

“Yes, I imagine she could come, Watson, but not for a little bit. Daddy has to go back to work, and I still owe you a trip to the zoo. In a few weeks we’ll invite Aunt Harry over for supper.”

“Ok.”

Hugs, and kisses and general good-byes are said, and then Sherlock is trying to balance all of Rosie’s things, while also holding tight to her hand as they descend the stairs from Harry’s flat.

John is lounging back in his seat with his eyes closed, when they finally get back to the car. “Get in the backseat, and I’ll come and put your seat in.”

John seems to rally. He gets out of the car, and comes around to pick up Rosie. “How’s Daddy’s girl, hm? Were you good for Aunt Harry.”

“As good as you were for your minders according to Harry,” Sherlock informs him as he tosses Rosie’s bag in the boot and slams it shut.

“Oh ho! Quiet as a mouse when Harry was watching, but getting into all sorts of trouble when she wasn’t then, eh?” He ruffles her hair, and glances over at Sherlock wrestling with the child seat. “Here, let me do that.”

“It’s fine. I’m sure she missed you. I’ll do it.”

John’s brow furrows, but he doesn’t push the issue.

Mrs. Hudson is thrilled to see them, and there is cake for tea, and Rosie is endlessly talkative, telling them all about her adventures with Harry, only half of which any of them understand, but it’s clear all went well, that she had a good time, and hadn’t been overly traumatised by the separation. It bodes well for future cases, Sherlock thinks, and then curls up on the sofa when John takes her upstairs to bed.
By the time John comes back downstairs Sherlock’s managed to work himself into a fine sulk, and he isn’t even entirely sure why. Post-case drop, perhaps. But the conversation in the car earlier hadn’t sat right either.

It’s one of those nights when he misses morphine, the lovely, wool felt numb, the quiet of it. He feels keyed up and depressed all at once.

He has his back to the room, and can hear John moving about, doing the dishes, making himself a cup of tea, settling into his chair by the fire.

It suddenly strikes Sherlock that he’s come back here, to this flat, without question. He still owns the Acton flat. He has things to do to get it ready for selling, and yet—here he is, reading quietly by the fire. A week ago he would have at least gone through the motions of pretending he needed or wanted to go back, but tonight he hasn’t.

It isn’t monumental, but it seems significant.

Sherlock rolls over, and uncurls. He stares at John, skin and hair glowing warm by the fire, lips curled around the rim of his teacup, and suddenly Sherlock wants desperately to kiss him.

John glances over. “There you are. You okay?”

Sherlock sits up, sighs. “I suppose.”

“Bored already?”

He just shrugs.

“You wanna come over here?”

Sherlock sighs, but he gets up and goes over anyway. What he really wants is to sit in John’s lap, bury his face in his neck, and forget everything for awhile. Ridiculous sentiment, but here he is… Forced to lie in a bed of his own making.

John sets his book and tea down as Sherlock approaches. “You wanna come here?” He jerks his chin down to his lap, and Sherlock hesitates, trying to understand his full meaning.

“Or not…” John’s cheeks colour. “Sorry, I…”

“Alright.”

Sherlock goes and slides to his knees in front of John’s chair, slides his hands up his thighs, leans in. John looks down at him curiously, for a moment, and then seems to realise what he wants. He meets him half way and kisses him like he’s parched, like it’s been years rather than hours.

“Thought maybe you just wanted to sit,” John pants when he finally breaks away.

“Oh.” Sherlock moves to sit back, but John reaches out and grabs onto the front of his shirt.

“Hey, where are you going?”

“You said…”

“Don’t you dare stop.” And then John is kissing him again.

It is exactly what Sherlock needs, he realises. To lose himself in John’s taste, and breath, and heat.
John’s fingers dig into his shoulder and the back of his neck. John’s tongue slides against his, and Sherlock opens his eyes whenever he can manage to, without getting caught, because he wants to see it happen, wants to see the moment John starts to grow hard.

He pulls away to catch his breath, and then slips down and lays his head against John’s thigh. He watches.

“What are you doing?” John sounds as breathless as he feels.

“Looking.”

He hears John’s swallow. “At my cock?”

“Mm.”

“See anything you like?” There’s a teasing tone to John’s voice now, but a slight thread of something else, too (hesitance?).

“Hard to say. You’re so covered up.” Sherlock slides a hand further up, swipes his thumb in an arch along the inside of John’s thigh. He shifts in his seat.

Sherlock slides his face closer. Suddenly desperate for the scent, the weight, the taste of him against his tongue. He presses his nose against him, breathes, and hears John gasp. A hand drops to his head, tightens in his hair. John’s hips stir, but instead of thrusting forward, Sherlock realises he’s sliding back. Oh.

He pulls back and blinks up at John, who looks… He looks…

“Sorry.” And then he gets up so fast Sherlock falls back on his arse. He doesn’t linger to help him up, instead he just hurries down hallway, and shuts the door to the loo.

Sherlock sits on the carpet and tries to gather himself. The whole day has been odd. It’s been off almost since the moment John woke that morning. Perhaps he is having regrets about what happened between them. Perhaps he is having regrets about everything. But then… he’s here. Well, he’s locked himself in the loo, now, but he’s here.

Sherlock gets to his feet, trying to fight off the sour feeling twisting in the pit of his stomach. He goes to the loo door, and knocks. “John?”

“Yeah. I’ll be out in a minute.”

Sherlock goes into the bedroom, and sits down on the bed. He can hear John breathing in the next room. He hears him tear off some toilet roll and blow his nose. The water runs in the sink for a moment, and then—silence.

“John…”

He hears him sigh. The door between the loo and his bedroom slides open, and John just stands there, leaning against the door frame. His eyes are red. “Sorry.”

“I believe I should be the one apologising. I didn’t ask. I should have.”

“I invited you over.”

“Yes, but—not for that.”
John wipes a hand wearily over his eyes and then drops it again. “Listen, you shouldn’t have to be walking around me on eggshells, I’m…” He pushes away from the doorframe and comes over to sit beside Sherlock on the bed. He folds his hands in his lap, but his arm is pressed against Sherlock’s. It feels like something. “I don’t want you thinking I didn’t love what happened last night. That I didn’t want it, didn’t enjoy it. I did. Christ, you have no idea how much I did, but, it’s harder when you…” He swallows. “It’s harder when you’re the one initiating, when you’re the one touching me, and I…” He swallows again.

“It’s alright,” Sherlock says, though it doesn’t feel alright at all.

“No. I don’t think it is. It’s not alright to me. Because I trust you, but…”

“But?”

“But I don’t.”

“Ahh.” And all Sherlock can see is Victor walking away, running away, crawling into bed with him at night and then pushing him down in the dirt, playing with his hair and then shouting at him to leave him alone.

“It’s not about you, okay. It’s important to me that you know that. It’s not about you. It’s…”

“It never is,” he says without thinking, and sees John turn and look at him in confusion.

“I love you.”

“I know.”

“And I want you.”

“I know. But I’m—I’m not allowed to want you, it seems.”

“No, Sherlock, I…”

“It’s fine.”

“Is it?”

“No. But it will have to be.”

John lifts a hand to cover his eyes, and Sherlock looks over at him, reaches out and wraps an arm around his shoulders.

John leans into him. “I think there’s something really wrong with me.”

“Perhaps.”

John huffs and looks up.

“What? Do you want me to lie to you, just to make you feel better?” Sherlock grins, and John huffs again and smiles back.

“No.”

“You love my honesty. Told the whole world about it in one of your blogs, as I recall.”
“Did I?”

“Mm. I miss your blog sometimes.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Though I suppose it’s not really the thing anymore.”

“Should probably have a Twitter.” The look on John’s face suggests he thinks it a horrible idea.

“I believe that one Twitter per household is quiet enough.”

“An Instagram?” He brightens.

Sherlock sighs, and John smiles. “Instagram it is!”

Sherlock tightens his arm around John’s back and then lets go. “I do want you, John. But if it’s—difficult for you…”

“I don’t want it to be. I love you. I just—it’s always been hard for me to…”

“To give people access to your body.”

It sounds horrible clinical, but John nods. “I—I guess so. Yeah.”

“Would it help if I waited for you to ask for what you want.”

John shakes his head. “I don’t know what I want.”

“I don’t want to put you in a position like tonight, again. That makes intuiting things rather risky. I would rather you ask.”

“I don’t know if I can.”

Sherlock just nods. It feels like an impasse.

“I’m sorry,” John says again.

“You don’t have to keep apologising.”

“I don’t know how to do this. I’ve never talked about this with anyone, because I—I didn’t have to. You know, all the girlfriends were temporary, and with Mary… I think I never had to consider the ‘why’ of it. She gave me so many reasons to stop trusting her, I just—I just thought it was that.” John looks over at him. “I do trust you.”

“As much as you’re able. I know. I do believe that.”

John shakes his head and stares back down at his lap. “I don’t want to fuck this up. I don’t know what I’d do if I fucked this up. I’ve wanted you for so long, I…” His eyes fill.

“Let’s go to bed, John. Just sleeping. It’s been a long day, and perhaps some of these things would be better discussed when we’re both less tired, or with Ella?”

“Yeah, maybe, I…”

“Get into bed. I’ll lock up.”
Sherlock goes down and checks the front door, goes upstairs and checks on Rosie, who is sound asleep, then he comes back down and shuts off the gas to the fire, and the lights in the flat. By the time he gets back to the bedroom John is curled up under the covers. He blinks up at him as he comes in, graces him with a small, sad smile, and so Sherlock shuts off the lights in the bedroom as well, undresses down to his pants in the dark, and crawls into bed.

John presses back against him, the minute he is under the covers, and he wraps an arm around him and pulls him close, breathes in the scent of his hair, and skin, and then presses his lips against his scalp.

“I imagine these things take time. We’ll figure it out.”

“Yeah.” John’s hand finds his hand under the covers and closes around it. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“Just—everything.”

“You’re welcome.”

Sherlock lies in the dark and listens to John’s breathing deepen and slow, feels the way his body relaxes and melts back against his as he drifts to sleep. There was a time, only a few days prior, really, where John was still anxious, tense and alert, even in his sleep, but not anymore.

They will figure out. They’ll be alright.
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

Please note the added tags for this chapter: #sexting, #frottage, #hand jobs.

Enjoy! ;)

“Hey…”

Sherlock stirs groggily, and moans into the pillow.


Sherlock cracks open an eye, and stares up at John, awake, and showered, and dressed for work. Oh. Yes. A work day.

“Just wanted to say good-bye. Rosie’s sleeping like a log, so I thought I’d give her a day off from nursery, but if you want to take her later, go ahead.”

“Was going to take her to the zoo.”

“Oh yeah? The one in the park?”

Sherlock nods, and John smiles.

“She’ll like that. Listen, I have to go meet the estate agent after work, so I’ll be home late. You want me to grab some takeaway for supper on my way back home?”

“Yes. Just text me later about what.”

“Okay.” John reaches down and runs a hand through Sherlock’s hair, and Sherlock lets his eyes fall shut. “I’ll text you at my lunch break.”

“Alright.”

“Love you.”

Sherlock opens his eyes again, takes in all the details of John, the softness around his eyes, the fond smile teasing the corners of his lips, the way he looks well fed, and well rested, and generally relaxed and happy, despite the night before. “I love you too. Be safe. I’ll see you tonight.”

John rubs his fingers against Sherlock’s scalp and then pulls away, almost regretfully, and leaves. Sherlock lays in bed and listens to him gather a sack lunch from the fridge, go down the stairs, shut the outside door as he leaves. There is silence on the child monitor. The sound of Rosie’s even breathing filling the room with the sort of soft white noise that makes Sherlock want to curl up and go back to sleep.

But she will be up soon enough, and then he will be hard pressed to find time to shower, or ready for the day. With a heavy sigh he swings his legs over the side of the bed, and sits there, elbows on his thighs, and rubs his hands over his face.
His phone buzzes on the nightstand, and he reaches down and picks it up.

*Bored*

He smiles.

Isn’t that my line?

*Is it?*

*You co-opted it now?*

Well, you know…

You just left. Bored already?

*Morning commute can’t*

*compete with cases.*

Fair point.

*Miss you.*

I miss you too. Which is

ridiculous, you realise, as

you’ve only been gone 5 min.

*You know what.*

What?
I think I might be in love.

Sherlock’s heart flips over in his chest. Of course. Of course John’s said it before. “I love you. ‘Course I do.” And they’ve shared a bed, and John has taken him into his arms, his mouth, and… But, it’s different, isn’t it? To John at least. ‘In love’ is different than a simple ‘I love you’.

Oh? May I ask with whom?

You, you idiot!

Sherlock stares down at the screen. He imagines John rolling his eyes and smiling as he types it. He remembers that John, a John he has only ever seen in that brief period between The Pool and his leap from Bart’s. A John who was in love and was letting himself be, to the full extent he was able to at the time. And more’s the pity Sherlock hadn't been ready to let him in.

You ok?

Sherlock knows he has to say something…

Are you at work yet?

Not by half.

Come home. Come to the zoo with me and Watson.

What, and just skip out on work?
Precisely.

Sherlock, I can’t!

But you want to.

God damn it!

So, does that mean you’re turning around?

What do you think, Genius?

Excellent.

Sherlock crawls back into bed and waits for the sound of John returning. He doesn’t have to wait long. When John appears at the bedroom door, looking equal parts pleased and put upon, Sherlock is buried beneath the covers all the way up to his nose. He blinks up at him. “Hello.”

John is fighting vainly to suppress a smile. “You’re a bad influence.”

“And you love it,” Sherlock mumbles beneath the blankets. “Your daughter is still sleeping. You should come back to bed while you can.”

John grins, drops the satchel slung over his shoulder onto the floor, shuts the door, and crawls back into the bed, fully clothed. He pulls Sherlock into his arms without hesitation, and it’s wonderful. His clothes are cold, and he smells of outside. Sherlock buries his warm face into John’s cool neck, and relishes in the way John lets out a deep sigh, every ounce of tension draining from his body.

“See, this was a good idea.”

“Yeah. You tend to have those now and again.”

“Mmm… I think you mean all the time.”

“Nope. But this is a good one.” John’s fingers stroke through his hair, ease his head back. “Think maybe I’ll kiss you for awhile.”
“Better and better.”

John gazes at him. “Was it okay?”

“Mm?”

“What I said.”

“Said?”

John nods toward Sherlock’s phone on the nightstand, looking suddenly unsure.

“Of course. The feeling is quite mutual.”

“Yeah?” John is smiling.

“Yes. Now less talking, more kissing.”

John huffs. “Demanding arse.” And then he kisses him. It’s full and deep, and Sherlock luxuriates in it, in the way John explores his mouth, lets his hands wander, cataloguing every inch. They kiss, and kiss until Rosie’s soft stirrings sound over the baby monitor.

John pulls away, but Sherlock drags him back down again.

John looks apologetic when he finally pulls back and sits up. “Gotta go get her. Still want to go to the zoo?”

“Is it nice outside?”

“Gorgeous.”

“Yes, then. Let’s.”

Sherlock lazes back in the sheets and listens to John on the child monitor.

“Oh, look who’s awake!”

“Daddy! School?”

“No school today, Bug. We’re going to the zoo. What do you think about that?!”

“Papa can come?”

“What? Oh yeah, I’m coming. ‘Course I’m coming.”

“No, Papa!”

“I don’t know what you mean, Bug.”

Sherlock sits frozen on the end of the bed. It was inevitable that this would happen eventually. He silently curses Sally, while at the same time being grateful that John is being predictable clueless.

“Let’s get up and get dressed, yeah? And then we’ll have breakfast.”

“PAPA!”

Sherlock hears something hit the floor.
“What?” John replies tightly.

And then the tears start, and Sherlock realises he is probably going to have to intervene. With a sigh he gets up, and pulls on some pyjama bottoms and a t-shirt, and heads up stairs.

When he gets to the door of the nursery it’s to the sight of John trying to wrestle Rosie into her clothes, while she wails piteously on the floor.

“What a fracas.”

She stops crying at the sound of his voice, sits up, stares at him quizzically for a moment, and then giggles wetly. “Papa.”

“Daddy’s only trying to get you dressed. If we get to the zoo early, they may still be giving the animals their breakfast.”

“You’re at the zoo?”

“Of course I’m coming. Hurry up now. We don’t want to be late.”

He turns around and leaves again, hopeful that perhaps John still hadn’t caught on. He has a way of doing that, especially when it’s something he doesn’t want to countenance.

Things seem to go more smoothly after that, because John and a completely clothed Rosie are back downstairs and eating breakfast by the time Sherlock gets out of the shower. John looks relieved to see him. “Can you sit with her. Need the loo.”

“Yes. Go.” Sherlock gets himself some coffee and toast, and sits down next to Rosie at the table.

“There are lions?” She asks, sticking a spoonful of porridge in her mouth.

“I’m quite sure.”

“Giraffes?!”

“Possibly.”

“Daddy will come?”

“Yes Watson, we’ll all go together.”

“Good. Together.”

Sherlock smiles and takes another bite of toast.

“Miss Hudson?”

“No, I believe today is Mrs. Hudson’s day to go to the shops, and then out to lunch with Mrs. Turner.”

“Auntie.”

“No, your Auntie Harry is across town at her house. Just you, and me and Daddy.”

“Okay.” She takes a drink of water from her sippy cup, just as John reappears at the door to the kitchen.
“Almost finished?”
Rosie nods, and Sherlock takes a last bite of toast. “I believe so.”

“We’ll go together.” Rosie informs him.


“Yes.”

“Should probably bring the pushchair. She’ll get tired.”

“I’m big!”

“Yes, you’re very mature, Watson, but your legs are still shorter than ours, which means you have to move them twice as quickly to keep up, and you’re bound to get tired. We will only use the pushchair if you need it.”

“Fine.” She rolls her eyes, and Sherlock cocks an amused brow.

“Oi, no disrespect. No eye-rolling.”

“Auntie does it.”

John sighs. “I bet she does.”

The pushchair does come in handy, as Rosie starts off strong, skipping and practically running to Regent’s Park, but has all but worn herself out by the time they finish standing in line, and get through the front gates.

After they finish touring the Gorilla Kingdom, John stares wearily down at Rosie, as she flops lazily to the ground, hanging off his arm, requiring him to all but drag her, and sighs.

“Get up and walk like a big girl, please.”

“No!”

“Walking or the pushchair,” Sherlock offers. “Two options. Which will it be?”

“STOP!!!”

John sighs even louder as she flops onto the grass and starts crying. He furtively steals glances at the passers-by staring at the display.

“Get up.” John grinds out. Sherlock can see his calm fraying.

He steps forward. “Watson, this behaviour is not at all reflective of your self-professed maturity. Come sit in your pushchair, and tell us what it is you want.”

This has little to no affect, and the tantrum is increasing. More people are staring, and John is getting more and more agitated. Perhaps the zoo was not such a good idea after all, Sherlock thinks.

“Watson, perhaps…”
“Stay out of this!” John snaps. His hands fist at his sides, as heads turn their way.

“John.” He offers quietly. “Go sit down. I’ll handle it. It was my idea to come to the zoo. It’s only fair.”

“It’s not your responsibility!” John whispers fiercely, but Sherlock can see the surrender in his eyes.

“But it can be.”

He sees the moment John concedes. His shoulders slump. “Yeah. Yeah, fine.” He throws up his hands. “Suit yourself.”

He takes the pushchair and wanders off to a bench a short way away, and Sherlock looks down at a red-faced and exhausted Rosie. She’s noticed John walking away and her crying has diminished somewhat.

Sherlock sits down on the grass next to her, and tucks his knees against his chest. “Would you like to go home?”

“Noo!!” She wails afresh.

“Alright.”

Rosie cries a while longer, and then rolls over onto her back, stares up at the blue sky, filled with puffy white clouds skittering past, and sniffs.

“I imagine it doesn’t require saying, Watson, but your father and I missed you quite a lot when we were gone. I will try to get a case closer to home next time.”

“It was big.”

“What was?”

“Auntie’s flat.”

“It can be disorienting being in a new place. Did you wake up at night and wonder where you were sometimes?”

She fists at her eyes and rolls onto her side, looking up at him. She nods.

“Mm, it’s happened to me on occasion. Never a pleasant feeling.”

Rosie sniffs, and sits up. “Ice cream?”

“Your father may have something to say about that at 11:00 in the morning, but I admit, I would very much like some myself. Should we try to convince him?”

She nods.

“Alright. You’ll have to get up and walk on your own, though. Do you think you can possibly find the strength?” he asks with a hint of melodrama.

She stares at him for a moment, and then giggles. He smiles back. “Up then.”

They both get up and he reaches down and takes her hand.
She’s skipping again by the time they reach John. “Papa said ice cream!” She announces.

John frowns. “Pretty sure I didn’t. It isn’t even lunchtime yet.”

“Papa said!” She repeats.

John looks up at Sherlock with a frown, and Sherlock looks everywhere but at his eyes. “She asked and it seemed a good idea.”

John doesn’t say anything, and then after a moment… “Well, it seems I’m outnumbered.” He stands up with a sigh. “Come on then.”

They get ice cream cones, vanilla for John, strawberry for Rosie, and chocolate for Sherlock. They sit on a bench near the zoo’s playground, and eat it, and once Rosie is finished, John wipes her clean, and lets her run off to play on the equipment.

Sherlock has been taking his time eating, trying, he supposes, to avoid the conversation he knows is coming.

They sit side-by-side and watch Rosie playing with some of the other children.

“She seems to get on okay. I was worried after the thing at nursery.”

“The boy who pushed her is a known bully. I doubt it was her fault.”

“Right.”

They sit in silence for a few moments more.

“You’re really good with her, you know.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. Thanks for earlier. I just—it gets to me.”

“It’s fine. I believe she missed us. It was a bit of subconscious attention getting, I imagine.”

“Yeah.” John sniffs and shifts a little in his seat. Sherlock braces himself. “When did she start calling you Papa?”

“It was Sally.”

“Sally Donovan?”

“When I took Watson to the Met a week ago. She was talking to her while I finished up with Lestrade, and she said she didn’t know what Rosie called me. She’s been calling me that off and on since.” John looks over at him, and when he says nothing… “I can correct her, put a stop to it.”

“Hey.”

Sherlock glances over at him briefly, and then looks back out at the children playing.

“Hey.” Sherlock turns and holds his gaze. “You don’t mind?”

“Why would I mind?”

John smiles quizzically, and huffs. “She’s not your daughter, Sherlock. Most people don’t
particularly want to be saddled with a toddler that isn’t theirs.”

“So you keep saying, but I’ve been in her life since the moment she was born, and now that you’re moving back, the frequency with which she sees me will increase. It’s logical that she wants to find a way to categorise me that aligns with how she sees her peers categorising their adult caretakers. So no, I don’t mind. But if you would prefer I not…”

“Didn’t say that. It’s just—it’s not always going to be easy for her, you know, having to explain how she’s got two dads, and even more so since we’re not…”

“Not what?”

“Well not—a couple—officially.”

Sherlock stares down at the grass beneath his feet. “What are we then?”

“I don’t know. We’re—we’re us, but we’re not that, you know. So how’s she supposed to explain that to her friends, her teachers?”

“Perhaps it doesn’t require explaining. The nursery already accepts me as a legal guardian due to the residence order, and as you well know people assume, and have been assuming about the two of us for years, so…”

“And the kids? Kids can be cruel.”

“Children tend to accept these things easier than adults in my experience.”

John turns and looks back out over the play park. Rosie is sitting in the sand, building mountains with another little girl about her age.

“I just—worry.”

“I know.”

“And it’s just been a lot very quickly—with us, I mean.”

“Yes.”

“And I’m not saying I have regrets, but…”

Sherlock swallows tightly, and waits.

John looks over his shoulder, taking in the crowds around, them, and then stares down at his hands, and lowers his voice. “I’ve always loved you, okay. I’ve always wanted you, but I never really let my self consider what it would be like to have you, to be an ‘us’, and—it scares me, to be honest.”

“Because of what people will think.”

“Maybe. A little. But also what they might do. What that will mean for us, for her. I love you. I love her. I want you both to be safe, and I—I would kill anyone who hurt either of you.” There is a fierceness to it that sends a thrill racing across Sherlock’s skin.

“John, we live in an urban area. We can afford to be picky about her schools. She’ll encounter less prejudice than most, and as for the rest, I can take care of myself, and you, if need be. The full weight of it doesn’t have to fall entirely on your shoulders.”
John sits up a little straighter beside him. “I know. But I—I don’t know what I’d do if something happened to you. In fact, I do know, from experience, and I can tell you that it isn’t pretty. I just… Give me time, okay. I know I keep saying that, but it’s only been a couple of weeks, and I need time to see how it will be.

“So what do you want me to do, then?”

“Do?”

“About Watson. About what she calls me.”

“If it’s what she wants, I—I guess let her. Christ knows you’re probably a better dad to her than I’ll ever be.”

“Untrue.”

John smiles weakly. “Look how you handled her a few minutes ago. I just can’t—deal with her when she gets like that.”

“Then let me.”

John doesn’t say anything, just rubs a hand over one thigh, and gets to his feet. “We should at least try and get to the lions. I still have to go to Acton at 3:00 to meet to the estate agent, and if Rosie doesn’t get to see the African exhibit there will be hell to pay.”

“Mm, true.” Sherlock agrees. He gets to his feet as well. “I’ll go fetch her.”

“Sherlock…”

He turns. “Mm?”

“There really are no regrets. You know that, right?”

He takes in the sight of John’s sincere and slightly troubled eyes, the way he holds his body at attention, alert. He takes in the pink that is slowly returning to his cheeks, and the dark rings beneath his eyes that are fading, and the way that he subconsciously sways into Sherlock’s orbit, even here, even now, standing a few feet away from one another in the middle of a crowded zoo. It’s his John. The one he fell in love with, the one who is stronger and more courageous than he realises.

He nods. “I do.”

John looks relieved. “Good. That’s good, yeah. Okay, well—let’s go. Will probably need to grab some lunch before we leave too. Need to get some protein into her to counteract all that sugar, or you’re going to have a little cyclone on your hands when I go out later.”

Sherlock chuckles, and John smiles. “Come on, then.”

Mrs. Hudson is good enough to take Rosie when John leaves for Acton, and Sherlock lays on the sofa in the quiet flat, and thinks about John driving across town to sell his flat, the sad little flat that never quite felt homely, never quite felt like John. It had very much been Mary’s space, and John had let it be.

It’s the way with John. He makes himself small in a home, makes himself fit easily, makes a half-
hearted effort at insisting on cleanliness, but beyond that, doesn’t bring any of himself to a space.

Even now the flat is filled with Rosie’s things, and Sherlock’s things, but beyond a single mug in the cupboard, and a paperback novel on the table by the hearth, there isn’t a single thing of John’s here. He hasn’t even really unpacked his clothes, Sherlock realises. He must pull them out and wash them as needed.

Sherlock makes a mental note to make room in the dresser, and to get a second wardrobe.

John is still so much a mystery, to himself as well as Sherlock, and Sherlock thinks that was part of appeal in the beginning—the mystery. But now he just finds himself curious, and hungry for any little glimpse he can catch. He looks forward to seeing John emerge. He wonders how long a wait it might be.

He rolls onto his side and stares at his phone. He shouldn’t bother him. John is probably meeting with the estate agent at this very moment. He traces a finger over the texts they had exchanged earlier that morning, scrolls up, hesitates on: ‘I think I might be in love.’

He imagines what John’s face must have looked like as he typed it. He would have been on the tube at the time. He would have looked around himself before typing it, old habit, but he wouldn’t have been able to suppress that certain fond smile he gets, the one that makes Sherlock go warm all over, that makes him yearn, and ache.

He looks at the time. John will be gone an hour yet. Mrs. Hudson had brought out the play dough just as he was leaving her flat, so she and Rosie will be occupied for awhile. There’s time—time to take the edge off. But then, what if John is in the mood later? The night before notwithstanding, John might be. The day has been pleasant thus far. There will be takeaway for supper, and Watson is bound to be tired, so will go to bed early. John might want to…

He sighs, and throws an arm over his eyes. If not for the fact that he’s just finished a case, and has little need for his brain, he would be berating himself for such adolescent internal negotiations. Really. It’s completely ridiculous.

His phone vibrates in his hand, and he eagerly pulls it into his line of sight.

---

_She thinks I can list

it for £450,000_

It seems fair, though

I hardly _know a thing about it._

---

_That you admitting that

there’s something you
don’t know?!!!
**eye-roll**

*You and Rosie, two peas in a pod, I see.*

Will you be home soon?

*Just on the way back.*

*Did you decide what you want for supper?*

We agreed Chinese, yes?

*Yeah. Okay.*

*What you doing?*

Sherlock stares down at John’s text, and wonders just how honest he should be.

Just lying here, thinking.

*Oh yeah? What’s Rosie up to?*

She’s with Mrs. Hudson.

*Oh, so you’re lying there ‘thinking’ are you. ;)*
He raises an eyebrow. Blatant flirtation.

I was lying here thinking about not thinking. But then I thought that perhaps you might prefer I wait to not think until after supper, so you could join me.

Yeah?

Yes.

And what exactly is involved in this ‘not thinking’.

Sherlock stares at the screen. This is new territory. This is John dipping his toe in? A safe way to see where things might go without them actually, physically having to go there?

He decides to tread carefully.

Picking up where we left off this morning, perhaps?

Could do. What else?

Picking up where we left of in Malton?

Oh yeah?
Sherlock curses the difficulty of gauging tone via text. It feels terrifyingly essential that he not overstep.

*What did you have in mind?*

Where are you right now?

*On the tube.*

Sherlock grins. So John…

I believe that what I have in mind may not be appropriate reading for the tube.

*That you refusing to tell me?*

Giving you fair warning.

*Consider me warned.*

Sherlock wracks his brain for the perfect fantasy. There are so many, but some of them still feel too private, too precious. He’s not sure he’s ready to expose all of himself just yet.

I thought we might start in the shower.
There is a long pause, and Sherlock wonders if he’s misread it all, already. But after a minute or so he sees John start to type again.

*And then?*

I’ve yet to see all of you, you know.

It hardly seems fair. I thought perhaps you would let me strip you bare.

*Ok. What else?*

I’ve thought about it you know—what you must look like, slick and wet. How your skin must look flushed with the heat of the water. What it would feel like to pull you close, kiss your wet, eager lips, and feel you grow hard against me.

He wonders if he’s just gone too far. There is a long pause. It could mean someone’s sat down next to John and he can’t respond. It could mean John isn’t sure how to respond. It could mean John has been put off entirely.

Sherlock experiences a momentary rush of panic.

*Christ! You’re going to get me there now, at the rate you’re going.*

Oh.
Yes, perhaps I should stop.

*Don’t you dare.*

He smiles. It’s rather fun, this, and if he’s half hard sitting here, so much the better. There’s no one here to see.

Oh, so you want me tell you

how I would drop to my knees,

lick the water coursing down the inside

of your thighs?

*God, yeah.*

Hmm, so they’re doing this, then. They’re actually doing this. Not at all what Sherlock thought he would be doing on a mundane Monday afternoon, but he’s not about to stop now.

He listens for any sort of sound from downstairs, and when he hears none, licks his lips and palms himself experimentally through his trousers. It’s good. And it seems hardly fair considering John is stuck on the tube.

Sherlock imagines him sitting there, aroused, and having to hide it. It’s the sort of elicit, slightly dangerous thing that John lives for, and that is probably making his situation all the more precarious, which is, in turn, turning him on all the more. A perfect ouroboros of arousal.

*Sherlock?*

Are you hard?

*What do you think?*

How are you hiding it?
Coat over my lap.

I should have come with you.
I could have slipped my hand
underneath, stroked your knee, slid
my hand a little higher every
time someone looked away,
until I was close enough to
trace the hard line of your cock
with my finger. What I wouldn’t
give to feel you throb
against my hand.

Christ. Rosie still with
Mrs. Hudson?

Yes.

Keep talking. Gonna go
back out for the food. Coming
home first.

Sherlock’s cheeks heat, and his heart kicks with anxiety and anticipation.

However will you walk home
from the tube?

No idea. Keep talking.
Sherlock thinks.

I would unzip your flies.

One time at a time.

Slowly. Slow enough no one would notice, until I could reach in… Maybe just one finger. Maybe two.

*God, your hands.*

And then I’d manage to ease beneath the placket of your pants, and…

*Always knew you’d be a tease.*

Sherlock makes a quick mental note to reread all these texts later, there is much to be gleaned, but he’s too worked up to absorb and process it all now. He twitches in his pants, and considers moving to the bedroom, but where he is lying now, he will be on best display when John comes up the stairs.

Oh. Maybe he should… He shrugs out of his jacket, and throws it over the coffee table, undoes one more button at the neck of his shirt, shifts a little to make sure his trousers are straining, just so. The evening sun coming through the windows will fall over his body perfectly if John gets home in the next few minutes.

*Sherlock!*

Oh yes.
Stroke a finger up the bare
length of you. Can you imagine
it John? The sensation of my bare
finger against the naked length of you?
I would trace up and down, up and
down, barely moving a muscle
other than that. Driving you
mad in the middle of a crowded
carriage in the middle of the
afternoon, and I know you. I
know you, John. It would be so
difficult for you to keep quiet,
to not move, to do your best
to be sure no one knew. Could
you be that discreet do you think?
I have my doubts. I think you
would moan, and people would
look, and you’d have to try
to hide it, but you would be so
hungry, John, wouldn’t you? You’re
so hungry right now.

He palms himself through his trousers and bites back a whimper. There is a damp spot forming
against the cotton of his pants.

You should see me, John. You
should see how much I want you
right now. You really do need to
hurry up and get home.
Are you touching yourself?

He looks down at the erection straining almost painfully against the front of his trousers. He palms himself again, just to make it honest.

John…

Yeah? Oh god, Sherlock.

Don’t you dare come without me.

I’m just pulling into the station.

Be right there.

He smiles.

So close, John. Not sure

if I can wait.

Christ, Sherlock. Please!

Hurry.

It’s the most ridiculous, most adolescent thing he’s ever done, but good god, if he isn’t having the time of his life!

He hears the door shut downstairs. John shuts it quietly, takes the stairs quietly. He doesn’t want Mrs. Hudson to know he’s back. And Sherlock can tell by his tread on the stair just how hard he is.

He licks his lips and drops a hand to his hip, and then John is there, standing at the door to the lounge, face flushed, coat folded over one arm, and still held in front of himself. Sherlock lets his lips part, and just stares, the sort of stare that used to do things to John back in the old days, used to send his pulse racing, and his pupils dilating.

John turns around and disappears into the kitchen. Sherlock hears him lock the door, and then he reappears in the lounge, locks that door too, lets the coat his holding drop, and crawls on top of
Sherlock on the sofa, his mouth crashing against Sherlock’s with a moan.

It’s heady, and completely overwhelming, and Sherlock lets himself drown beneath the flood of John’s sighs, and grunts and whimpers, beneath the heat of his surging body and tongue. John’s hand slides between them, presses down hard, slides up the length of Sherlock’s cock, and Sherlock chokes out John’s name like a prayer.

“God yeah, that’s it. Wanna see you come.”

John’s fingers fumble at his flies, find their way inside his pants, and Sherlock rocks up into his touch, and lifts his leg a little at the same time, instant added pressure against John’s cock, as he ruts against him. John makes a surprised, strangled sound, his fingers clenching and loosening against Sherlock’s erection.

He starts to thrust faster, and somewhere in the back of his chemical-addled brain Sherlock thinks that maybe they will come together, and wouldn’t it be a shame, because this is John Watson coming undone, beautifully undone, and Sherlock is too drunk on arousal to fully appreciate it.

“Oh god… Oh god, I…” John sounds shocked, and maybe a little panicked, like he can hardly believe that he’s in this moment, with Sherlock, doing this, and it’s taking him over so fast and so fully. “I—Sherlock, I…”

Sherlock rocks up into John’s hand again, an unspoken plea, and John seems to have just enough presence of mind left to understand. He tightens his grip, starts to stroke. It’s fast, and erratic, but it’s enough.

Sherlock feels it build, molten hot in his centre, feels his balls draw up, and when he comes he comes so hard it surprises him. He groans loud into the empty room, spills hot over John’s hand, and then turns to jelly beneath John’s frantic thrusts and thrills at the sounds John makes the, ‘uh, uh, uh’ as he ruts faster and faster against Sherlock’s thigh, the bitten off, ‘Fuck!’ as as the first burst of his orgasm explodes through him. The ‘Fuck, fuck, oh Jesus, fuck,’ as the orgasm strings out, seems to last longer than Sherlock imagines an orgasm could, wrings John dry. He wonders just how long John has been denying himself.

John is very still.

He pants against Sherlock’s neck.

His hand is still inside Sherlock’s pants, wrapped around his cock as it slowly goes flaccid.

Sherlock breathes in their combined scent, sweat, and endorphins and ejaculate. His mouth waters. He wants to take John tenderly, carefully into his mouth and lick him clean.

John shivers, and Sherlock lifts his arms to wrap around him. “Are you alright?”

John nods, but doesn’t say anything.

Sherlock pets his hair, presses his lips against his forehead. This is the hard part, always the more difficult thing—afterwards, when the lust is waning, and the endorphins have cleared. He remembers how John was with him in Malton, tender, attentive, careful.

Sherlock reaches up and pulls the blanket draped over the back of the couch down on top of them, and feels John relax, even with that small bit of extra protection.

There is so much he wants to say, but John needs—normality now. He traces his fingers up and
down his spine. “Should we get some of the chicken for Rosie, do you think? She liked it last time.”

“Mmm,” John hums against his neck, and then pulls back a little and blinks up at him, pulls his hand out of Sherlock’s pants, and wipes it against the front. “Yeah, maybe. You want the pork dumplings?”

“Yes, and the fried rice.”

“Okay. I’ll get steamed for Rosie, and some chop suey, enough for all of us.”

“Alright.”

John’s fingers stir against his abdomen, his thumb tracing over Sherlock’s navel. “Thank you.”

Sherlock blinks. “For what?”

“Today. This. Us.”

“No thanks required.”

“Still…”

Sherlock splays his fingers along John’s lower back. “I love you.”

“Love you too. I—I think sometimes I just need a little push.”

“Is that what this was?”

“The sexting maybe.”

Sherlock rolls his eyes. “Good god, could we not call it that.”

John grins. “But that’s what it was!”

“Sherlock Holmes does not sext.”

John leans down and sucks on his earlobe before whispering. “Apparently he does, and if he wanted to do it again sometime, he’ll get no objection from me.”

Sherlock reaches up and runs his fingers through John’s hair, until he pulls back and looks at him. “Are you alright? I didn’t push too much?”

John shakes his head. “It wasn’t too much.”

“Sure?”

“Pretty fucking sure.” He grins, and leans down to kiss Sherlock again.

They stay like that much longer than they have any business doing, and when they finally hear Mrs. Hudson’s familiar ‘Woo hoo!’ on the stairs, they have to scramble apart and try to pull themselves together enough to be presentable.

When Sherlock finally unlocks the door to the kitchen, and let’s Rosie and Mrs. Hudson in, he’s sure he’s managed it, but she takes one look at him, grins, reaches out to squeeze his arm, and whispers. “See, I told you he’d come ‘round.”
“Yes. Fine.”

She giggles. “Any time you two want me to take Rosie, just let me know.”

“I’m sure that won’t be necessary.”

“Oh, I’m quite sure it will.” She winks, and then looks over as John strolls into the kitchen, trying so hard to look nonchalant, that it’s painfully obvious.

She looks him up and down. “It’s about time, you.”

John tries even harder to look innocent and fails, and Sherlock has to fight hard to suppress a smile.

“You promise me you’ll treat him right, you hear me. You have no idea how long he’s been pining for you.”

“Oh for god’s sake. Out!” Sherlock starts shooing Mrs. Hudson out the door.

“I mean it!” She calls from the stairwell even after Sherlock has slammed the door behind her.

When he turns back around John is staring at him.

“ Ignore her.”

“No. She has a point.”

Sherlock doesn’t know what to say, and he is even more surprised when John walks toward him, reaches out and pulls him into his arms.

Sherlock sees Rosie appear at the entrance of the kitchen from the lounge. He wonders if John has forgotten she’s there. She has the plush cat Harry gave her dangling from one hand, and she stands and watches them for a minute, and then walks over and pushes herself between their legs, wrapping one arm around Sherlock’s and another around John’s.

John looks down at her. “Hey bug.”

“Hi Daddy.”

“Did you have fun with Mrs. Hudson?”

“Yeah.”

“Got a question for you.”

“Ok.”

“How would you feel if we came to live here with Sherlock.”

Sherlock’s heart stops.

Rosie looks confused.

“Daddy would sell the other flat, and this would be our flat now. We’d all live here together, and the room upstairs would be your room, and in a few months we’ll get you a big girl bed, if you can promise not to get up at night.”

“We live here now?”
“If you like.”

Sherlock watches her consider it. She pulls the cat up close to her face, and sucks her thumb for a moment, before dropping her hand again, and nodding her head, bunches bouncing. “Ok.”

“Okay.” John pulls back and scoops her into his arms. “You want the Chinese chicken in the paper box for supper?”

“Yeah!”

And Sherlock is amused and more than a little awed at how easy it all was, and that the potential of takeaway seems to have easily trumped any other announcement of the evening.
Chapter Notes

Author's Note: There is some description of child abuse suffered by John at the hands of his father when he was three or four years old. This is shared in the context of a therapy session. There is also brief reference to the deleted scene with Magnussen and Sherlock in the hospital in HLV.

“I want to talk about my dad.”

Sherlock’s head snaps around before he can stop himself, and he berates himself for being so obvious, but Ella sits back a little in her chair, takes up her notepad, and looks every bit as surprised.

“Alright.”

“I know I should talk about it in my own session, but…” He glances over at Sherlock. “I want him to hear. I—I need him to know that…” John trails off. It’s difficult for him, difficult already, and Sherlock has no idea why he’s chosen today, but he meets John’s gaze and holds it, tries to let him know that it’s fine, that whatever it is, he should say, should tell, that he will try to hold him up if he can.

“You can talk about whatever you need to talk about here, John. Sherlock, are you alright with John taking time in this session to talk about this?”

“Of course.”

Ella nods. “Alright John, whenever you’re ready.”

He nods, fists his hands together to stop them from shaking and then takes a deep breath. To Sherlock’s surprise, he turns and addresses him. “I’ve been doing a lot of thinking. A lot has happened between us, and it’s happened pretty fast. I mean, not fast in the grand scheme of things. Here we are eight years on.” He smiles and Sherlock smiles back. “But over the last few weeks a lot has happened, yeah?”

Sherlock nods in agreement.

“And I want you to know that I don’t regret a minute, not a single thing we’ve said, not a single thing that’s happened between us. But, I know you, Sherlock. At least I think I do a little by now, and I know you don’t say things. Christ knows sometimes you never stop talking, but when it comes to how you feel about the way I treat you, you don’t say things.”

“Do you feel that’s accurate?” Ella asks.

Sherlock brain is racing, trying to figure out what any of this has to do with John’s father, why they are suddenly talking about him and his reactions. Perhaps John has been unsatisfied with his level of communication, somehow. Perhaps John is angry that he doesn’t talk more, ask for more.

“Sherlock?” Ella urges.
“Hey,” John interjects, his hand reaching across the space between their two chairs, to rest momentarily on Sherlock’s knee, before retreating again. “I’m not angry at you, okay. That’s not what this is about. You’re doing everything right. But there are some things that I’m doing that I—I need you to understand the why behind. That’s all this is.”

Sherlock nods. He takes in Ella’s reaction as she looks back and forth between them, as she writes in her notepad. She’s surprised, surprised by John today, and truth be told, so is Sherlock.

“Alright.”

John looks instantly relieved. He nods and then sits back in his chair, stares down at his hands. Sherlock can see his cheeks starting to pink, and he wonders at it.

“I don’t let him touch me.”

Ella looks up from her notepad. “Sherlock?”

“Yeah.”

“At all?”

“No. I mean when we’re…” His cheeks are scarlet.

“I believe he means when we are intimate.” Sherlock clarifies, willing himself, with every ounce of his strength to not blush as well. “But you do.” Sherlock adds, glancing over at John.

“Yeah, I do, I just mean that there are limits, a lot of limits, and pull back, pull away, and I—I hesitate a lot. I need you to understand that, because I don’t want to hurt you, and I don’t want it to turn into resentment.”

“John, when I told you that it was alright, whatever you wanted, needed, I meant that.”

“But there’s an imbalance.”

Ella sets her notepad down on her lap. “What do you mean an imbalance?”

“He lets me touch him in ways I won’t let him touch me.”

“It’s alright if you need different things from your physical intimacy.”

“Yeah, I know, but this…” He sounds frustrated. “This isn’t that. This isn’t me liking one thing over another. This is me needing to be in control. This is me not being able to let go with him.”

“And you believe that has to do with your father?”

John is quiet, so quiet that Sherlock finally glances over at him. There are unshed tears in his eyes, and Sherlock aches to tell him it doesn’t matter, he doesn’t care, John can be the one in control every time they come together if that is what he wants, if that’s what makes him feel safe, but then—it seems to bother John, and so…

“Yeah…” John whispers desperately. “And I want to tell him.”

“Alright, go ahead.”

John’s eyes flit momentarily to Sherlock, and Sherlock nods.

John sits and stares at the floor. After a moment he looks up, desperate. “I don’t know where to start?”
“Perhaps we should start with how your father touched you?” Ella offers.

Sherlock watches John blanch, but he takes a deep breath, and squares his shoulders, and begins. “Yeah. Right. Right. Okay.” John digs his fingers into the arms of the chair, and then… “Dad started drinking when I was too young to remember him any other way. Harry says she remembers him sober. He was still strict, still always insisting it was his way or nothing, but by the time I came along he’d started drinking just to get through the day, and he was outright drunk at least a few times a week. When he was drunk he had a short fuse. I mean he had a short fuse all the time, but it had more of a tendency to get violent when he was drunk.

“The first time he…” John swallows, rubs at his thigh. “The first time he hit me, that I remember anyway, it was because I didn’t want to eat my peas at supper. I was three or four, I think, and come to think of it, I’m not sure how much I actually remember, and how much of it is what Harry told me, but I refused to eat my veg, and so he hit me up the back of the head every time I took a bite of something other than peas, and then finally shouted at me to eat or there would be hell to pay. When I cried, he grabbed me by the arm, yanked me onto the kitchen floor, and told me he’d kick me if I refused again. I did. He did. I ate my peas.”

“Sherlock, how are you feeling?” Ella suddenly asks.

“What?”

“The things John is sharing, how is that making you feel? It seems like you’re feeling something.” She nods down to his hands gripped, white-knuckled to his knees.

“Oh.” He lets go.

He thinks of John, a small boy the same age as Rosie. He thinks about his father, or anyone doing the things he’s just described to him, and he feels fierce, defiant, like he could kill, like he wants to.

“That’s your problem, Sherlock. You’ve always been attracted to broken things.” His inner Mycroft reminds him.

“I’m angry.”

“Why?”

“Because he was a child, and he didn’t deserve that. He deserved to be safe, to feel safe. I would kill anyone who treated him that way. I…”

He stops himself just short of confessing that he has, but he sees John look over at him, and when he turns and meets his gaze, he sees him finally understand that night at Appledore over three years prior.

“John, do you want to continue?”

“Yeah, yeah, I… Are you okay?”

It takes Sherlock a moment to realise he’s talking to him. “What?”

“Are you okay?”

“Of course.”

“You sure?”
“You didn’t have to do what you did that night—for me. You didn’t have to do that.”

Sherlock glances furtively at Ella. “Yes, I did.”

He sees John realise where they are. “We’ll talk about it later, then.”

Sherlock nods. “If you want.”

“I do.” John turns back to Ella. “Sorry, it’s—it’s something we just can’t talk about here.”

“Alright. Would you like to continue talking about your father?”

“Right. Yeah. Uh…” John takes one more worried glance in his direction and then continues. “It was like that a lot, growing up. I learned to not draw attention to myself. That was harder for my sister, and I get why she left when she did, and I—I don’t blame her, but it was worse after she left because he was angry about her and her girlfriend, and angry about her defying him and running away, and he didn’t have her to take it out on, so he took it out on me and mum, and because I didn’t want mum taking the brunt of it, it mostly ended up being me.

“So, I guess in some ways that was all the touch I knew. Mum wasn’t really affectionate that way. She didn’t hold and cuddle us. She didn’t comfort us when we were ill or injured. She was pretty practical about patching us up, and we weren’t supposed to cry, just sort of keep calm and carry on. She probably didn’t want Dad getting angry, you know. Makes sense. But, we just never got touched the way I imagine other kids do.”

“And did you encounter any sort of physical contact or affection outside your home?”

John has to think about it. “I guess when I was in school, or with my friends, when we were doing sport, or rough housing and messing about.”

“And how did that sort of touch make you feel?”

“Good. Felt a bit rough, but safe. Then in the army, during Phase One training it was more of the same, maybe more of, too, and it was fantastic. You were meant to engage that way, it was encouraged, rewarded even, as long as it was in a training exercise. Felt like approval, you know.”

“Like friendship, bonding?”

“Maybe, yeah.”

“Like love?”

John doesn’t reply. Sherlock hears him swallow dryly.

“You’ve spoken to me about your commanding officer, about what an important relationship that was to you.”

John nods.

“Do you think that the environment in which you met had anything to do with the depth of affection you held for one another?”

“Maybe. That happens a lot over there. It wasn’t abnormal. And nothing happened. He was my commanding officer. Nothing happened.”
“He didn’t touch you?”

“No!”

Sherlock is surprised at the strength of John’s reaction, as it seems in direct opposition to the soft, eager, open way he had seen John react to James Sholto on his wedding day, and the hesitant but obviously fond looks the man had given him in return.

“Never?”

“I mean a couple of times, but professional, in the context of training.”

“Rough but safe?”

“Just what are you implying?”

“John, due to your life experiences, your perception of roughness, of violence, is somewhat unique. Your only exposure to touch as a child was what you experienced from your father, and it was violent and abusive. That being said, it was coming from a caregiver and guardian, the only person a child has to model love.”

“Are you saying I liked it?” John sounds almost murderous.

“No. Not at all. It was obviously and rightly, profoundly traumatic. But what I am saying, is that when the sort of touch modelled to you from your earliest memories is only violent, it can cause your approach to expressing emotion physically to get muddled. Things can get hardwired differently.

“You enjoyed the roughness of sport, and the hand-to-hand combat exercises in your military training, because they were rough, and violent and yet still controlled and safe. They gave you a sense of belonging, of camaraderie, and perhaps even tightened the bond of your friendships. It was familiar, but it was also relatively safe.

“Tenderness, gentleness, vulnerability, those things are different, unfamiliar, and perhaps somewhat terrifying, perhaps especially with men. They require you to be open and vulnerable in new and unfamiliar ways, especially if you feel that to do so is a kind of submission, or a giving up of personal comfort and safety.”

John huffs out something that sounds like disbelief.

“This is difficult for you to talk about. Do you know why?”

“Because it all sounds a bit kinky to be honest.”

Ella cocks a brow. “Does it?”

“You make it sound like I want to rough him up in bed.”

“That’s not what I meant to convey. I’m trying to help you understand your reactions to him touching you, I assume you meant with tenderness, in moments of physical or sexual intimacy?”

John sniffs.

“Would you like to continue on this topic?”

“No.”
“May I say something?” Sherlock speaks up.

John turns to look at him and, after a moment, nods in assent.

“You do let me touch you, but it’s when I try to initiate, especially certain things, that you seem uncomfortable. Perhaps it is like Ella says, it’s more about feeling as though you are having to submit to things being done to you, and I know you say you trust me, but I have given you so many reasons not to trust me in the past, especially when it comes your physical and emotional safety, and even if you do trust me, even if you do, you can still feel a thing despite all logic. That is the rather horrible thing about feelings. They just are. Sometimes despite all logic to the contrary, they are.”

John smiles, crooked and wry. “So what? We’re just going to go on the way we have been, me never letting you initiate, always being uncomfortable with you touching me?”

“John, it’s not always, and we’ve only been intimate a small handful of times. Even I’m not sure what I’m comfortable with yet. I’ve pulled away too, if you recall. It’s early, new. We have time.”

“But I don’t want to mess this up!”

“You keep saying that.”

“Yeah, because I’ve messed up every relationship I’ve ever been in, and you matter to me!”

“John,” Ella interrupts. “Sherlock makes a fair point. This is new territory for both of you. Take some time to let things develop, and if after a month or so you still feel the same way, and you are still concerned about it, we can address it again. You’ve made remarkable progress since the last time you were here. Give yourself time to celebrate that.”

“Yeah, I…”

“How have things been going with your drinking. You mentioned in your personal session that you’ve been trying to cut back.”

John looks over at Sherlock. “Good. Good, I think.”

Sherlock nods. “Very good. We don’t have any at the flat. When we were away on a case last week, John ordered something non-alcoholic when we ate out.”

“That’s excellent, John.” Ella encourages. “It’s very clear to me how seriously you take this relationship you’re building together. I haven’t seen you quite this motivated in a long time.”

“Yeah, well… Just hope I can keep it up.”

“There are bound to be ups and downs, but your commitment is clear. When the downs come we will address them, but for now enjoy yourselves.” She smiles. “And I think this is enough for today. John, I’ll see you on Friday, and and Sherlock you should let me know if you would like to start rescheduling one-on-one sessions, since we’re committing this slot to your joint ones.”

“Yes.”

John is quiet on the way home in their shared cab, and Sherlock lets him be.

When they get back, Mrs. Hudson is just coming out of her flat, hand-in-hand with Rosie. “Oh, look
who’s here."

“Daddy!!”

Sherlock wonders if he should try to distract her, if it’s going to be one of those sorts of post-therapy
evenings, but John just smiles, and scoops her up, and lets her tell him all about the ant pile they
found by the bins, and helping Mrs. Hudson dust her furniture, and decorating sugar biscuits, and
Sherlock silently mouths a thank-you to Mrs. Hudson as they make their way upstairs.

“You want me to cook something?” John asks, putting her down.

“If you’d like.”

“What do you think?”

“What do we have in the fridge is the more relevant question, I would imagine.”

“Right.” John wanders into the kitchen, and Sherlock sets about turning on a movie for Rosie.

Could do mushroom risotto with chicken, and some veg, or could do shepherd’s pie. “Pie!” Rosie
says in tandem with Sherlock.

John chuckles. “Okay, pie it is, Love.” And Sherlock isn’t sure if it’s aimed at him, or Rosie, or
both of them at once.

Sherlock listens to him putter about the kitchen, humming softly to himself, and suddenly he feels so
fond it’s rather overwhelming. He finishes getting Watson settled, and wanders into the kitchen to
join him.

John is scrubbing out a skillet in the sink. He looks up with a smile. “Hey.”

“Would you like some help?”

John looks surprised. He grins the grin Sherlock has fallen in love with, and then nods his head
toward the pantry. “You can peel potatoes if you like. No cutting yourself this time, though, yeah.”

“No.” He holds up the finger he had previously mangled on the mandolin. “This is just starting to
heal.”

John looks relaxed, and happy, and though Sherlock has what feels like a million questions about
everything he’d shared in therapy, he’s more than happy to defer them, to let this calm string out as
long as it is able.

They dance easily around one another in the kitchen, prepping the meal in amiable silence, broken
only by John’s occasional humming, and Rosie’s exclamations from the lounge. When the food is
finally in the oven to bake, John turns around, leans against the counter and looks at him.

“What?” Sherlock finally asks.

“Nothing. I just like to look. There was a long time I couldn’t. I still remember the day I woke up
and couldn’t remember the exact colour of your eyes.” John’s jaw tightens, and he swallows down
the emotion that still comes with the memory.

Sherlock bridges the space between them, and stares down at him. “Then look your fill.”

John huffs out a laugh, shakes his head and then looks back up at him. “I love you.”
“I love you too.”

“It’s good, really good, being back here.”

“Yes. I’ve been thinking of getting a second wardrobe, for your clothes. They’re still all in boxes or at the other flat.”

“Yeah?” John sounds pleased. “Would be a good idea, probably.”

Sherlock glances around them. “I’ve been thinking that we might outgrow this place, but I suppose we can cross that bridge when we come to it.”

“Right.” John reaches out and hooks his thumbs under the waistband of Sherlock’s trousers, lets his fingers drape over his hips. “As long as…” He’s staring at the centre of Sherlock’s chest. He swallows again. “As long as we’re together, I don’t care where we go.” He looks up at him, pulls gently at his waist, and Sherlock steps forward and wraps him in his arms.

He stands in the middle of the little kitchen that just a couple of years prior had been a drugs lab, and he listens to Rosie singing along to her film in the lounge, breathes in the scent of John’s home cooked meal in the oven, and relishes in the warmth of him in his arms, and he realises that he is the luckiest person in the world, and he never would have thought, a few years prior, that this could be possible, that it was even something he might want. But things change, and here they all are.

When supper is ready they spread a blanket on the floor in the lounge, and have a picnic in front of the television which thrills Rosie. John bathes, her, and Sherlock reads her a bedtime story, and when he gets back downstairs John is making a cup of tea. He looks up from the kitchen counter as Sherlock strolls into the lounge. “You want some?”

“Yes, thank you.”

He settles into his chair, and smiles up at John when he finally returns and hands him a cup. “This evening was pleasant. Thank you.”

“Thank me? What for?”

“The cooking, the picnic here in the lounge, and—everything you said today.”

John takes a sip of tea, looking at him over the rim of the cup before setting it down again. “You told me that Magnussen was for Mary.”

Oh. So it’s this, then.

“Oh. So it’s this, then.”

“Which was partially true.”

“Partially. And the other bit was what? Punishment? You were punishing him for flicking me in the fucking face?”

“And perhaps punishing myself for not seeing until it was too late, and putting you in that position in the first place.”

John just stares.

“And—maybe a little personal vengeance as well.”

John huffs. “‘Cause he took a piss in the fireplace?”
“Mrs. Hudson did have to clean that up, you know.”

John grins. And Sherlock leaves the rest unsaid, suddenly uncomfortable, for reasons he doesn’t fully understand, at the thought of telling John about Magnussen’s unsolicited hospital visit. Truth be told, he’s still not 100% sure he didn’t hallucinate it. Best left unsaid, definitely.

“It was wrong of me, John, to let it go as far as it did. My errors put you in a position where you—where you were forced to submit to a horrible humiliation, and I couldn’t just walk away from that as though it didn’t happen.”

“Yeah, well—I’ve been through much worse, and the consequences weren’t exactly worth the gesture.”

“It’s my responsibility to keep you safe. I failed.”

“Thought keeping you safe was my responsibility.”

“It is. And I’m grateful, but that doesn’t mean I don’t want to do the same.”

John sighs and stares down at his lap. “Right. Okay.”

“I would have killed him.” Sherlock doesn’t know why he says it. It just comes, and there is a lethality to his tone that surprises even him.

“Magnussen?” John looks confused.

“Your father.”

John shakes his head, and stares down at his lap, when he looks up again, he holds Sherlock's gaze. “I don’t want to talk about him, okay. I don’t want to give him a single second more of my life. I—I’d rather just try to move forward.”

“I want you to be comfortable.”

“And I want you to be comfortable, but we both seem to be setting one another off sometimes. Truthfully, casual sex was much easier.”

Sherlock doesn’t know what to say to this confession, and after a moment of his silence, John looks up from his mug. “I just mean… When it was casual it was a quick moment of pleasure, no strings attached, nothing on the line. As long as you got the other person off, you were golden, but when you love someone…”

“It’s weightier.”

“Yeah. And I didn’t mean I’d rather that. It’s fun, but it’s different from what I have with you, and I love what I have with you, okay. I hope you know that.”

Sherlock nods. “I do.”

“Good… Good.” John takes another sip of tea.

“I have an idea.”

John arches a brow, mid sip, and then sets his teacup down. “Christ. Okay.”

“No. A—a good one, I hope.”
“Yeah? Okay. Let me have it, then.”

“Exposure therapy.”

“What?”

“It’s often used to treat PTSD, but I thought that in this case…”

“Sherlock, I don’t want to feel like an experiment.”

“It’s not an experiment. It’s already a proven method.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t want to feel like your patient.”

Sherlock can’t help the grin that twitches at the corners of his mouth, and John rolls his eyes. “No.”

Sherlock grins.

“We’re not playing doctor.”

“What if you were the doctor?”

He sees something flicker across John’s face that makes him decide they will definitely revisit the entire idea at a later date.

John sniffs. “Well, that would rather defeat the purpose wouldn’t it?”

“Mm, fair point.”

John sighs and flops back in his chair. “So this plan of yours, what exactly would it entail?”

*And there’s his John.* Danger always a motivator. But in this particular situation that may complicate things. It will require treading carefully.

“Just what it sounds like, slow exposure to accepting touch. You already let me hold you, kiss you. It seems that it is the more overtly intimate or erotic things that you have difficulty with me initiating. So I thought we could start with things that straddle the line between platonic and erotic, those things that can tip either way, and see how that goes.”

“What kind of things?”

“Massage. Bathing together. Drawing on your back.”

“Doing what?”

“Drawing on your back.”

“Why would you do that?”

“You never did that as a…” Sherlock catches himself. “Not with a pen, obviously. With a finger. You draw words on the person’s back, and they try to guess what you’re writing.”

John huffs out a laugh. “People don’t do that.”

“Yes they do.” Sherlock suddenly feels self-conscious. “Well, at least Dad used to do when I was a boy.”
“Really?”

“Yes. He would read me a story every night before I went to bed, and then he would choose five vocabulary words from that night’s chapter, and draw them on my back, and I would have to guess.”

John looks slightly befuddled, but undeniably charmed at this revelation.”

“Huh… That sounds kind of—nice, actually. But it’s a kid thing, right. I mean—we’re adults.”

“If you don’t want to, we won’t.”

“Didn’t say that.”

“It was implied.”

“You angry.”

“I don’t see why we should have to follow anyone else’s rules. This belongs to us. We should do what we want.”

John blinks. “Yeah. Okay. Fair enough. I just—I’ve told you, I’m not used to this.”

“Fine.”

“Hey.”


“I’m sorry.”

“Fine.”

“I mean it, Sherlock. I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

“You didn’t.”

“Seems like maybe I did.”

“No.”

John sighs. “You want to write on my back, write on my back.”

Sherlock snaps out of his sulk. “Really?”

“Yeah. Really.”

Sherlock lifts himself up by the arms of his chair, and crosses his legs beneath himself. “Come here, then.”

“Where?”

“Sit on the floor in front of my chair. Maybe sit on a pillow. Do you want me to start a fire?”

“No, I’m fine.”

“Alright.”
John comes and sits, and Sherlock feels ridiculously keen. “Would you take off your jumper? Hard to feel it under two layers.”

“Yeah, okay.” John shrugs out of it so he’s just in his shirt, and lays it over his lap. “I feel a bit ridiculous, just so you know.”

“We don’t have to.”

“No. Go ahead.”

Sherlock reaches out and strokes a hand across John’s back, between his shoulder blades, and thinks. Best to cut the tension straight off. He grins and writes.

A-N-D-E-R-S-O-N  I-S  I-D-I-O-T

He can see John’s mouth stretching into a grin before he’s even finished. He laughs when he’s done. “You’re mad.”

“Did you guess it?”

“Yeah. ‘Course I did. Very romantic.”

Sherlock chuckles, rubs a hand over his back, and starts again.

I  L-O-V-E  Y-O-U

“Love you too.” John’s voice is soft, and fond.


“For what?” John cranes his neck around, and looks up at him.

“This.”

“Me letting you write on my back like we’re a couple of teenagers?”

“Yes.”

John smile’s crookedly. “Yeah. ‘Course. It’s kind of—nice, actually.”

“Yes?”

“Mm. Do some more.”

“Alright.”

John turns back around and Sherlock starts again:

C-O-C-K

John laughs outright, and Sherlock chuckles along with him. He smoothes a hand over John’s back.

B-E-D-?

“You wanna?” John tilts his head back, and looks up at him. “We might not sleep. It’s kind of early.”
“I know.” John’s cheeks go pink, and Sherlock wants to kiss him, but he pushes down the urge. John nods. “Ok.”

They wander through the flat, turning out the lights, and then meet again in the bedroom. John is already changing into his pyjamas. Sherlock retreats to the loo to brush his teeth and do the same, and then they switch. When Sherlock gets back to the bedroom, John is lying on his front, shirtless.

Sherlock stops and John blinks up at him. “Thought we could keep doing it, if that’s okay.”

Sherlock nods. “Light on or off?”

“Whichever you prefer.”

“I want to know what you prefer.”

He sees John think about it. “On.”

Sherlock feels a rush of gratitude. “Alright.”

Sherlock goes around the side of the bed, and crawls in. John has his head turned away from him. It’s fine.

He reaches down and lays a hand on John’s back. It’s warm, but John still shivers.

He lets it rest there for a moment, takes in the expanse of John’s back, the puckered, ruined flesh of the exit wound in his shoulder, the burn scars he had observed before. He wants to kiss each one. But not tonight.

He starts to write.


“What? When?” John mumbles into the pillow.

“When I was away those two years.”

“Oh.”

“I did miss you.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes. Of course.”

“Good.”

Sherlock smiles, strokes a hand down John’s back, and up again.


John finally turns his head, to look up at him. “Why?”

“Because you keep me grounded, are a catalyst to my deductions, your mere presence has a centring effect. I am quite lost without you, you know. Our last case only confirmed it.”

John doesn’t say anything, and so Sherlock strokes his back again. John’s eyes slide shut, and he
does it again, and again, and then lifts his fingers to use the blunt end of his nails. John shivers, and then sighs, and then melts into the mattress.

After several minutes his breathing slows, and deepens, and Sherlock keeps on, slow, gentle passes of his fingertips. He stares down at the scars peppering John’s back, and thinks about the way that others have touched him, the way that John is permitting Sherlock to touch him now. He thinks about the fact that John trusts him enough to fall asleep beneath his touch, and he feels equal parts undeserving and determined, determined to never make John regret his trust, not ever again, not even for a moment.

It’s probably a wild and unrealistic hope, but god help him, he intends to try.
“Papa…” A small whisper, light as a flower petal on an April breeze. Sherlock buries his face deeper in the pillow.

“You get up. There’s food.” Far too cheery for so early in the morning.

“Papa.”

“Maybe he’s too sleepy, and doesn’t want these waffles. I suppose we could go into the kitchen and eat them ourselves, Bug, what do you say.”

Sherlock cracks open an eye. Rosie is lying on John’s pillow staring at him intently.

“No, he wants them.”

“Mmm,” John hums. “Not so sure.”

“Did someone say waffles?” Sherlock mumbles sleepily.

Rosie sits up. “Food. In bed!” She announces as though this new turn of events is the most transcendent experience of her young life.

“Mmm.” Sherlock rolls onto his back and throws an arm over his head. John is standing beside the bed with a tray. He’s wearing pyjama bottoms and a plaid dressing gown Sherlock has never seen before, cinched at the waist. There is no shirt beneath, and Sherlock is getting a breathtaking glimpse of bare chest. “What’s all this?”

“Food in bed!” Rosie repeats.

“So it seems, but why?” He looks from Rosie back up to John, who simply shrugs.

“Thought it might be nice. You brought me breakfast in bed when we were in Malton. Figured it was my turn.”

Sherlock sniffs the air delicately. “Is that Nutella?”

John grins. “‘Course it is.”

Sherlock sits up and reaches for the tray eagerly, which seems to please John, because he grins even wider.

“And coffee, and some sausage. Figured you’d need some fat and protein to counteract all that sugar and caffeine.”

“I love you,” Sherlock declares with a pleased grin.
Rosie rolls onto her back and starts kicking her legs in the air and singing a tune of her own creation, which seems to primarily be about waffles. John sits down on the end of the bed and watches him eat. “Molly’s going to come and get this one in a bit.”

Sherlock raises a brow. “Oh? Any particular reason?”

“Mrs. Hudson’s gone to her sister’s for the next two days, and I thought it might be a good time for your experiments.”

“Experiments?”

“The exposure therapy.”

Sherlock’s mouths a sudden ‘oh’ of understanding as Rosie starts singing about waffles and exposure therapy.

“I would rather not consider it an experiment.”

“No? Thought that would be right up your alley.”

“And you said it made you uncomfortable, so…”

Rosie is sitting up now, looking back and forth between them.

Sherlock offers her a piece of waffle smeared with Nutella. She snatches it up and stuffs it in her mouth.

John is staring down at his lap, picking at a loose thread on the tie of his dressing gown.

“John.”

He looks up. “Mm?”

“Are you sure? There’s no rush.”

Rosie climbs down off the bed and runs out of the room.

“Where you going Bug?” John calls after her.

“My book!” She calls back.

“Okay, but no stairs. Just the ones in the lounge.”

A small, exasperated “I know!” echoes back down the hall, and John smiles and shakes his head. “She’s starting to get lippy. Reminds me of Harry. She’s going to be a handful.”

“Good thing we’re both used to handfuls.”

John huffs and smiles. “Last night was—nice. It was alright. I want to try some more.”

“Alright. As long as you know we can stop—anytime, for any reason.”

He nods, and he looks. He’s looking at Sherlock in a way he never has before.

“What?”

“I’ve never been with anyone like this before.”
“Is that good?”

John smiles softly. “Yeah.”

Sherlock feels his cheeks heat. He digs back into the waffles, which are ridiculously crispy, and soft, and sweet. Exactly how he likes them.

“How.”

He looks back up and John grins. “I mean it. You’ve been—amazing. Fantastic.”

Sherlock’s cheeks heat even more, and John chuckles and gets to his feet, walks over and ruffles his hair before carding his fingers in, fistng his curls for a moment, and then letting go. “I should go make sure Rosie isn’t burning the place down.”

“Mm, it is terribly quiet out there.”

“Oh, Christ.” John gets up and trots out of the room.

“What’s this then?” Sherlock hears from the lounge, more amused and mildly frustrated than angry.

“Books.”

“Yeah, don’t think these are your books though.”

“Look Daddy, worms.”

“Protozoa actually.”

“Prozoa?”

“They’re like tiny little worms you usually can’t see. Sometimes they can make you sick. Now let’s put all these books away. They’re Papa’s books.”

Sherlock freezes mid chew.

“Papa will let me read them?”

“Some of them, maybe, but you have to ask him.”

“I’ll ask.”

Sherlock swallows down a wave of emotion as the pounding of tiny feet approaches down the hallway, and then Rosie reappears with one of his old Biology textbooks in hand. “Papa, this book?!”

“Yes, you may read it.”

“Prozoa!”

“Yes, and metazoans, and bacteria, and a myriad of other simple life forms.”

She hands him the book, and then crawls back up onto the bed. He hands it back to her and she sits cross-legged on the mattress flipping through the pages.

“Some of that information is probably out of date. I believe that book was published in ’94.”
“Not sure she’ll notice the difference. Bit above her, don’t you think?” John cocks a brow at her examining a photo of two naked human beings, as he strides back into the room.

Rosie’s head snaps up. “I’m big.”

“Yes, you’re very intelligent Watson, but that is a first year college textbook. You may find it a tad dry.”

She ignores him and goes back to perusing the pages.

John looks over at him and grins crookedly at his almost empty plate. “Hungry?”

“Starving.” Sherlock winks, and to his delight John’s eyes drop away with a pleased smile.

“Molly will be here in an hour. I should probably get her packed.”

“No Molly!”

John frowns. “You love Molly.”

“NO!”

“Oi! Lip. Watch it.”

“Come here, and bring your book. I’ll read you a page of your choice while Daddy packs your bag. You know Molly will take you to the pet shelter again. She always goes to the pet shelter on Wednesdays to drop off donations. You can see the cats and dogs.”

“No!”

Sherlock shakes his head. “Fine. Suit yourself. I’ll just go on eating my breakfast, and you will have to figure out how to read entirely on your own.”

He can see her examining him out of the corner of his eye. Sherlock looks up, and catches John’s eye, motions for him to go and pack her bag, and John goes gratefully.

Sherlock keeps nibbling at his breakfast sausage. After a moment or two, Rosie appears beside him, book in tow. “This one.” She points to a page with a picture of a bee and the title: PHYLOGENIES AND THE HISTORY OF LIFE emblazoned on the top.

“Mmm, excellent choice.” He takes the tray from off his lap, sets it on the floor, and then starts to read. After a moment or two she curls on her side, lays her head in his lap and sticks her thumb in her mouth.

“Phygetic tree?” She asks some minutes later, popping her thumb out.

“Phylogenetic tree, and it’s not a real tree like grows in the park, it’s a sort of tree-like drawing that helps to categorise kinds of life. It shows their evolutionary relationships.”

“Oh.”

“Shall I read some more, or should we talk about Molly.”

“Stay here.”

“You would rather stay here, I know. There has been a lot of travel and visiting lately. But Molly is
only for a day or two, while Daddy and I get some important things done.”

She rolls onto her back, head still resting on his thigh, thumb still in her mouth. “I’m big.” She mumbles around it.

“Yes, I know, but these are specifically Daddy things. Very boring. You would be begging us to take you to Molly’s after only a few hours of our nonsense, believe you me.”

She blinks up at him, and then pulls her thumb out of her mouth again and giggles.

He smiles. “After this, no more trips for at least a month. I promise.”

“How long?”

“A month is 30 days. That means from when you go to sleep one night, until you go to sleep the next, thirty times.”

“A long time.”

“Yes.”

“How many sleeps are Molly?”

“Two sleeps.”

“Not long.”

“No.”

He sees her consider it. After a moment she sits up and reaches over to turn the page in the book.

“Ok. Read more first.”

“Alright, one more page.”

In the end, Rosie proves a true Watson and greets her fate with the sort of calm, resigned courage one would expect. Molly will spoil her ridiculously, of course, and Sherlock doesn’t feel as bad as he might for leaving her.

He sits back in the passenger seat and stares at John as he navigates London’s late morning traffic.

John glances over at him. “You okay?”

“Mm.” He reaches over and lays a hand on John’s thigh, and leaves it there for the rest of the short drive home.

By the time they get back to the flat, Mrs. Hudson is gone, and John pushes Sherlock up against the wall in the foyer, and kisses him until he is breathless and half hard. When he is finally able to come up for air, he gazes down at John and smiles fondly. “Don’t you have work today, Doctor?”

“Skiving off.”

“So I see.”

“Figured snogging my ridiculously gorgeous boyfriend was preferable to treating strep and piles.”
Sherlock cocks a brow. “Lovely.”

John grins. “But it does mean we have the next two days entirely to ourselves. Whatever should we do?”

“I have a few ideas.”

“Thought you might.”

“What is your opinion on co-bathing?”

“Never done it, but would be willing to try.”

“Will we both fit in that tiny tub, do you think?”

“A close thing.”

Sherlock thinks for a moment. “How quickly could you pack an overnight bag?”

John’s brow furrows, but he looks intrigued, too, which is always a good thing with John. “Quarter of an hour.”

“Good. Do it. I have an idea.”

“You going to tell me where we’re going?”

“No. It’s not far. I’ll tell you when we need to turn, don’t worry.” Sherlock glances over at the tension in John’s shoulders. “Nothing unpleasant, I guarantee.”

“Never thought that.”

“Mmm. Take the next right.”

“Okay.”

They drive in silence for a few more minutes, and then Sherlock nods toward the hotel approaching just ahead. “Pull in just here. They’ll valet the car.”

“You booked us into the Langham Hotel?!”

“Yes.” Sherlock hesitates for a moment when he sees the look on John’s face. “Not good.”

“No. Good. It’s good, I just…” He glances over at him and shoots him a grin. “Bit posh.”

“You are a millionaire John. I do believe a bit of personal pampering should be allowed now and again.”

“Christ.”

They pull up, and their car is whisked away. John gapes at everything as they enter the expansive marble lobby and Sherlock is pleased that his little surprise seems to be so well received.

“The Infinity Suite is ready for you, Sir.”
Sherlock tears his eyes away from John to take the key card from the young man at the check-in desk.

“And of course your Suite gives you full access to the club.”

“Yes, thank you.”

Sherlock is quite sure they won’t be using the club. It will be room service for their meals. When they get to the room and the bellhop has left, John looks at the opulence surrounding them, and bursts into a fit of giggles. “This place is bigger than our entire flat.

“Indeed. And it has two bathtubs.”

John laughs again. “Did you just check us into £2000 a night suite, because it has two bathtubs?!”

“Well, that was one of the reasons. It also has two huge beds, room service, and a rainfall shower. Oh, and excellent views of All Souls Church and Langham Place.”

“Room service, eh? Some of us didn’t have a monstrous, sugar-laden waffle for breakfast. Could use some lunch maybe.”

Sherlock rolls his eyes, but picks up the phone and dials room service anyway. He orders a light lunch, not too filling, and easily digested. Who knows what the evening may hold. Best to think ahead.

John is wandering from room to room, taking it all in. “You should see this tub…” He calls from the master bath. “I think it lights up!”

“How utterly unnecessary.”

He hears John laugh. “They’ve got all sorts of things to put it in it, though, so that’s nice.”

When the food arrives, Sherlock has it spread out on the dining room table, and he and John sit and chat while they eat.

When John finishes his soup, he sits back in his chair, and looks around them again. “All a bit lavish this. If I didn’t know better, I’d think you were trying to get in my pants.”

“The thought never occurred.”

John shoots him a doubtful look.

“Well, possibly it occurred—for a moment. But this is meant to go slow, and I intend for it to.”

“What if I want to speed it up?”

“If you’re saying you would like to initiate something right here, right now, I think you should know that you would meet with absolutely no objection.”

John grins and leans back in his chair. “Might still be hungry.”

“Sounds promising.”

John jerks his chin down to his lap. “Come here.”

Sherlock, not wanting to misread things as he had previously, seeks clarification. “How do you want
me?”

John smirks. “Oh, you might be surprised…” He winks, and Sherlock smiles indulgently.

“Yes, but how specifically—at the moment.”

“Come here.” John tilts his chin. “Sit on my lap.”

Sherlock feels his cheeks start to heat, but he goes eagerly, and the blushing always seems to charm John, so it works in his favour. He straddles the chair, and settles down on John’s lap, facing him, looks down at him, eyes taking in every minute physiological change at once. John is eager, hungry, and slightly anxious all at once.

“Wanna kiss you.”

“Good.” Sherlock rumbles.

John stares up at him. “Not sure this is going to work though. You’re going to get a crick in your neck.”

“Switch?”

He sees John consider it. His pupils blow wide, and he nods.

Sherlock scrambles off him, settles into John’s chair, and shivers as John crawls into his lap in the same position he had just been in. “Better?”

John is looking into his eyes, hands already sliding around his back, down over the rise of his arse. “Mmm.” He squeezes, and then dips down to kiss him, as he lifts his hands to his face.

It’s deep and heady right away. John’s tongue sliding and tangling with his, John’s hands everywhere, and he loses all track of time. There is nothing but sensation, breath, pulse, and the low, warm thrum of slowly building arousal.

John reaches down, takes two handfuls of Sherlock’s arse, and uses it for leverage to pull their bodies closer. Sherlock is growing hard, and the added weight and pressure is delicious. His breath catches, his eyes pop open, and John grins like the cat that’s got the cream. “Good?”

“What do you think?”

John just hums in response, his eyes grow dark and he rolls his hips a little. “What do you want, hm?” He’s finding a rhythm. “Tell me what you want.”

Somewhere in the back of his head Sherlock knows this is John stalling, not wanting to give up control just yet (not ready). He could object, but they have two whole nights here, and he meant it when he said he intended to take it slow. If this how John wants it, then he isn’t about to stop him. They can warm up and slide into it slowly.

There are things he wants that he doesn’t dare ask for, things he knows John wouldn’t be comfortable with (not yet at least). But there are other things, things they’ve already done that were perfect, wonderful, and he would love to do again.

“Hey…” John is staring at him. “It’s okay. You can ask. I promise you that if it’s something I’m not okay with I’ll tell you.”

“I want your mouth on me.”
“Yeah?” John sounds breathless. “Where?”

“Everywhere.”

“Jesus…” John swallows and licks his lips, his eyes dragging the length of Sherlock’s body, as much of it as he can see anyway.

John glances toward the door, toward the windows, looking out for unseen eyes even in the utter privacy of their hotel room. After a moment he seems to make a decision.

“Take your clothes off,” he says when his eyes finally come back to rest on Sherlock. He slides off his lap, and Sherlock notices he’s half hard. “All of them.”

Sherlock’s cheeks flame, but he wants it, loves it, if he’s honest, loves being so vulnerable, so open, so at John’s mercy. He strips slowly, makes it a bit of a show. He loves the way John’s eyes follow each movement, the loosening of one button after another, the slow slide of fabric over flesh. The room is cool, enough to peak his nipples and raise a little gooseflesh on his skin, but not enough to be uncomfortable.

He stands fully exposed in front of John’s chair, and John stares at him slack-jawed, and heavy-lidded. He looks almost drunk, Sherlock thinks, drunk with want, and it’s a heady thing that, seeing John’s desire writ so clear across his features, know that he is it’s focus.

He shivers again, completely involuntary.

John gets to his feet, walks across the room and adjusts the thermostat up a few degrees and then returns, snatchng a decorative pillow and faux fur throw off the back of the nearest sofa as he does. He pushes the remnants of their meal off to the side and spreads the blanket out over the huge dining table, and then turns around with the cushion still in his hand.

“Come here.”

“Sherlock does.”

“When you said everywhere, did you mean…”

Sherlock nods. “Anywhere.”

Some of John’s determination and arousal seem to be waning. He looks almost anxious. “Cause listen, there’s this…” He swallows. “Thing I’ve—thought about. But it’s kind of—a lot.”

Sherlock blinks rapidly, trying desperately to guess what it might be. The mystery of it is almost better than the knowing, but still… “Tell me.”

“I’m not sure I…”

“John. Please.” And when he says nothing, “John you’ve had my cock in your mouth, I’m fairly certain that nothing you say now could surprise me.”

John lets out a high-pitched, nervous sounding laugh, and Sherlock steps forward, and looks down at him. “Just say it. What’s the worst that could happen?”

John’s eyes drop away. He stares down at the floor and shrugs. “Could put you off. Might think I’m a bit—I don’t know… Kinky? Queer? Might not want me anymore.” It’s remarkably vulnerable and honest. Sherlock is surprised.
“You are queer, John.”

John’s eyes snap up.

“And we are both standing in the middle of posh hotel room about to do, I assume, quite unspeakable things to one another, so probably a touch kinky as well. I imagine that makes us both beyond all hope of being considered on the straight and narrow. Besides,” he winks. “You love it, and I love you for loving it, so I fail to see the problem.”

John makes an attempt at looking scandalised and fails spectacularly. Sherlock chuckles. “Now, whatever it is you want to do to me, just be out with it, for God sake. It’s cold in here, and I’m in agony. He drops his eyes briefly to his fully erect cock, and delights in watching John’s eyes follow on instinct, only to snap back up again, pupils huge and dark.

“You’ll tell me to stop if you…?”

“Of course!” He lets out a long suffering sigh, just to make John aware of how ridiculous he’s being.

John swallows dryly. “Yeah. Yeah, okay, then just—bend over the table then.” Sherlock must look stunned, because John hurries to amend. “No penetration of any kind unless you ask. I promise.”

Sherlock does as he’s told. The faux fur blanket is ridiculously soft, and warm against his chest, and abdomen. It’s a generous and thoughtful touch on John’s part. The mahogany would have been cold, and hard, and unyielding, but the blanket is teasing new sensation from his body, even without moving. He has to fight the urge to rut against it. He holds very still and waits.

He hears John suck in a deep breath, hold it, and then let it out again slowly. The pillow John brought over from the sofa drops to the floor behind him, and then he feels the warmth of John’s body, as he steps up behind him. He holds his breath, and then lets it out in a long, loud sigh of contentment, when John folds his fully clothed body against his.

John’s head simply rests against his back for a moment or two, as he breathes, waits for his heart to calm, and his pulse to slow a little, and then he starts to kiss him, soft, tender kisses stringing slowly down his spine, his hands following in their wake, fingers brushing over damp, sensitised flesh, feather-light touches that burn like fire against his skin. And then there are the deep sucking kisses against the muscles of his lower back, and John’s tongue tasting the skin there, John pulling away again, his hands sliding up the length of Sherlock’s back, almost to his shoulders, body rocking against his, pressing him into the table, his weight and movement dragging Sherlock’s aching cock over the whisper-soft fur of the blanket. Sherlock moans, and John makes a quiet, strangled, sound before sliding back down his body and dropping to his knees.

And then suddenly his nose is nudging at the top of Sherlock’s cleft, and in one bright, glorious moment, Sherlock’s stomach flips and his heart skips a beat as he understands John’s intentions, realises what it is he wants (what it is he’s thought about fantasised about), and it’s the exact same thing Sherlock had hoped, but never dared ask for.

John’s hands slide down to cup his hips. He breathes deep, and sighs on the exhale, hot breath wafting over Sherlock’s arse. He pulls back a little, trails his nose over the prickling skin of Sherlock’s gluteals, licks once, and then sucks down hard over one cheek.

Sherlock grunts in surprise, and John breaks away to pant hotly against his skin. “Ok?”

“Don’t stop, for god’s sake!”
He feels John grin against his skin, and then he is kissing him again, a deep press of lips and long glide of tongue that grows closer to his cleft with each pass. It’s slow, almost methodical. It’s torture. He arches his back and pushes his arse in John’s face without even thinking, and John huffs against his damp skin. “You really want it?”

“Yes. Now. Please!”

“God.”

And then John is pressing his nose into his cleft, and there is a long, wet glide between and a hot, throbbing knot of pleasure curls in Sherlock’s centre, and builds, and builds with each pass of John’s eager tongue, until he’s sure he’s going to come, because now that John has breeched this last hurdle, it seems as though all hesitance is gone, and he has his face buried nose deep, laving at him like he’s never tasted anything quite so heady in his life, and someone is whining, moaning, and Sherlock doesn’t know if it is him, or John, or maybe it is them both. He doesn’t know where he ends and John begins anymore, and it’s the most overwhelmingly perfect sensation he has ever experienced—to be himself and someone else all at once, and to want it, to lose himself in it—wholly, without hesitation, without fear.

John’s hands are gliding up and down his thighs, but he lifts them, now, massages at Sherlock’s arse, parts his cheeks and plunges his tongue in again. He’s teasing at Sherlock’s entrance, and Sherlock feels dizzy with want, incredulous that it’s happening, that John has wanted this, and is acting on that desire, is taking Sherlock wholly apart, faster than he ever could of imagined, and quite honestly a little surprised at how much he wants it, and how easily he has been ready to surrender.

“John…” The moan is much louder than he intended, and he feels John huff against him, pull back messily.

“You want me inside?” His voice is rough with want.

“Please,” Sherlock pleads, high-pitched and desperate, and John doesn’t wait another moment, just presses back between, drags his tongue along the tightly furled muscle and then pushes. He waits a moment, waits for Sherlock’s body to relax and take him. It doesn’t take long at all, and then suddenly John’s tongue is filling him, not very deep of course, but it’s enough to make stars pop in front of his eyes, to draw a gut-deep groan from his throat, and to tip him precariously over the brink.

“God, John!”

John’s tongue withdraws, only to plunge deep again, and again until Sherlock’s legs are shaking, toes curling against the carpet, while sweat and what he vaguely registers must be John’s saliva is running down his thighs. He reaches around and takes himself in hand, vaguely aware that it should be embarrassing this animal need, the desperation to chase the pleasure John is fanning aflame inside him, to selfishly, and unabashedly masturbate while John’s tongue plunges inside. But he can’t seem to care enough to stop, and the sounds that John is making seem to indicate that he finds it more arousing than off-putting, and so Sherlock loses himself in it.

It won’t take long. He times each pull in conjunction with the thrust of John’s tongue, feels his muscles flutter and pulse around him. John moans, pulls out, licks, and plunges back in again. His fingers are digging into Sherlock’s hips and arse so hard he’s sure it will leave a string of lovely bruises, and the thought of it simply turns him on more. He picks up the pace, rocking his hips to press his cock through the tight ring of his own hand, John’s tongue breeching him every time he rocks back.

The pleasure builds fast and sudden, a hot twist in his centre that explodes in bright burst of electric
heat. It crashes over him with enough force that his knees buckle, and he falls forward on the table, feels the warmth of his come spread out over the soft fibres of the blanket beneath him, while John holds his tongue just inside his entrance and whines at the sensation of Sherlock’s muscles pulsing around him, drawing him in deeper.

He pulls away, finally, as the last waves of Sherlock’s orgasm wash over him, and he licks him gently, one last time, before struggling, shakily to his feet, and stroking his hands over Sherlock’s back. “You okay?” He whispers.

All Sherlock can manage is an undignified, “mmph…” into the blanket.

John chuckles, low and warm. “That mean yes?”

“Mmm…” He somehow manages.

“Come here.” John’s arm is around him, leading him over to the sofa, and there is another blanket from somewhere, and somehow they fit together on the narrow cushions, and John is covering them over, pulling him close, burying his nose in Sherlock’s hair, and pressing his lips to his scalp while his hands stroke the length of his bare back.

“Your clothes,” Sherlock murmurs. He’s a mess, and John has just pulled him close with a second thought to his new jeans, and jumper.

“Don’t care.” John breathes into his hair. His breath smells mildly of Sherlock’s arse, which should be off putting, but oddly, is anything but. Sherlock sighs and melts against him.

He must sleep, because when he opens his eyes again, it’s to John trying to shift off the sofa beneath him.

“Mm?”

“Just gotta use the loo. Thought maybe—a bath?”


John nods. “Yeah.”

“Alright.”


“Lights, I think. It’s bigger.”

“Mind if I put stuff in it?”

“Stuff?”

“They have bubble bath, and bath bombs.”

Sherlock smiles. “Whatever you like.”

Sherlock takes his time getting up. His back is slightly sore, and he’s hips are stiff. A warm bath will be welcome. He sits naked on the edge of the sofa wraps the blanket around himself and takes in the suite around him. John was right—it is ridiculously decadent. Perhaps not the wisest use of their funds, but what is the point of money if one can use it to spoil the people they love. He isn’t sure if anyone has ever spoiled John, and in his opinion John could use some spoiling. He does
seem to have a silly little penchant for posh things. Sherlock makes a mental note to indulge it more often.

When he finally wanders into the bath, John is rifling through a basket of bath bombs. “Lemon grass and vetiver, or sandalwood and vanilla?”

“Sandalwood.”

John plucks an ivory coloured bath bomb from the basket, and sniffs it. “Yeah, it’s nice.”

The tub is as full as is advisable if two people are going to crawl in, and so Sherlock shuts off the water and does just that, settling in with a sigh. “Seems it’s an air tub as well.”

“Nice.” John’s eyes slowly travel the length of Sherlock’s body. He sets the bath bomb carefully in the water, and sniffs appreciatively as it spins across the surface, releasing a scent that is somehow simultaneously erotic and homely.

Leaning over, he flips the switch on the wall, and then snorts as the tub starts to fill with small bubbles, and a rainbow wash of colour. Sherlock looks down and arches a brow. “Definitely unnecessary.”

John laughs, and then seems to realise that now that the bath is drawn, and Sherlock is in it, he is expected to get in it too. He seems to hesitate.

“I can bathe quickly and then get out and let you enjoy it, if you want.”

“No, I…” John sniffs and jerks his chin, like he’s made a decision. He starts to unbutton his shirt, and Sherlock feels a flutter of anticipation.

The first part is easy. John’s stripped down to his pants in front of Sherlock before. That’s familiar territory, but the rest…

There’s no preamble. John strips all the way, and steps toward the tub. It all happens so quickly that Sherlock hardly gets a chance to take in the sight of John’s generous cock, long and thick, even when flaccid, deceptively large given John’s height.

There’s really no time to pout about it, though, because then John is stepping in, and Sherlock is getting a gorgeous view of John’s arse, which brings to mind their activities of earlier. A fresh wave of arousal washes over him at the memory, and he can’t help but wonder if John might let him return the favour.

Sherlock scoots back as far as he can go, giving John room to lower himself into the fragrant froth, and John does, settling into the V of Sherlock’s legs and sitting there, somewhat stiff. He tucks his knees up against his chest.

“Tickles.”

Sherlock assumes he’s referring to the bubbles.

“Mm, bit like soaking in a giant vat of fizzy drink.”

John laughs, and then seems to relax, his legs dropping to stretch out in front of him. “Big though.”

“Mm, yes. Perhaps we should get one for the flat.”

“Not sure it would tolerate the weight. We’d probably end up crashing through the ceiling into the
middle of Mrs. Hudson’s bedroom.”

“She’s experienced odder things.”

John huffs and then finally relaxes back against his chest. Sherlock wraps his arms around him and John melts. “Was a good idea, this.”

“The disco tub?”

John chuckles. “The tub in general. The bath. The hotel. All of it.”

“I’m glad.”

“Me too.” John lifts a hand to rest against Sherlock’s forearm, where it is draped around John’s waist. He gives it a squeeze, and Sherlock tilts his head down and buries his nose in John’s hair.

They sit in comfortable silence, enjoying the ridiculous indulgence of their shared bath, and Sherlock almost wonders if John is falling asleep when he suddenly speaks. “Was it okay?”

“It?”

“What we did before. Out there.”

“Ok is far from being an adequate descriptor.” He smiles into John’s hair.

“Never did that before. Always wanted to, but was always afraid to ask.”

“It was something I would have never dared ask for, either, so you can imagine my delight.”

“Yeah? What else would you never dare ask for?”

Sherlock breathes against John’s scalp. “Mmm, too soon perhaps?”

“Too soon?”

“We’re taking this slowly, remember.”

“I’m pretty sure that what we did an hour ago doesn’t really qualify as ‘taking it slowly’.”

“Perhaps not, but…” He hesitates.

“But what?”

“But you were initiating.”

“You want to initiate?” John’s hand squeezes Sherlock’s arm gently.

“I want to touch you, the way you touch me. But there’s no rush.”

“I’m sorry.” He feels a tension come to John’s body, hates the regret in his voice.

“Why?”

“It’s only fair, and I’m—I’m pushing you away.”

“Are you?”
“I—I don’t know. Feels like it.”

“You’re here with me, now, like this.” Sherlock trails his fingers lightly over John’s waist, beneath the water, and feels John relax a little.

“I don’t know how to be like—that.”

“Like what?”

“The way you seem to be when I touch you, just—letting go.”

“Do you want to be?”

“Yes.” It’s whispered, fierce and without hesitation.

“I think it may come more naturally to you than you assume.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean,” Sherlock says, lifting a hand to splay over John’s heart. “That you crave it in some way, and you’re good at it.”

“At what?”

“Taking orders.”

John huffs. “You saying you want to order me about in bed.”

Sherlock sees John’s cock stir beneath the water. John shifts a little.

“I’m saying that clear expectations make you feel safe. Safe enough to trust, and thus let go.”

“That’s not…” But he trails off. “So, you want to what? Order me about? Play at soldiers?”

“If you like.” Sherlock murmurs in his ear, strokes the tip of one finger over one nipple, and then settles again. John is half hard. “It’s familiar territory, is it not?”

“You’re not my commanding officer.”

“Oh no, of course not.” Sherlock slides his hand from John’s chest, down his ribs to settle over one hip.

John catches the tease in his voice and huffs, but he’s fully hard now, and all with Sherlock barely touching him.

It’s the idea of it. It’s the fantasies John doesn’t want to acknowledge, of that Sherlock is quite certain. Surrender, obedience is vulnerable, risky, dangerous even, and John craves it, like a man parched.

But it’s delicate. Trust has always been precarious between them. Dangerous games come with risks. And at this stage, John’s heart and trust are not things Sherlock is willing to risk.

“You seem interested at least.” Sherlock grins into John’s hair.

“Shut up.” There’s no venom in it. John jerks his chin in the general direction of his very interested cock. “This is your fault.”
“I hope so.”
John huffs again and sighs. “I mean, you got me all worked up before, and then fell asleep.”
Sherlock drags his nose through John’s hair, down to his ear. “I’m awake now,” he purrs.
John shivers.
“Yeah.” John swallows, and his cock twitches.
“Do you trust me?”
John takes his time, considers it. After a moment he nods.
“Sure?”
“Yeah.”
Sherlock tightens his hold around John’s waist, and leans back a little more in the tub. “Then relax.”
“Right.” John takes deep breath, lets it out slowly and sinks back against him.
And that is all they do. They lay together in the warm fragrant water, and Sherlock gives John the time he needs to let it settle, to feel and become accustomed to the way their naked bodies slot together, their hearts beat in tandem, the way their respective scents mingle to make something new.
“I love you,” he finally murmurs against the shell of John’s ear, leans down to kiss it, cards fingers through John’s sweat damp hair. John’s eyes slide shut and his breathing slows.
When he’s completely relaxed, Sherlock reaches over and places John’s hand over his. “Show me what you like.”
Some of the tension returns. “What?”
And so Sherlock moves his hand just a little, up John’s rib cage, and when he goes to remove his hand from over Sherlock’s, Sherlock reaches over and puts it back. “Show me, John. When you’re alone in your room, or the shower, what do you think about, how do you touch yourself?”
John sucks in a shaky breath. “I can’t.”
“Alright.”
“I’m sorry.” He moves like he’s going to get out of the tub, and Sherlock reaches out and lays a hand on his shoulder.
“Stop being sorry.”
“What?”
“Soldiers now. First order. Stop being sorry.”
John settles back under the water. “I don’t understand.”
“For this. For this being difficult for you. Stop being sorry. It’s difficult. Fine. It’s fine.”
“It’s not.”
“John. I’m telling you that it is.”

“I don’t know what I want, Sherlock! That’s the problem. I can’t ask you. I can’t show you, because I don’t know.”

“Alright. Do you want me to show you.”

John cranes his neck to look up at him. His eyes are red-rimmed. “Yeah.”

“Then sit up.”

“What?”

“Slide forward a little.”

“We’re doing it now!”

“We’re beginning now, yes.”

And to Sherlock’s great pleasure and relief, John does exactly as he asks without further argument.

Oh.

“Hand me that sponge and soap.”

“What? You’re going to bathe me?”

Sherlock just cocks a brow and waits until John sniffs, and looks put upon, but does it anyway, and ahh… There they are. This is familiar ground. Sherlock takes it from him, squirts some of the soap onto the sponge, and starts to wash John’s back, in slow, tender strokes. It affords him a chance to study him, to look at the scars that pepper and stripe his back and shoulders. A wave of momentary rage passes over him as he deduces the circumstances behind each one. He knows that it is difficult for John, and the fact that he sits quietly, and submits to it, no tension in his body at all, feels significant. In fact by the time Sherlock dips the sponge beneath the water, and then presses it against John’s back to wring it out, and wash the soap away, John is completely relaxed.

“Shampoo,” Sherlock says next, and John complies immediately, no roll of the eyes, no huffing, no objection of any kind. Sherlock smiles to himself as he dispenses some into his palm, and then lifts it and begins to massage it through John’s hair. Every muscle in John’s body lets loose.

Sherlock massages the product in much longer than is strictly necessary, and takes up the hand-held shower nozzle on the edge of the tub, urges John to lean back against his shoulder, and rinses. He stares down at him as he does. John’s eyes are closed, mouth slightly parted. Sherlock almost wonders if he’s fallen asleep, but the cadence of his breathing isn’t quite right for it.

When he finishes, he dips the sponge in the water again, and wrings the water over John’s chest, watches his nipples peak beneath the flow, and his erection, which had been waning start to show interest again.

He sets the sponge down in the water, and lifts his hand, to graze his fingertips over John’s chest, his shoulders, up and down the length of one arm. John’s breathing evens out even more, until, Sherlock realises, he actually does fall asleep. He lets him.

He wonders what it must have been like for John, as a child, John who is clearly tactile, who craves the press and crush of other human bodies, to grow up in a home with an unaffectionate mother, and
a violent, abusive father. Would anyone have ever done these sorts of things for him? Would he have been bathed, slowly, gently, with care? Would he have been tucked in at night with stories, and a kiss to the forehead? Would there have been winter evenings by the fire, tucked up on his father’s lap watching Christmas movies, or pats on the head, and praise from his mother when he made particularly good marks in school? Sherlock imagines not.

It’s easier for John to give, that’s clear. He thrives on being the caregiver, sublimating, perhaps, his own desires to be nurtured, making them safe by turning them outward. But, he deserves to be cared for as much as anyone, perhaps more.

John jerks suddenly awake.

“Hello,” Sherlock murmurs.

John’s eyes find his and he relaxes again. “Sorry. Sorry, I must have just dozed off.”

“Mmm, it’s rather relaxing.”

“Yeah…” John whispers, and leans back against his chest again. His hand finds Sherlock’s under the water, and lifts it to wrap around his waist. “Yeah, it is.”
“Were you a little in love with Victor, do you think?” He can hear the empathy in John’s voice, but there is a tension there, too, the jealousy he can never seem to help, the idea that the love he so craves could be stolen from him, could have been even before it had a chance to bloom.

They lay naked together in the huge bed, in the even bigger room, beneath silky soft sheets, clouds of downy duvet, while the quiet hum of late night traffic outside, and all the small, unfamiliar sounds of a hotel at night, create a background symphony of white noise.

“I don’t know. I wanted to help him, and he wouldn’t let me. It wasn’t his fault. He was young, we both were, and the things that were being done to him—he didn’t know how to make it stop, or even how to talk about it, and I wouldn’t have been able to help him even if he had. I—I suppose I did love him as much as I was able then. I just knew I wanted him to be the him I knew again. I was too young to realise he never could be.”

John props his head up on one hand and trails a finger down Sherlock’s spine. “Bit of a bleak assessment. You think broken people can never get better?”

“No, but I think you do.” John looks hurt more than angry, and Sherlock rushes to clarify. “I believe that broken people will never be the same person they were before they were broken. But that doesn’t mean they can never be whole, or functioning—or beautiful.”

John’s finger stills, and his hand drops to splay over Sherlock’s lower back. It’s small, and warm, and comforting. “I was so young.” He sniffs, his fingers trembling slightly against Sherlock’s skin. “I’m not sure I remember who I was before. Maybe there never was a before. Maybe I never got the chance to become anything.”

“Who do you want to become?”

John’s hand strokes the length of his back, in long, soothing caresses. “More of this, less of—less of who I have been, less of who I was when you died, when I was married to Mary, and afterwards, definitely less of that.”

“Then become that. You are already.”

“I’m not sure I know how.”
“You do. Surviving is an art form. You mastered it’s basics years ago, and now you can perfect it. One can’t create beauty, true art, until they’ve mastered the basics, so… You’re rather well positioned.”

John lays back down on the pillow, and pulls close, his fingers tracing Sherlock’s ribs, eyes searching him in the dim light of the room. “What’s beautiful about me?”

Sherlock smiles softly. “Your tenacity, your courage, your desire to protect, your loyalty.” He reaches up and smooths a hand over John’s head. “Your tenderness.”

John huffs in disbelief, but his eyes are full.

“You don’t believe me?”

“I’m not.”

“You are. Look at you, right now. You are.”

A tear breaks free to roll over the bridge of John’s nose, and drip down on the pillow. “I want to treat you right—the way you deserve.”

“I know.”

“I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You’re not.”

“But I have.”

“Are we going to keep having this conversation, because I’ll be quite honest, John, it’s starting to get a tad boring.”

A muscle in John’s jaw twitches. “Yeah, well maybe you think me hurting you isn’t a big deal, but I happen to know it is—from personal experience—so excuse me if I…”

Sherlock kisses him, chaste but with conviction, and feels the tension drain from John’s body. “I forgive you,” he whispers when he pulls away. “Now forgive yourself.”

John’s jaw clenches tight, his nostrils flare, and he swallows.

“John… Forgive yourself.”

John sucks in a deep breath, as his eyes fill. His face crumples.

Sherlock pulls him close, and John lets him, lets himself be held naked against Sherlock’s body, lets Sherlock stroke his back, and whisper into his hair. “It’s enough, John, everything you’d done, everything you are, everything you’re becoming, it’s enough, you’re enough, please let this go.”

“I’ve never been enough.” John chokes wetly against his neck. “For anyone.”

“You’ve always been more than enough to me.”

John lets out a small sound, somewhere between a sob and a giggle, and Sherlock pulls him tighter. Kisses him like maybe he can press the knowing of it into John’s skin, rewire his heart, and head, and crack him open enough to let some of it in. “I love you.”
“I love you,” John whispers back, against his lips, pulls closer. “I love you.”

“I know.” Sherlock writes the words over his skin, kisses it against his eyelids, presses it over his heart. And John lets Sherlock touch him, for the first time this way, lets him slide his hands down his back, over his arse, lets them settle there, warm and large, lets him pull their bodies closer, lets their half hard cocks settle and press bare against one another. He lets Sherlock fill in the empty places, bridge the gaps.

Sherlock kisses the top of John’s head, while his thumbs rub soothing circles against his lower back, and he nuzzles his nose through his hair, slides his leg up between John’s to stroke the inside of his thighs. He worships him with touch, and John breathes hot, and damp against Sherlock’s chest, smearing his mouth messily against his skin, tasting him, breathing him in, while his tears, and saliva, and sweat anoint Sherlock’s skin like a sacrament.

And isn’t that appropriate, Sherlock thinks, because John has worshipped him since the moment they met, until he had mistreated him so many times he’d lost the faith, and Sherlock has never believed in a God, in anything higher than himself, not even as a boy, but he has believed in John Watson from the very first moment he laid eyes on him, believed in him, protected him, tried to ease his way even if he so often got it all so terribly wrong.

Sherlock dips down and captures John’s lips with his own, feels John light up, and surge against him, hears him moan, whine, a gorgeous, strangled-sounding thing at the back of his throat as his hands slide under and around Sherlock’s waist and pull him close, closer, as close as he possibly can.

“Want you.”

“Good.”

“Please…” John pulls back, face flushed, eyes dark and searching. “Please.”

Sherlock reaches up to touch John’s face, to feel the heat of his flushed, damp cheeks, the race of his pulse at his neck. “Are you sure?”

John swallows and nods, the look in his eyes almost desperate. “Please.”

Sherlock takes his face in both his hands and kisses him again. It’s deep, and passionate, and John exhales through his nose like it’s a relief, like he’s finally able to let go for the first time, and so Sherlock kisses him deeper still.

He kisses him until he feels every last bit of tension in John’s body drain away to be replaced with a different, sweeter sort. He drinks his fill, tastes John’s neck, his shoulders, his chest, delights in the way John’s nipples peak beneath his eager tongue, how it draws a surprised gasp from John’s throat, and he wonders, for a moment, if any of his swiftly cycling sexual partners had ever taken the time to notice that his nipples were sensitive, that there was a spot behind his ear that could make him moan, that if you pressed firm circles against his hip bones he would arch up into your touch, his cock growing hard, straining for attention.

And oh, it is a beautiful cock Sherlock thinks, now he’s had a proper look, thick, and flushed a deep and dusky pink. Not a cock make for small mouths. He wonders, too, if John has ever been properly tended to in that way. Sherlock feels simultaneously irritated by and relieved that John’s previous lovers have evidently been so inadequate.

It’s true he hasn’t the practical experience some of them no doubt had, but he’s had plenty of years to observe and research—both technique, and John himself—and he’s a quick study. He’s confident he
won’t let John down, and by the way John is panting, and fisting his hair as Sherlock sucks at his hip bone, he’s fairly certain he’s proving himself just fine.

He can smell John now, a sweet, salty, musky scent—sweat, and skin, and arousal, and he longs to bury his nose in the sparse thatch of dark blonde hair at John’s groin, to breathe him in, to taste him. He pulls back a little, breathes against John’s abdomen, drags his nose over the sensitive skin below his navel and hears John’s breath catch as his erect cock whispers against the underside of Sherlock’s chin.

“Okay?” He asks, just to be sure, pitches his voice low, and tempting, and John’s fingers tighten in his hair, and his body arches upward, seeking Sherlock’s.

“Yes,” John whispers raggedly. “God yes.”

And Sherlock smiles. He will proceed confidently, but with caution. It is all so new—to both of them, and John has never been this way with him before. He wonders why, why tonight? Why John, who had wanted it to be in the safety of their own flat, their own bed the first time Sherlock made love to him, why John who in the early days used to fuss if they had to share a room on a case because ‘people might talk’, who flirted non-stop, but would look panicked if he even thought Sherlock might act on it, why tonight, in this very posh, and very public hotel is he laying himself bare, begging for Sherlock to touch him?

Perhaps the why doesn’t matter. Perhaps it was simply time. All the objections and deterrents have dropped away, one-by-one, and there is no longer any reason not to, especially considering how much and for how long John has wanted this.

Sherlock slides his hands up John’s ribcage, back down, cups his hips, rubs his thumbs along the crease where thigh meets groin. John gasps, and Sherlock buries his face there, breathes in the musky arousal. His grip on John’s hips tightens instinctively and John moans, and isn’t that just the most delicious sound.

He’s dreamed of this, breathing in John’s scent while his cock drags along his cheek, over his lips. He’s dreamed of the salt-sweet of John’s cock against his tongue.

John gasps as Sherlock dares a taste, drags his tongue from base to tip, warm, and slow, and wet.

“Oh god, god Sherlock, I can’t…”

He stops, rests his chin on John’s abdomen and stares up at him, waiting. John’s cheeks are flushed red, eyes hooded, mouth lax. He cranes his neck to stare down the length of his torso. “Why are you stopping?”

Sherlock grins, slides back down, glides his tongue up the length of John’s shaft, and then parts his lips and takes him in.

“Christ.” John’s head slams back against the pillow, and his hips arch upward, he hits the back of Sherlock’s throat, and Sherlock has to take a moment, breathe through his nose, accept the fact that this is happening now, here, that John is inside him, his sweat, his skin cells, the bitter salt of pre-come blooming over his tongue, awash in his saliva, mingling to slide down his throat, pieces of John becoming part of his body.

It’s sensory overload in the best possible way. He’s starting to lose awareness of everything else, his senses frantic, desperately trying to sort the data, fighting to narrow their focus. They’ll catch up in a minute, of that he’s certain, but for now it’s a neurological storm of input.
John’s fingers fist in his hair and pull hard. It’s a bright spot of focus in the fog. In an instant everything narrows down to the sharp pull of it. He has to pull back with a gasp. His cock throbs between his abdomen and the mattress, and John pants.

“Sorry. God, sorry, I…”

Sherlock just shakes his head. “No. Good. Do it again.”

John huffs out a pleased giggle, head falling back against the pillow. “Not going to last if you keep being so perfect.”

“I’ve hardly done anything yet?” Sherlock pouts.

“Yeah? Well—carry on then.” John gives his hair a slow, firm pull, and Sherlock’s eyes slide shut as new pools of sensation begin to spring up all over his body. And he needs John in him again, without question, this very instant, and so he takes him into his mouth again, deeper this time, now that he’s got a feel for how John fits, lets the head of John’s cock slide along the top of his palette, nudge at the back of his throat, and then slide further still. He slides his hands over the length of John’s thighs, and hollows his cheeks, and finds a rhythm, and John lets out a strangled whine that Sherlock thinks might be the end of him, then and there.

There had been a handful of times when John had brought girlfriends home, when Sherlock had heard them together, had almost wondered if John had wanted him to hear, because he had done nothing whatsoever to hold himself back, and John can be extremely quiet when he wants to. And in all those times, John had never made sounds like the ones he’s making now. Back then it had been clear it was part performance, but this—this is raw instinct, this is vulnerable.

John’s fingers scrape against his scalp. He can tell he’s trying to control himself, and he wishes he wouldn’t, he wishes he would just fully let go. He’s wanted to see John a wild, unfettered thing since the moment they met, and this is the closest he’s ever got. It won’t do. It just won’t do.

He slides a hand down his thigh, back up again, dips down, and John spreads his legs for him, lets his fingers find their way between the damp heat of his thighs, behind his balls, and when he strokes a finger, gentle yet firm against the muscles of his perineum, John lets out a sound like he’s been punched, startled by the pleasure of it. He thrusts instinctively into Sherlock’s mouth, pressing down his throat, and causing his eyes to water.

“Sorry, sorry. You okay?” John sounds like he can hardly breathe, and Sherlock simply pulls back a little, hollows his cheeks and hums around John’s cock.

“God. Sherlock…”

He’s fairly certain they’ve both had quite enough of this dancing around the edges. Every muscle in John’s body is taut, and his cock is hot, and full, and twitching against Sherlock’s tongue, and Sherlock wants him to let go, just to let go for goodness sake!

“I—I can’t…”

“Mmm,” Sherlock hums, and pulls back, John’s cock popping from between his lips to slap wetly against his belly. “You can,” Sherlock encourages, lips whispering against the heated, sensitive flesh.

John whines again, and Sherlock drags his tongue along the length of him.

“You can, John.”
“Can’t…” John sounds near tears, but there is something in his tone that makes Sherlock think it’s safe to proceed, and he hopes he knows John well enough by now to be right, because being wrong could be disastrous.

“Come now.” Sherlock drags his tongue along the crease of John’s thigh, and John hisses, thrusts vainly into the cool air. “Come,” Sherlock murmurs against the taut muscles of his abdomen, watches John’s balls drawing up. He dips down and takes John into his mouth again, sucks hard, but not too hard, glides his tongue along the underside of John’s cock as he does. It only takes a second or two before John cries out, fists his hair, sobs into the quiet of the room and spills hot and thick over Sherlock’s tongue. He pulls at Sherlock’s hair, trying to pull his head back, but Sherlock reaches up, gently holds his wrist, let’s him know it’s okay, it’s alright, he wants this.

John lets go, one last surge of wet heat in Sherlock’s mouth, and then he goes limp beneath him. Sherlock swallows, thinks of all of John’s cells now racing through his body, thinks of how it feels like belonging, like John having a home in him. He pulls back gently, looks up the length of John’s body, and freezes.

John is lying flushed and sweaty, one arm draped over his eyes, mouth a tight line. His hand is a fist, trembling. Sherlock frowns and crawls up to lie beside him. He reaches out, but stops, hand hovering over John’s head, and watches as John’s face crumples. His heart plummets into the pit of his stomach. “John, I…”

But then John is rolling toward him, reaching out for him, and oh… Oh. He pulls him close, pulls the blankets up around them, tucks John’s head under his chin, and waits.

John cries for a long time, and Sherlock holds him, and strokes his hair, and lets the tears join every other part of John’s body that had flooded his tonight. He doesn’t say anything, because there is nothing to say. He doesn’t do anything, because there is nothing to do. This is as much John letting go as the orgasm that gripped him only moments before.

This is John, too.

His John.

The city quiets outside as they lie together.

Very late has turned to very early, and John’s tears have subsided, even though his grip around Sherlock’s waist has not.

“He knew I liked boys, my Dad. I think he probably knew it before I did.”

Sherlock tilts his chin down to stare at the top of John’s head. John’s grip around his waist tightens.

“I think he suspected it even before Harry, but afterwards he, he made sure I knew it wasn’t acceptable, not in his house, every chance he got. I always told him he had nothing to worry about with me, to lay off. I—I think I believed it on some level. Not sure how that works, cause the first boy I was ever in love with was when I was fifteen. But I—I didn’t realise it, you know. I didn’t know that it was ‘that’ until you were talking about Victor, and…” John looks up at him in the dark. “It was like living in the dark.”

Sherlock nods, reaches up and brushes a lock of damp hair away from John’s forehead.
“I’m okay,” he says sliding closer. “I’m okay. I just—I didn’t know it could be like that.”

“Like what?” Sherlock dares to ask, even though he knows John may not be able to put it into words.

“Like…” He shakes his head. “I don’t know… Letting go—of everything. Just letting yourself enjoy it.”

Sherlock smiles. “I believe that is what sex is supposed to be, is it not? Enjoyable?”

“Yeah, but I guess—I guess I always cared more about the other person enjoying themselves. And there’s a pleasure in that, don’t get me wrong. It’s damn pleasurable sometimes, but my own pleasure… Well, I guess it never really registered. Felt unimportant, sort of. Like I didn’t really matter.”

“It does matter. You matter.”

“To you.” John smiles up at him crookedly. “God knows why, but to you I do.”

“Yes, you do.” Sherlock kisses him, and John hums softly, wraps himself around him, and kisses back.

They must fall asleep that way, because when Sherlock wakes some time later, it is to the first, pink streaks of dawn painting the walls across from him, to John’s limbs still tangled with his, and John’s fingers still tangled in his hair and resting lightly against his jaw, and to John’s breath wafting against his lips. John is smiling. He’s smiling in his sleep.

Sherlock lies and watches his eyes roll around beneath his lids, luxuriates in the comforting, even cadence of his breathing, the way his nostrils twitch now-and-again, and the slight silver scruff around his jaw and cheeks. Sherlock reaches out and rubs a finger over it, follows it up with the palm of his hand, delights in the burn that suffuses and spreads through his nervous system with remarkable speed, tingling and waking him up.

John stirs with a hum of contentment. “Watchadoin’?” Mumbled through the haze of sleep.

Sherlock smiles. “Touching you. You need to shave.”

“Y’like that.” John’s eyes are still closed, and Sherlock suspects he’s still mostly asleep.

“I like you.”

“Mmm…” John presses his face into Sherlock’s neck, and Sherlock shivers. He’s growing hard again, just like that, just from the sound of John’s low, sleepy hums, and the sensation of his breath on his neck, his hands seeking out flesh, whispering over his ribs, under and around his waist, pulling him close.

“Warm.” John observes as their bodies slot together. John is sweating, his body sticky in some places and slick in others. The crease of his thigh is slick, and Sherlock’s cock slides perfectly into place, nerves prickling, arousal pooling, thick and hot. He hadn’t come the night before, and now it seems his body is twice as eager.

He feels John’s eyelashes flutter against his neck, and his lips spread into a slow smile, as he slides
his hands lower, cups Sherlock’s arse, and squeezes, and Sherlock rocks against him, on instinct, without the slightest thought, the movement making him harder still, sparking fire in his veins.

John huffs against him. “Mmm…”

Sherlock shivers and sighs at the sound.

“That good?” John sighs, and shifts his leg a little. Sherlock can feel John’s pubic hair tickling the side of his cock, and he’s already so hard it nearly drives him mad. He can only groan in response.

John huffs. “So good.” He squeezes his arse again, slides a finger down his cleft, and Sherlock sucks in a sharp breath, awash with sensation. His nipples peak tight, and his skin bursts into goose flesh. John’s breath is hot, and humid against his chest. The soft glide of his finger isn’t enough, though, not enough by half.

Sherlock whines, and thrusts against him, and John chuckles, fully awake now that Sherlock is being so demanding.

“Hold on…” He rolls away, and gets out of bed, and Sherlock whines again, which just makes John laugh outright. “Christ, just wait. Gotta get something.” John’s hair is a riot, his cheeks flushed pink and eyes still heavy with sleep, and his warm skin glows in the morning light.

Sherlock appreciates the sight of his compact, muscled arse as he bends over his overnight bag, rooting about for god knows what, and of his cock hanging thick and heavy between his legs as he turns and comes back to the bed with a small bottle in one hand.

He holds it up. “Lube.”

Sherlock’s face goes hot, and John grins as he crawls back into the bed. “Same as last time, no penetration unless you ask.”

“I’m asking,” Sherlock blurts, and John’s eyebrows disappear into his hairline.

“Okay…”

“What? I mean it,” Sherlock pouts, when John seems to hesitate.

“Oh, I know you do, but can I ask you something?”

“What?”

“How much have you had up there?”

Sherlock’s cheeks flare again, and he silently curses himself. “Enough.”


Sherlock does his best impression of being mortified, but John just grins. “Not doing anything until you tell me.”

“Why?”

“Because I need to gauge how slow to take things.”

“I didn’t come last night, John. I’m desperate. Slow is the very last thing I hope you’re considering.”
John just shrugs. “Still haven’t answered my question though.”

Sherlock sighs. “Fingers.”

“Yours?”

“Of course mine.”

John reaches down, and takes his hand, examines the length and girth of his fingers before looking back up again. “How many?”

“Two.”

“Did you stimulate your prostate?”

Sherlock’s eyes go wide. He shakes his head.

_Oh the benefits of having a doctor for a lover!_

John grins. “Hmm, and you’re sure you want it?”

“Of course I’m sure!” Sherlock’s cock gives an interested twitch under the blanket, and John looks down at it, and then back up with a mischievous glint in his eye.

“Can see that.”

There’s something different about him, Sherlock realises, a lightness, a lack of inhibition and self-consciousness that Sherlock can’t ever recall seeing in him before. It bodes well for whatever is about to happen next.

“Come here, then.” John crawls back beneath the covers and slides close. His skin is cool and dry from being out in the room, and Sherlock shivers as he pulls him close. “Jesus, you’re like a furnace.”

“I wonder why.”

The corner of John’s mouth twitches. “It’s nice.” He twines his legs with Sherlock’s again, starts to touch him, a slow, soft surge of John’s body against his, a slide of fingers through his hair, down his neck, down his spine, the mingling of breath, a press of lips, slide of tongue, until Sherlock is melting against him, until he’s almost forgotten what it was he was so eager for a moment ago.

John’s fingers are stroking lightly over the rise of his arse. It’s almost too much, the touch burning with it’s lightness, and he is about to tell him so, when his hands shift, grip, start to massage, deep and slow, and Sherlock remembers with blinding clarity, just what it is John’s promised him.

Sherlock presses against his body, pushes his straining cock against the softness of John’s belly, he rocks against him, and John gives his arse a squeeze. “Patience, okay. I’ve got plans.”

“Well they’d better not take all morning.”

“Oi!” John gives one arse cheek a playful slap, and Sherlock is shocked at the surge of pleasure that bursts inside his body. John just chuckles. “You’re so bloody demanding.”

“It’s your fault,” Sherlock pants, and John smirks.

His finger returns to Sherlock’s crack, and this time it is cool, and slick. Lube, Sherlock suddenly
realises. Just when did John manage that? He presses his face into his neck with a huff. “Please, John.”

“What do you want?” And here they are again, Sherlock suddenly realises, John playing out with Sherlock what it is Sherlock had tried and failed at with him. If this is what John needs, to sublimate it first, to see how it will play out, then…

Sherlock reaches back, takes John’s hand in his and pushes, guides his hand down and his finger deeper, until it slides slick and firm against the entrance to Sherlock’s body. The pressure of John’s finger there causes a wave of pleasure to pass through him. He feels his body tense and then relax and take it in with a swiftness that surprises them both. They gasp in unison, and John goes very still. “That okay?”


“Yeah?” John sounds breathless, awed.

“For god’s sake, yes!”

He feels John smile against his jaw. He presses deeper, and every nerve in Sherlock’s body lights up. It’s focussed and somehow diffused. He’d done this to himself, of course, but it is so much better with John. John’s fingers are smaller and shorter than his, but he is hitting Sherlock at angles he never could have hit himself, and he seems to have a great deal of skill, because his finger is already curling just a little, and oh. Oh!

Sherlock grunts in surprise, and then moans, long and drawn out, and John chuckles. “Good?”

Sherlock can only pant and nod out a response. John strokes the spot again and Sherlock realises to late that he about to come, or at least it feels like he is, but whatever it is that John is doing seems to be stretching the moment out, further, and further, until his body is nothing but an all-encompassing ball of pleasure, wave after wave of if. And still John’s finger, his single, small, miraculously talented finger, works its magic.

His brain shuts off.

He’s vaguely aware that he’s making the most wanton sounds, and of John making sounds of his own, murmuring against his neck, his jaw, his lips. “Oh God. Look at you. Christ! God, Sherlock.”

He’s tempted to reach down and take himself in hand, try to somehow bring himself past the brink, but on the other hand…

He realises in a moment of stunning clarity, piercing through the fog of pleasure, that John is growing hard again. How, given the orgasm he had enjoyed only a few hours prior, Sherlock will never know, but he’s not about to complain. He’s curious now, curious if John could come again so soon, curious if he could bring John the same sort of pleasure John is bringing him now.

He reaches out, fumbling and uncoordinated, reaches for John’s body, and pulls it close to his. He jostles John’s arm in the process, causing his finger to withdraw, and Sherlock hisses with disappointment.

“What’s wrong? You okay?”

He nods. “Want to touch you.”
“Okay.”

“Lube.”

“What?”

“Lube, John.” He rolls his hips, drags his aching cock against John’s abdomen, watches John’s mouth drop open.

“Why?”

“Want to touch you.”

For a moment he thinks John is going to decline, but when Sherlock rocks his hips again, and their cocks drag against one another, John leans forward, reaches over Sherlock’s shoulder, and then brings his hand down between them with the bottle of lube.

Sherlock takes it and grins. “You have to feel this.”

John’s mouth stretches into a grin of his own, Sherlock’s enthusiasm obviously contagious. “Yeah?”

“Yes.”

Sherlock dispenses some of the lube, slicks his cock, and then dribbles more onto his finger.

John reaches out and takes hold of his wrist. “Listen, I didn’t plan to…”

Sherlock shakes his head, waiting.

“I know we had a bath earlier, but I might not be really clean, and…”

Sherlock rolls his eyes. “Oh, who cares. It’s sex, John. It’s meant to be messy, and the sheets are the hotel’s problem.”


Sherlock presses the lube back into John’s hands. “Here, put more on. I want to do it together.”

John chuckles, but does as bade, and then they are in one another’s arms again, and Sherlock’s hands are dipping down and over the warm, twitching entrance to John’s body, even as John’s hand returns to his, and their cocks slide together, slick with lube, and sweat, and precome.

He feels John tense in his arms a little, and so he kisses him, slow, and sweet, and deep, until John starts to move against him, teasing pleasure from his own body, and Sherlock rubs slow circles against his hole, adding a little pressure each time, until suddenly John takes him in with a sigh that almost sounds like relief.

“Slow,” he whispers against Sherlock’s lips, and Sherlock nods, nudges at John’s cheek with his nose, until John looks up and into his eyes.

“Look at me. I want you to look at me.”

John’s cheeks flush crimson under his gaze, but he holds it, even as he slips back inside Sherlock’s body, and finds the same magical spot he had been teasing before. Sherlock lets the waves of pleasure overcome him again, and still John looks, dips in to kiss him, pulls back and looks again.
But when Sherlock somehow manages to push deeper, to curl his finger, just so, just as John is doing to him, John’s mouth drops open, and his eyes flutter shut.

“John, look at me.”

John shakes his head, buries his face in Sherlock’s neck, and moans. His finger loses its rhythm inside Sherlock’s body, he presses hard, and Sherlock feels his cock leak in response.

“Careful,” he whispers.

“Sorry. Sorry. Oh, God.”

“Shh…” Sherlock kisses him, and John’s finger slides from his arse, his whole body losing all coordination as Sherlock teases his prostate.

“Oh god…”

“Mmm, it’s good.” Sherlock agrees. He rocks his hips slowly, drags their cocks against one another, just enough to keep his own arousal stoked now that John’s lost all ability to move.

This is new territory. John is gorgeous, relaxed, thirsty, coming apart slowly, slowly beneath Sherlock’s seeking touch.

“Sherlock…”

“Mmm?”

“And Sherlock doesn’t know quite what he means, more pressure, more speed, another finger? This is John finally taking the leap and asking for what he wants, and Sherlock desperately wants to get it right, to not make him have to ask for too much.

He presses a little firmer, and John gasps, his hips snapping forward. He groans loud and long.

“No. Don’t wanna come. Just…”

Sherlock finds the bottle of lube behind John’s back, pops the lid with one finger, and dribbles some blindly over his hand, uses it to slick a second finger, and slide it down to join the first. John is tight, and Sherlock isn’t sure he can press a second finger inside without hurting him.

He rubs around the edge instead, relishes in the sounds John makes, in the way his body surges against Sherlock’s, the way his half-hard cock glides along the side of Sherlock’s making him shiver and sigh.

“Please.” John smears his lips over the tendon in Sherlock’s neck, and then pulls back, looks up, captures Sherlock’s eyes with his own. “Please.”

Sherlock presses. “Look at me. Keep your eyes on me.”

John shivers, but he doesn’t look away.

Sherlock curls the finger already inside him, rubs gently, watches John tense, and surge, and rock, waits until his eyes roll back and he moans obscenely loud into the rose-pink glow of the room, before pressing again with the second finger, and to his surprise, John takes it.

“Oh.” John grunts in surprise. “Jesus Christ, Sherlock, I…”
Sherlock stills immediately. Gives John’s body time to settle and adjust. John’s eyes return to his. They’re full.

“Are you alright?”

He nods. “Feels good. God, it…” He arches his back, thrusts his arse out, and Sherlock’s fingers slide deeper, both of them. He feels light-headed at the sensation of John’s body surrounding him, clenching tight around his fingers. His brain races. What would it feel like if…? His cock throbs between their bodies at the thought, and John’s hand fumbles behind him, returns to his arse cheek, squeezes.

“Your fingers. God, your hands…”

“Look at me,” Sherlock says again, because John’s eyes have squeezed shut, and he needs to know, needs to be able to see him when he does what comes next.

He moves his fingers, just the tiniest slide deeper, and then withdraws. John’s grip on his arse tightens, and he thrusts back against Sherlock’s hand again. “Want it. I—I want it. Oh god! I want it.”

“Then don’t look away.”

Sherlock presses in, slowly, as deep as he thinks can possibly be comfortable, and John doesn’t look away for a moment, not even when his mouth drops open, and his breath starts coming in quick pants, and his body grows impossibly warm against Sherlock’s.

“You’re alright?”

John nods.

“I love you.”

John’s eyes fill. “More.” His voice breaks on the word. “More.”

Sherlock nods, slides his fingers almost all the way out, and then presses in again, rocks his own body against John’s as he does, and feels prickles of arousal burst along his skin as John moans, and drops his forehead to press against Sherlock’s chin.

“More.”

“Look at me.”

John does, and Sherlock starts a rhythm, a slow, steady glide of fingers in and out, awed that John wants it, that John is greedily chasing it, thrusting back against Sherlock’s fingers like it’s still not enough.

Sherlock curls his fingers the next time he retreats, presses and rubs John’s prostate, and delights in the way John’s eyes go wide, and his head falls back, and he whines, and whines, and gasps out, “More.”

Sherlock briefly considers a third finger, but it’s not what he wants, not really, and John wants more, too, so…

“How much more?” He keeps touching him, keeps him teetering on the brink, and when John’s eyes find his again, he holds them, telegraphs what he’s asking, as clearly as he can in that strange
way they seem to have of almost reading one another’s minds. He sees the moment John understands. His eyes go wide and then darken with want. He nods.

“You’re sure?” he presses a little more firmly at the spot he’s teasing inside John’s body, and John exhales, surges against him, his cock growing harder.

“God, Sherlock. Please.”

Sherlock pulls out, and John’s eyes snap up to his.

“You’re sure?”

John nods.

“Roll over.” Sherlock orders, and watches John frown in confusion. “I want to hold you, when…” He sees John understand. He rolls onto his side, and let’s Sherlock pull him back in against his chest. Sherlock wipes his hand as thoroughly as he can on the sheets, and applies more lube, trying not to think about the fact that they are doing all of this without protection.

He knows John is clean, he has his medical records to prove it, and he knows that he’s clean, as his brother insists on reports every six months because of the drugs, but John doesn’t know that, and yet here he is, laying himself bare, without question. Absurdly trusting, and not at all safe, and so painfully ‘John’ that it makes Sherlock want to gather him up, tuck him away safe, and never let him go again.

“Do you have protection?” He gives John an out.

John shakes his head. “Shit.”

“I’m clean.”

“Me too.”

“Oh Christ, the mess.”

“I don’t care if you don’t,” Sherlock murmurs into his hair, pulling him close, letting his slick cock slide between John’s arse, reaching around to take John in hand, and secretly thrilling at the fact that John is quite serious, then. He does want what Sherlock had been thinking, hoping he did.

“The hotel staff might,” John gasps.

“The hotel staff have seen worse, believe me. And we have two beds, and another tub we’ve yet to try.” Sherlock kisses down the back of John’s head and rocks his hips, his toes curling against the sheets as his cock drags between John’s cheeks.

John thrusts into his fist. “God. Sherlock.” His hand reaches back to grip Sherlock’s hip, and pull him closer, and Sherlock throbs and aches to give him what he wants, even though he can still hardly believe it. In his wildest dreams he never could have guessed that John would want this, and certainly not so soon.

“Need you.”

Sherlock pulls back, slicks himself once more with the last of the lube, and then pushes forward, presses against John’s entrance. He can feel the muscles there flutter, each time he strokes John’s cock. He pushes a little more and John moans.
“Okay?”

“Yeah. God. Just…” John pushes back, and Sherlock huffs in surprise when the head of his cock pushes inside.

“God!” John exclaims. “Oh god, that’s… Just wait. Wait a minute.”

Sherlock goes as still as he can, trembling with the restraint. He’s been hard for ages now, it seems, and it’s almost becoming uncomfortable, but the last thing on earth he wants to do is rush this.

He has one arm tucked underneath John’s waist, and he lifts his forearm, drapes a hand over John’s hip while he starts to stroke him slow, and lazy with the other. John’s body tightens around him for a moment, and then lets go, and he slides naturally deeper. John whimpered, but it doesn’t sound like pain, more like—relief.

“I—I… God, don’t stop.”

Sherlock has no intention of stopping. He tries a tentative rock of his hips, feels his cock slide infinitesimally. John puffs out a breath, and then sucks in another, a deep hiss through his teeth.

“I love you,” Sherlock murmurs into his hair, and he feels John let go, relax around him. He slides all the way in.

They lay there like that for a moment, very still, their breath synching, John’s body adapting to the fact that Sherlock’s is now a part of it, foreign yet familiar, wanted but new. “Alright?” Sherlock finally whispers.

“Feels—feels like… Just stay.” John finally says.

“I will. I am.”

“Promise.” John breathes. It sounds small, and wet.

“I promise. I promise, John. Always.”

“Promise.”

“I do. I promise.”

“Me too, I…” John sucks in another breath, and Sherlock sighs when John tightens around him. “You need to move now, okay.”

Sherlock smiles into his hair. “Alright.”

He gives John’s cock a long pull, and finally moves, pulls out just the slightest bit, before pressing back in as far as he can.

“More,” John begs, and Sherlock is only too glad to oblige, pulling out further this time, and each time, realising all too soon that the pleasure building can’t be put off much longer. It’s practically pain at this point, and good as John feels—hot, and tight, and slick around him—he needs to come.

“John, I can’t…”

“I know. I want it. I want you to. It’s okay.”

“I just want to…” Sherlock pushes deep, and John moans. And that’s it, it’s the sounds John makes
that always seem to short out his brain, and flip the switch to something so much more primal, he pulls John tight against his body and starts to thrust in earnest, tries to keep stroking him, and fails.

He feels John’s hand close around his fist, and understands. He simply holds it there, letting John thrust into it, the slick slide of John’s shaft against his palm, the inside of him gripping Sherlock’s cock, John’s moans and Sherlock’s whimpers mingling as their pleasure builds, together, slow, but sure.

Sherlock starts to lose track of which is his body, and which John’s, which his groans, which John’s sighs, who gasped, who twitched, or thrust, or squeeze. Everything narrows to the sensation of John sliding and clenching around him, seemingly tighter with every thrust, and to the sounds John makes, wild and uninhibited. He starts thrusting faster into the ring of Sherlock’s fist, selfishly, shamelessly taking what he wants, and Sherlock feels like he’s never loved him more than he does in this moment, knowing that John wants this, wants him, wants them together so much that he is forgetting to care about being ‘good’, forgetting everything but the climax he’s chasing.

“Fuck, John…” Sherlock rumbles in his ear, knowing how John loves it, knowing what it does to him, and that’s all it takes. He feels John’s cock plump in his hand, and then John’s hips snap forward with a grunt, and he spills over Sherlock’s fingers, while his body clenches and pulses around Sherlock’s cock, making him see stars, making him thrust frantically, wanting to finish before John comes down from the chemical high, before he gets over sensitised. It’s easy, really. John continues to pulse around him, weaker now the last of his orgasm has wrung him dry. He sighs, and moans into the pillow.

“God Sherlock. Do it. Come on. Come in me.”

It’s unexpectedly frank, almost filthy, somehow, and Sherlock loves it, he suddenly realises. Must want it, need it, fuck! He comes hard, with a shout, spills into John’s body for what seems like an age, as John mutters things Sherlock is too drunk on endorphins to catch, but which he is sure are every bit as delicious as what came before.

He goes to jelly as the last pulse wrings from his body, pulls out gingerly, and then drags John close, both of them laying, sweaty and sated in the midst of the beautiful, sordid mess they’ve created. John huffs out an exhausted laugh. “You’re a bloody menace.”

“You should talk.”

“Mmm, maybe. Never heard you say fuck before.” John sounds pleased.

_Had he said that out loud?_

“Seemed appropriate, given the circumstances.”

John giggles and Sherlock pulls him closer, even though he’s still leaking Sherlock’s come over them both, and Sherlock can hardly find the strength to do so.

“God we need a bath,” John declares.

“Not sure I can walk at the moment.”

“You and me both.”

Sherlock presses his face into John’s hair, inhales deep. “Are you okay?”

John nods. “Oh yeah.” He rolls over, blinks up at Sherlock, his hair a riotous mess, cheeks still
flushed pink. He looks twenty years younger and Sherlock wants to kiss him. He does, deep and lazy, until John smiles against his mouth and pulls away. “Best sex of my life.”

Sherlock rolls his eyes, but his cheeks are hot, and John laughs and pulls him closer. John is looking at him, looking at him like he’s something infinitely precious and valuable, and Sherlock can’t quite understand it. He reaches out and pushes the curls back from Sherlock’s sweaty forehead. “You were the most beautiful thing I’d ever seen.”

Sherlock’s breath catches. “What?”

“The day we met. The day I walked into that lab. You looked up at me and my heart stopped. You took my breath away. Still do.”

Sherlock’s chest goes tight with an emotion he doesn’t understand.

“And I thought—I thought, there’s no way a posh boy like that would ever be interested in a bloke like me, and then it seemed like you were, but you said you weren’t, and I... Well, it was too late to un-feel it, I guess. Maybe it was love at first sight.”

“Doesn’t exist.” Sherlock murmurs, quite overcome.

“No?”

“Well—maybe attraction at first sight.”

John grins.

“The love took a few weeks at least.”

He grins wider, chuckles, and kisses Sherlock again.

When they finally come back up for air, Sherlock feels a like he may just have his legs under him again. “Bath, you said?”

“Mm, sounds nice. Alien birthing pod this time?”

“For variety’s sake, let’s say yes.”

“The lemongrass bath bomb?”

“Yes.”

John shifts a bit, with a grimace. “And maybe we send these sheets to the laundry.”

“Definitely.”

John moves to get up, but Sherlock doesn’t let go. He’s not ready. Not just yet.

“Stay. Just a few minutes more.”

John hums and melts back against his chest, breathes warm breath over Sherlock’s heart, drapes an arm over his waist.

Sherlock traces his fingers down the length of John’s spine.

“I’m sorry this took me so long,” John murmurs after several minutes have passed. “It shouldn’t
have.”

“There wasn’t a deadline.”

“Still.”

“I’ll always wait for you.”

John sucks in a breath that stutters around the edges. Sherlock tilts his chin to look down at him, and when John looks up to meet his gaze, his eyes are full. He smiles crookedly. “And I’ll always get there—eventually. I promise you that.”

Sherlock nods. “I know. You’ve always been, and always will be the bravest and most loyal man I know.”

John’s eyes drop, almost shyly, but when he looks back up, he’s smiling. “I love you.”

“I know. I love you, too.
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

Here we are at the end! I can hardly believe it. Writing this story has been such a cathartic journey. A final huge thank you to everyone who has read, left kudos, commented on or recced this fic. Thank you for coming along for the ride.

Two years later…

Pain radiates from his left shoulder like fire as he lies on the pavement, and squints up at the cold Spring rain pouring down from the thin strip of black sky visible between the two buildings either side of him, and hopes against all hope that the footsteps slapping against the wet pavement in his direction, belong to John.

“Sherlock!”

He sighs in relief.


“Hello.” Sherlock’s eyelids flutter against the rain and the pain.

“What happened?”

“The getaway vehicle was a Citroën. I tried to stop it. The driver didn’t feel like stopping.”

“You’re a fucking idiot. We’ve talked about this. You’ve promised. No. Don’t move.” John’s hands are everywhere. They are efficient, steady. He pulls out his mobile and dials 999.

“One more time and you were going to force me to retire. Wasn’t that the threat?” Sherlock hisses as John palpates his injured shoulder slightly harder than is strictly necessary. He’s angry.

“Too fucking right. Where did it hit you?”

“Hip. Rolled over the roof. May have hit my head on the pavement on the way down.”

“You want to give yourself brain damage, is that it? Because this will be the third concussion this year, and you are not thirty anymore, you know. Hell, you’re not even forty anymore.”

“I know.”

He sees John hear the fear in his voice he hadn’t meant to let show.

“It’s okay. You’re going to be okay. You’ll be fine, but can you please stop getting injured. Would be nice if you were able to stand for the ceremony this weekend. At this rate we’ll probably be conducting it in a hospital room.”

“It will be at Marylebone Town Hall, just as we’ve planned.”
“Not if your bloody doctor orders otherwise.”

Sherlock doesn’t say another word. He stares up at John who’s removed his coat, to hold over Sherlock and shelter him from the pelting rain. After what seems like an age, three police cars and an ambulance screech to a halt at the end of the alley, and John shouts over the rush of the rain to the paramedics running down the pavement toward them. “Over here! Dislocated shoulder, possible rib fracture and head trauma.”

“Sounds serious.” Sherlock smiles and then winces at the pain in his head.

“It is,” John states, tightly. “Now shut up and let these blokes do their thing.” He steps back and lets the two strange men assess Sherlock, stabilise him, and load him onto a stretcher.

It isn’t until they are in the back of the ambulance on the way to the hospital, that Sherlock looks over at John’s hands trembling and clenched into white-knuckled fists, and reaches out.

“John?”

John’s head snaps up.

“I’m sorry.”

John’s brow knits, and he lifts a hand to pinch at it. “Stop being sorry, and start being careful. I’m dead serious. You keep taking these dangerous cases, and there’s no need. None!”

“Excuse me, Sir.” The paramedic pushes between the two of them, and there’s nothing more to be said.

John is silent in the back of their shared cab. He’s angry. Sherlock can tell. John always gets quiet when he’s angry. He’ll talk about it when then get home. Sherlock braces himself. John will force the issue that has been hanging over their heads for months, the one topic that Sherlock can never quite seem to broach, because he is too afraid of what it might mean.

They pull up in front of the flat, and Sherlock pays the cabbie, lets John go on ahead. He’ll make tea. He’ll ignore Sherlock for the first hour they are back at the flat. He’ll pretend nothing is wrong, but then he will sigh deeply, look up from the book he’s reading, or the television show he isn’t really watching, and he’ll speak.

To Sherlock’s surprise, John is waiting for him at the top of the stairs. He strides forward the minute Sherlock reaches the top stair, strips off Sherlock’s coat, begins to unbutton his shirt, crowds him back toward the kitchen, down the hallway to their bedroom.

His touch is somehow rough and gentle all at once. He’s angry, but he’s relieved. He’s frustrated, but grateful Sherlock is here, relatively in one piece, the tape around his ribs and bruising blooming up one side of his body, the only sign that anything potentially dangerous had happened tonight, at all.

John reaches down and undoes Sherlock’s flies, waits for his trousers to drop, and for Sherlock to step out of them, and then pushes him down to sit on the edge of the bed, and drops to the floor, presses his face to the inside of Sherlock’s thigh, presses his nose, and mouth against the soft mound of Sherlock’s flaccid cock, through the cotton of his pants, and breathes.
“Promise me it will stop.”

“What will?”

“You know what. You know, Sherlock. You—you’re my whole world, Rose’s whole world, and if you… Just stop. Stop it now.” John mouths at the front of Sherlock’s pants and then rests his face on the side of Sherlock’s bare thigh to stare up at him. “Why are we even still doing this?”

And there it is…

“It’s what we do.”

“But why? We don’t need the money, and I…” John rises onto his knees, reaches down to smooth his hands carefully over the tops of Sherlock’s thighs. “I know it means something to you—helping people, whether you’ll admit that or not, and I’m dead proud of you for it, too, just so you know. Proud to be your partner. Proud to be your best friend. Proud as punch to be about to become your husband.” He smiles and gives Sherlock’s unbruised thigh a squeeze. “But these dangerous cases…”

“I know.” Sherlock admits. “I know, John. I’m sorry. I just thought—I know you need it, and I…”

John’s brows knit. “Me?”

“Yes. It—it’s a part of why you’re here, isn’t it? It’s always been a part of why you were here.”

John sits back on his heels. “Maybe in the beginning, but…” He rises up again. “Jesus. Jesus, Sherlock, you don’t really think that after all this time, after everything, I’m still just here for the cases?”

Sherlock’s eyes flicker away down to his lap. He picks at the newly formed scab on one of his knuckles. “Well, not just for the cases.”

“Hey.”

Sherlock looks up.

“The cases stopped mattering ages ago. Years ago. Before you jumped.”

“Not true.”

“Excuse me.”

“When you were married before, you…”

“We decided you wouldn’t do that.”

Sherlock scowls. “The only time you came back to me was when there was a case.”

“That was years ago.”

“Oh, so if I suddenly shuttered the door on all this, if I—I—suddenly retired to the country, you’d still be here, you’d still be happy?!” Sherlock surprises himself with the ferocity of his own feelings on the matter.

John blinks, and then suddenly his hands are cupping Sherlock’s face, small, and warm, and his thumbs are tracing along the lines of his cheekbones, causing Sherlock’s eyes to slide shut, and the
tears he hadn’t even realised were swimming in his eyes, to spill over.

“Look at me,” John murmurs.

And Sherlock does as he’s told.

“’Course I would. I’ll always be here. It’s you I love, it’s you who makes me happy—not the fucking cases. You—you bloody idiot.”

John kisses him, and Sherlock lets him, tries to let the words sink in, to believe them.

It’s been two years since they started sharing a bed, since they said the words that had been hovering there, unsaid, between them for all the years before that, and yet it’s still hard for him to really believe it sometimes, and that has been his burden to bear, his thing to work on, and he has been, he’s tried, but lately—lately he’s been feeling his age, and yes, probably trying a little too hard to compensate.

There was the hair dye, and then the gym membership, and finally the extra cases, the dangerous ones, because he wants to see John’s eyes light up, just so, wants to see the flush of his cheeks, the excitement in his eyes, the adrenaline fuelled arousal. It makes him feel useful, desirable, wanted—still—even though he’s not as quick as he was a thirty-three, now he’s forty-three.

John’s kiss is deep, tender but passionate, and Sherlock longs to give himself over to it, but…

He feels John smile against his lips. “Stop thinking.” He murmurs.

“Not.”

“Yeah, you are. You’re thinking about how old you are—or think you are.”

Sherlock does his best impression of shocked and appalled, and John laughs. “I’ll remind you that I have a good four years on you, so if you’re old, then I’m ancient! And I will love you, grey hair or not.” He ruffles Sherlock’s curls. “Crows feet.” He kisses the corner of each of Sherlock’s eyes. “Double chin…”

“John!”

But John is dipping down to kiss the chin in question and Sherlock feels some of his mortification drain away.

“And all. So stop doing this, okay. You don’t have to prove anything to me, and you don’t have to put your life at risk just to keep me interested. I meant what I said, what I’ve always said. You’re the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen. And all I want, all I’ve ever wanted was just the honour and the right to grow old with you, so…”

John dips down again. He kisses him. He kisses, and kisses, and kisses him until Sherlock forgets everything but the way he feels when they are together—warm, and safe, and thrumming with life.

“Papa.” Sherlock lifts his eyes from the cuffs of his shirt, to see Rose bobbing up and down on her toes in the doorway, the delicate layers of her pink chiffon skirt flouncing up and down like the petals of a flower.

He smiles at her reflection. “Bee. Aren’t you meant to be with Mrs. Hudson? We’ll be starting soon.”
“I have to tell you something.”

Sherlock turns around and leans against the dressing table. “Alright. Tell me.”

She flounces into the room, staring slightly agape at the wood-paneling, and velvet-flocked, brocade wallpaper that adorns the walls of the small ante room. “It’s a secret,” she finally says after looking her fill.

“I see.”

“It’s about Daddy.”

“Oh? And is it a secret he would want you to tell?”

“It’s nice. He won’t mind.”

“Ahh, well you’d best tell me then. We only have a few minutes.”

She walks over and motions for him to get down on her level, and he does. “Daddy looks nice!” She whispers loudly.

“Yes, he usually does. Is that the secret?”

She shakes her head, carefully manicured curls bouncing. She leans in closer, cups a hand between her mouth and his ear, conspiratorially. “He’s wearing pink.” She is clearly thrilled by this detail, which is unsurprising as she has been going through what John has dubbed her ‘pink period’ for over six months now.

“Is that so?”

“Yes.”

“Perhaps he wanted to match your dress.”

“It’s just his shirt and his tie,” she clarifies. “His tie has flowers.” She looks him up and down, and frowns. “What’s your tie?”

“I’m not going to be wearing a tie.”

“Why?”

“I never wear ties. And John said I shouldn’t if I don’t want to.”

“Oh.” She looks him up and down again, taking in his navy suit and white shirt. “Well, you look nice too.”

Sherlock chuckles. “Thank you. As do you.”

She twirls. “I know. My dress is a rose, like my name.”

“Very like.”

“I’m going to go now.”

“Alright. I’ll see you in there. Don’t forget the rings.”

“Molly has them. Her babies hate weddings. They keep kicking her from the inside.”
“Well, let’s hope they stay in there until the ceremony is over.”

Rose wrinkles her nose. “Imagine if they fell out on the floor with water and blood like the elephants on that documentary.”

Sherlock rolls his eyes. “Perish the thought. Now off you go. Quick, quick.”

She laughs, and then scurries away down the hall.

He’s alone again. Alone, and as ridiculously sentimental as it is, he misses John, John who is only one room away, but who feels unbearably distant given all that has transpired over the last week, and the import of the day.

He strides over to the door and peeks down the corridor. He can hear the quiet chatter of their guests in the room down the hall, but there is no one in sight, and so Sherlock quickly slips next door.

John looks up at the sound of the door, and rolls his eyes. “Not supposed to see me until we get in there.”

“You’re hardly the blushing bride. I fail to see the purpose of such a silly tradition. Besides—I needed to see you.”

John smiles fondly at that. “You saw me an hour ago in the car. Miss me already?”

“I always miss you.”

John nods his head in Sherlock’s direction. “How are the ribs.”

“Sore.”

“You’re lucky, you know.”

“Yes.”

Sherlock takes in John’s navy suit, the pale salmon-pink shirt, and the floral tie, just as Rose had informed him. “You look…” And, he suddenly realises, he has no words, none that can properly capture how marvellous John looks—relaxed, and handsome, and flushed with anticipation and joy.

Sherlock smiles. “I like this look on you.”

“Yeah?” John still blushes with pleasure when Sherlock praises his looks, and Sherlock continues to be charmed by it, every single time.

“Yes.”

“Right. Well, you know, I thought—first case: A Study in Pink. It was when I first fell in love with you, so—seemed appropriate.”

Sherlock is overcome at the gesture, and horribly irritated that he didn’t catch the significance himself. He walks over and stares down at John, traces a finger along the line of his jaw.

John smiles, and lifts a hand to the front of Sherlock’s shirt. “A bit buttoned up, aren’t you?”

“I thought it being a formal event…”

John looses the third button down and licks his lips. “Need you to look like you.”
“Mm.” Sherlock takes a step closer. “Shall I kiss you?”

“Not supposed to until the ceremony.”

“Yet another ridiculous tradition…”

He kisses him—deep and full. Predictably, John doesn’t put up the slightest resistance. Instead he melts into the kiss, gives as good as he gets, and they are both flushed, and breathless when a knock on the door finally interrupts them.

“You two both in there?” Greg sounds amused. “Should we just start without you?”

“Go away!” Sherlock booms.

John rolls his eyes. “We’re coming.”

“Or, we might be, if not for all the pointless interruptions.” Sherlock mutters with a pout.

John laughs. “Come on you. Come marry me, and then you can take me on this top secret, last minute honeymoon you’ve arranged, and make me come as many times as you like.”

Vows are exchanged with Greg Lestrade standing for Sherlock and Mike Stamford standing for John.

There is the exchanging of rings, and Rose completes her duties as ring-bearer quite well, and totally without incident.

There is Molly, and his mother, and Mrs. Hudson dabbing their eyes, and Mycroft looking quietly, seriously pleased, in spite of himself. There is his father smiling softly, still somewhat befuddled that it’s a man Sherlock is finally marrying, but never one to begrudge his child happiness, he is glad, all the same. There is Harry, grinning like the cat that’s got the cream in the second row, the woman she’s currently dating at her side. But mostly, there is John. John who is staring up at him like a besotted school boy, like Sherlock has hung the moon and stars. John who somehow, inexplicably looks ten years younger than he did two years ago, who no longer seems to carry the weight of the world on his shoulders, John who reaches up, and slides a hand around the back of his neck, and pulls him down into one of the deepest, sweetest kisses Sherlock can recall, in front of a room full of people, for the first time. John whose cheeks are flushed pink when he pulls away, but whose eyes are still full and unwavering.

And then there is a dinner at Angelo’s, the whole restaurant reserved just for them. There is good food enjoyed along side even better people. There are toasts and speeches (mostly tedious except for John’s which makes Sherlock and everyone else present more than a little misty-eyed).

And afterwards, when Rose is found sound asleep in one of the booths, and Molly declares she and Greg really must make their good-byes, after Mike has vigorously pumped both their hands in one last hearty congratulations, and Harry has scooped Rose up and taken her home, and Sherlock’s brother and parents have offered well wishes of their own, and John and Sherlock have wheeled Mrs. Hudson home in her wheelchair (a hip surgery she is still recovering from), and gotten her settled for the night, there is John, still in his wedding suit, making them a late night cuppa, and Sherlock lighting a fire in the hearth, and both of them settling, exhausted, into their respective chairs with a sigh and a shared smile.
“Hello, husband.” John grins.

“Hello.” Sherlock smiles back.

“Bit odd this.”

“Is it?”

“Suppose we’ll have to start bickering over who takes out the rubbish, and who mows the lawn, now?”

“You always take out the rubbish, and we don’t have a lawn.”

“Well,” John grins even wider. “Guess that solves that, then.”

“Indeed.”

“Do I at least get wedding night sex?”

“Does anyone?”

“Mm, probably not.”

“Perhaps morning after the wedding sex?”

“Deal.” John winks. “Though, speaking of, aren’t we leaving for your mystery destination bright and early?”

“We can lie in. There’s no rush.”

“Sounds perfect.”

“Today was perfect.” Because Sherlock wants John to know. Needs him to know how much this has meant to him, that John wants to be with him in this way, that John was willing to wait out Sherlock’s wholly unnecessary histrionics about marriage and weddings being a waste of time, wholly unnecessary, foolish even. Histrionics it was clear were born out of fear—fear of rejection, fear of losing John yet again, a fear that marriage was something John did because he felt it was expected of him, and not because he was really interested in or committed to the enterprise.

Well, it was clear to everyone but Sherlock.

There had been a few tetchy visits with Ella, but he’d got himself sorted eventually, and John had even gotten down on one knee a second time, asked again, pulled Sherlock into his arms and kissed him like it was the first time and they hadn’t just spent three months engaged in a tense and painful stalemate.

“Yeah?” John looks pleased.

“Yes. My prior objections were ill-founded, and—they were about me. I hope you know that.”

“Yeah.” It’s soft, but there is still sadness behind it. He had hurt John those three long months, and it still feels unforgivable.

“I had heard there are certain benefits to marriage.”

“Oh?”
“Mmm, not the least of which is that you have someone to crawl into your lap and kiss you whenever you feel the need.”

John huffs, and grins with a shake of his head. “Oh, you heard that, did you?”

“Indeed.”

“And might you be feeling that need right now?”

Sherlock lowers his voice, and smirks. “Desperately.”

John sets his tea down, walks over, and slides onto Sherlock’s lap, leaning back to press a line of kisses along his jaw. “How’s that.”

“An excellent start.”

“Thought wedding night sex was off the books.”

“Who said anything about sex?”

John shakes his head again. “Well, just assumed that if the kissing was a start, then…”

“Ah, but perhaps the kissing is the beginning, the middle and the end.”

“I stand corrected.” John sits up a little, leans over, and kisses the other side of his neck, presses a kiss to his chin, reaches up, cards his fingers through Sherlock’s hair and pulls his head down until their lips meet.

They kiss long and lazy, and when they finally break apart Sherlock suddenly realises he’s exhausted. John blinks at him. “Just look at you. Too much excitement.”

Sherlock rolls his eyes, but it’s true, probably, he thinks.

“Let’s go to bed, yeah. But you have to promise me that I’ll get to make love to you sometime tomorrow.”

“Of course. I promise. I—I’m sorry it’s not tonight.”

“You’re right. No one has sex on their wedding night. Let’s go to bed.”

And they do—naked, and warm, and safe in one another’s arms.

Sherlock wakes slowly.

John is still asleep. He can tell by the weight of him in his arms, and the even cadence of his breathing.

It’s a morning like any other morning, but it feels significant, somehow. The white gold ring on his finger, smooth and warm from his skin is John’s promise and declaration: he wants this, he wants them, he wants Sherlock, still, after all these years, and forever. Sherlock swallows down the unexpected wave of emotion that clenches in his chest and bites at the corners of his eyes.

He runs a hand down John’s spine, and buries his nose in his hair, and breathes in the scent of home.
John stirs, hums, wraps his arms around him, still mostly asleep, and pulls him close.

“Whatcha doin’?” mumbled sleepily into Sherlock’s neck.

“Thinking about yesterday, about us.” Sherlock is honest.

John stirs, and blinks blearily up at him. “Everything okay?”

“Wonderful.”

John smiles, half-drunk with sleep. “Mmm, tha’s good. Come here.”

John pushes up to press their mouths messily together. He has morning breath, and he’s still uncoordinated with sleep, and Sherlock thinks it’s the best kiss they’ve ever shared.

They kiss for a long while, like that, lazy, unhurried, the sort of kissing that fans arousal to a low simmer and then keeps it there. It’s the promise of things later in the day.

Sherlock is tempted to take the train where they are going, so he doesn’t wear himself out driving, but then there will be people, and he wants John entirely to himself today.

They finally break apart and go their separate ways, Sherlock to the shower, and John to get breakfast started. Then they switch, and breakfast is hot, and ready by the time John makes it out of the shower.

Later Sherlock goes down to see if Mrs. Hudson needs anything before her sister arrives later in the day, while John packs their overnight bags. She tuts and coos over the previous day’s festivities and then insists that she’ll be just fine for a few hours, and that the two of them should just head out and get their honeymoon started.

And so they do. John insists on driving due to Sherlock’s ribs, and Sherlock directs him north out of London. John is like a boy at Christmas trying to guess what it is Sherlock has planned. His theory of a seaside inn in Brighton comes the closest, and Sherlock winks sidelong at him with a grin as a reward, which results in John reaching over to lay a hand on Sherlock’s thigh as they drive.

He gets bolder, and bolder the longer they go, and eventually has to pull off onto a secluded country lane, covered over with trees. He practically launches himself into the backseat to find the lube in his overnight bag, and proceeds to give Sherlock an earth-shattering hand job where he sits, while simultaneously wanking himself to completion in the drivers seat beside him.

It’s an impressive feat of dexterity and coordination, the most ridiculous thing they’ve ever done, Sherlock thinks, and tells John so, and John giggles breathlessly, still drunk on endorphins, and then produces a pack of baby wipes from somewhere, gets them both cleaned up, and they carry on their way.

When they finally reach East Dean and Sherlock directs John to turn down a long semi-private lane, he is overcome with a rush of nerves. There is so much about this surprise that could be ill-received. He wonders, now, if he should have warned John more, discussed it with him, not done this thing on a whim after his accident a week prior. But, it’s too late now.

They pull up in front of the small brick cottage, and Sherlock nods toward the house with a hesitant grin.

“We’re staying here?”
Sherlock nods. “It’s just a half-mile from the sea, a 20 min walk to the cliffs, a mere jog to Eastbourne and easy drive to Brighton.”

John looks impressed. “Nice. I’ll admit, not the sort of thing I thought you’d come up with, but looks homely. We have this whole place to ourselves?”

“No, of course, John. It’s our honeymoon.”

“Right. Well, let’s go have a look then.”

They get out of the car, and John fetches their bags from the backseat, while Sherlock hurries to the front door, and finds the envelope he was told would be tucked under the welcome mat. There’s a note inside, along with the key. It’s written in purple ink, and embellished with loose doodles of flowers in the corner.

Sherlock rolls his eyes, and is about to tuck it in his pocket when John appears at his shoulder, and narrows in on the one detail of interest in the blink of an eye.

“Wait. Janine? Janine Hawkins?” Sherlock can hear the tightness in his voice, that jealousy that still plagues him after all this time. They’re working on it, but it rears its head often, and this ghost from their not so distant and rather unpleasant past, is teasing it to the fore again. “What’s she got to do with anything. This her place then?”

Sherlock sighs, and crumples her note in his fist. “Was her place.”

“What?” It’s short and tight.

Sherlock sighs again. “I had hoped to show you the place and get your opinion before I revealed it’s origins. She bought this cottage with the earnings from selling sensationalised accounts of our relationship to the press after the Magnussen affair. She bought it, and then never used it. It’s been on the market 6 months, and after my accident last week…”

“Wasn’t an accident. Was your own bloody fault.”

“Yes, precisely. And afterwards, I got to thinking about what you’d said, about us slowing down a little. How you wanted the—“ Sherlock’s throat goes tight. “The honour of growing old with me, and well—I thought this as good a spot as any.”

John’s brow knits. “What do you mean? You bought this place?”

Sherlock nods, feeling horribly sheepish. He should have talked it over with John. He really should have.

“Sherlock, we can’t just leave London. There’s Rose’s school, there’s Mrs. Hudson.”

“I know. We wouldn’t move here now. It could just be a place to come on holiday. But someday, when we feel like we’re ready, I thought—I hoped—that maybe you would want to retire here with me.”

John’s eyes widen for a moment. He sucks in a sharp breath, lets it out again, and then the corners of his mouth twitch, and he shakes his head, and huffs, and grins. “You’re a madman, you know that. You better hope I like this place. And for the record, of course I’m going to retire with you, wherever we end up.” He holds up his left hand and waggles his ring finger, and the gold band adorning it, in front of Sherlock’s face. “That’s what this means, you idiot.”
Sherlock feels a weight drop from his shoulders.

John jerks his chin at the door. “Best show it all to me then, since God knows how much of our retirement funds you paid to get the place. Or maybe she gave you a discount.”

There it is again, the jealousy. Sherlock steps in front of him as he reaches for the door. “John, you do know that nothing happened between me and Janine all those years ago, yes? Nothing. Everything she told the press, that was just fiction.”


“I mean it. I liked her, that’s all. She was amusing company, and she was kind without being ridiculous about it. She was tolerable.”

“Right.”

“John…”

“Yeah. I know. I’m doing it again. Fine. It’s just—odd.”

“Odd?”

“That you chose to honeymoon in a house owned by your ex.”

“John, we were never involved?”

“You kissed her!”

“Whatever. You kissed!”

Sherlock steps forward, takes John’s face in his hands, and kisses him. After a moment he feels him give in to it, hears the soft thump of their overnight bags on the front stoop, feels John’s arms lift to wrap carefully around his waist. And when they finally part, John’s eyes are full.

He forces a smile. “Sorry.”

“I know.”

John sniffs and looks away to wipe at his eyes. When he looks back up it’s clear he’s rallied. He takes a deep breath. “Well, on we go then. Gotta see if the place is suitable for keeping after your wrinkly old arse someday.”

Sherlock opens his mouth to object, and John just laughs. “Don’t worry, I’m sure it will be a very pretty, wrinkly arse.” He gives said arse a gentle swat as Sherlock turns to unlock the door, and then they are both in the foyer, where John sets their bags down, and starts to wander slowly through the rooms, Sherlock just behind him.

The cottage had come furnished, and it’s clear that the furnishings were not of Janine’s choosing. They’re old, possibly pre-war, but they’re warm in that way that suggests a kind of homely comfort, and Sherlock can tell John is pleased.

“Actually. This is really nice. Could do us very well.”

“Yes, I thought so.”
John walks about the parlour, running his fingers over the hearth, the bookshelves, the faded chintz sofa. He stops, looks up, and grins. “Practically pink. Rose will love this.”

Sherlock smiles back, pleased that John can already picture them all there. “Yes, I imagine she will.”

John’s face does something Sherlock can interpret. “Come here,” he murmurs.

And Sherlock goes, because how could he ever say ‘no’ when John is looking at him like that. Why would he ever want to.

John smiles up at him. “It was a good idea, this. I’m sorry I got… Shouldn’t have been that way with you before. I love it. Really. But, umm… Next time you want to make what I assume was at least a half million pound purchase, maybe we could talk about it first.”

Sherlock nods. “£625,000. And yes. Of course. Quite right.”

John smiles, and giggles, and shakes his head. “Well, let’s see the rest of it, yeah?”

They take their time exploring the three small bedrooms, the adequate kitchen, which had obviously undergone a refurbishment by the last owner, the lovely, if overgrown back garden, complete with stoned in garden beds, and a set of abandoned beehives, that look remarkably intact considering how long they have been sitting out in the elements, unattended.

John helps Sherlock move them into the large shed at the back of the garden, and then they go inside, and unpack, and realise they have nothing to eat, and will need to go to the shops.

John is cautious at the shops. New village, and so remote. He walks a little farther away from Sherlock, but Sherlock can see the tension and alertness in his body, the way his eyes scan the aisles for anyone who might notice Sherlock and judge. It’s unnecessary, but it’s John’s way, and Sherlock sees it for what it is, at its root—love. John isn't ashamed of him, of them. Quite the contrary. John is, rather, protective, and hasn’t he always been, Sherlock thinks, remembering the early days, and John’s well-founded fears about the press. Those days are done, but times are strange, and he can’t fault John for his caution.

They get their food without incident, and return to the cottage to cook a couple of pork chops, a salad, some of John’s excellent mushroom risotto. They skip the wine in favour of a local cider, which pairs nicely with the pork. John still struggles sometimes, and so they keep alcohol in the house to a minimum.

After tea they settle in the parlour and light a fire in the giant old hearth, and John makes slow, tender love to Sherlock on the pink, chintz sofa, in the glow of the flames, both of them laughing at the inconvenience of the location, when John’s knees keep slipping off the sofa. They finally stumble to the bedroom, and finish there, John murmuring words of praise and encouragement in Sherlock’s ear, while he strokes him to an electrifying finish, and then comes inside him with a whimper of relief.

Afterwards, they lay quiet and sated in one another’s arms, and whisper back and forth in the dark. John holds Sherlock in that way he sometimes does now, like he’s afraid of their happiness, afraid that Sherlock might be snatched away from him at a moment’s notice, and he might be forced to face the world alone again. And Sherlock does what he always does in those moments, he spoons in behind John, pulls him against his chest, and buries his nose in his hair, breathes warm breath against his scalp, presses a hand over John’s heart, and let’s John hold on tight until he feels the tension drain from his body, again.
Finally John rolls back over to face him. “Love you, you know.”

“Yes, I do know.”

John huffs the way he always does when Sherlock says this. “If you’d told me over a decade ago, when we met, that we would be this someday, I never would have believed it.”

“And are you glad?”

“Course. You’re the best thing to have ever happened to me. Didn’t feel like it sometimes, but all-in-all…” John slides up and presses his lips against Sherlock’s. “All-in-all I’d say I’m the luckiest bloke in the world.”

“Oh, I don’t know. I rather think that privilege might belong to me.”

John grins. “Flattery?”

“The truth. You are remarkable, a man of courage, and loyalty, and conviction. A rare thing these days.”

“Definitely flattery.” John grins. “And flattery will get you everything, so what do you want, mm?”

“I already have everything I want, everything I’ve always wanted.” Sherlock replies quite seriously. He sees the words sink in, sees John’s eyes grow wet, before flitting away.

“John…”

John looks back up, and Sherlock smiles. “I mean it. I wanted you from the moment you stepped into that lab with Mike, against all logic, wholly unexpected. You were the most remarkable surprise. You were the one thing I never thought I would have, and so had convinced myself I didn’t want at all.

“You’ve filled in the cracks in my life. You’ve made something indescribably beautiful from the pile of detritus that long stretch of years before you arrived had left behind. You knit me together, and there will never be words or actions enough to let you know how grateful I am, or how profoundly I love you.”

John blinks, and the tears that had been gathering in his eyes spill over. “And you say I’m the romantic one.”

Sherlock frowns in confusion. “But you are.”

John laugh wetly, shakes his head, and kisses him.

The End

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