Colors

by Quesarasara

Summary

Everyone on earth is born with eyes that see in black, white, and an endless series of greys.

When you meet your soulmate, you finally see the world in color.

We're all searching for the person who brings color to our lives.

John and Sherlock are no exception.
This fic was born when a bout of late night channel surfing reminded me how much I adored the movie Pleasantville.

And then that rediscovered love crashed headlong into the soft spot in my fangirl heart for soulmate AUs.

And my soulmate preoccupation was like "Hey, you got your premise in my guilty obsession!" and then Pleasantville was all "No, you got YOUR weird obsession mixed up with my clever premise!" And then this story just wouldn't leave me alone.

Special thanks to my ruthless beta for the brutal encouragement (you know who you are).

I do not own these characters, but I am shamelessly borrowing them.

Updating on Thursdays. Comments and feedback absolutely appreciated.

Note: I'm American and thus my spelling is predominantly that of this side of the pond. FYI.

中文 translation available [here](#) by [maizi0522](#).
Lovely, generous, talented and wonderful reader Abby sent me the most BEAUTIFUL cover for this fic. It's perfect and amazing and I am so very, very grateful. Since she wished to remain anonymous other than her first name, please join me in sending thanks to her via telepathy. THANK YOU ABBY!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.
Full Disclosure: The artwork used in the cover is by the amazing artist Allinor on deviantART, the original piece is Lacuna03.

Check out the original at the link above, it is GORGEOUS!
Stretched out on his stomach near the edge of the water, legs splayed behind him while one bare foot kicks toe first into the ground before bouncing back up to let the other leg repeat the motion, the little boy arranges the assortment of shells and stones he’s been gathering from along the beachfront all afternoon into neat rows like soldiers on the sand beneath him.

Eyeing the collection thoughtfully, he reaches out and plucks up a particularly smooth stone, turning it over in his fingers to brush the sand off its polished surface. The smoky charcoal edges are darker than the lighter grey it becomes toward the center. A fleck of seaweed sticks black and shiny to the bottom of the rock and the few droplets of water that still cling to it glow silver in the late afternoon sun. He holds it up over his head and watches the light shine through it, shades of grey that sparkle as he moves it back and forth. The boy sets it back down carefully into its place amongst the other treasures the sea has seen fit to release to his care and lets his eyes linger briefly over each object.

“Mummy?” he calls over his shoulder.

“Yeah, Johnny?” A shadow falls onto his shoulder and slides over the objects in the sand in front of him. “What have you got there, love?”

“Treasure,” the fair haired boy replies with a dazzling smile up at his mother.

"Treasure indeed," she says as she sits down beside her son and rubs a hand absently over his back while surveying his haul. “You’ve found some beautiful shells, haven’t you?”

"Yeah, but not just shells, Mum. Some rocks, and a piece of tin—and I found a bottle cap too!” He reaches out and picks up the round object, tilts it to watch the light play off the crimped edges, and holds it up for his mother to get a closer look and shyly asks, “What color is it?”

The woman’s eyes crinkle at the corners, her pleasant though rather unremarkable face growing soft and lovely as she regards her young son. She looks again at the bottle cap and then stretches out one finger to tap against the tip of the boy’s nose. “It’s green.”

“Green,” the boy repeats softly, a note of reverence in his voice, his eyes wide with curiosity. “What does green feel like?”

His mother narrows her eyes, one side of her mouth quirking up in a thoughtful fashion, and is silent for a moment. Then with a sudden smile she plucks the shiny disc from her son’s hands, rubs the face of it against the sleeve of the soft shirt she’s wearing, then reaches out and slides the smooth metal surface over the boy’s forehead. “Green is cool and fresh, like walking over grass with bare feet.”

John’s face lights up with understanding, a smile spreading across his expressive features. He looks down over the other objects lined up in the sand before him and points to a small shell that shines a bit brighter than those on either side of it in the light of the afternoon sun and asks “What about that one? What color is it?”

“That one,” his mother replies, “is pink”.

“Pink,” John says, pushing the word through his lips, out over his tongue and against the roof of his mouth. “Show me pink!”

Looking down at her child, she feels the familiar swell of affection rise inside her chest. Her little
boy is growing up so fast—so curious about the world, so sure that she can explain things that are so very difficult to put into words.

Reaching out to clasp one of his small hands in her own, she raises it toward her face and puts her lips close to the back of his hand. “Pink is warm and soft, like a whisper against your skin.”

John giggles as his mum’s breath tickles his knuckles, then turns back toward his collection and grabs the smooth dark stone he’d examined earlier. He holds it out to his mother with an expectant look on his face.

"Now this is something special, Johnny," she remarks, her eyebrows raised in surprise as she takes it from him. "It’s sea glass. A broken piece of a bottle, perhaps, that’s been tumbled and worn shiny by the waves and had all the rough edges smoothed out.”

The boy regards the stone with an impressed nod. “What color is it?”

“It’s red,” and before he can even ask, she brings his hand back up to her face. “If pink is a whisper against your skin, then red is something warmer—like a kiss!” With a warm huff of air she presses her lips to his skin, makes an exaggerated smooching sound, and revels in the laughter that bubbles out of the little boy’s mouth.

A second shadow falls over the sand in front of them, and John looks up to see his older sister hovering overhead, a scowl marring her pretty face as her gaze travels over the items laid out so carefully before her brother.

“What’s all this junk, then?” she asks, sliding one foot up and toeing a few of John’s prized objects out of their orderly row.

“It’s not junk, Harry!” John insists, moving to shield the rest of his treasures away from her feet as she raises her leg to kick them out of place again.

“Harry,” their mother says, a slight timbre of warning in her voice. “Johnny has collected some very interesting things, and we’ve just been talking about all the colors he’s found. Would you like me to tell you about them too?”

Harry rolls her eyes and cocks a hip in the careless way that generations of older sisters have perfected through centuries of practice then aims a petulant glance at her brother.

“No thanks,” she says with a shrug. "But you should keep telling Johnny about them, because he’ll probably never get to see colors anyway.”

"Yes I will Harry!" John tells her as he pushes himself up to his knees in the sand, his brows together knit in a scowl. “I’ll get colors when I meet the right person just like when Mum met Dad and then I will be able to see them all. And when I can, I won’t even tell you how they feel!”

"Yeah, right." Harry sneers at her little brother as she flips her long hair over one tanned shoulder. “Like you are anyone’s soulmate.”

“Harriet Jane Watson,” their mother warns, “that’s quite enough! Apologize to your brother.”

Harry clenches her mouth shut and stares at the ground.

“I said, apologize to your brother,” the woman repeats.

Harry squares her shoulders and feigns an indifferent shrug. “Sorry, Johnny. I’m sure there’s
someone very special waiting out there for you,” she says with a smirk, then rolls her eyes and turns to walk away.

“Your father and I will discuss this with you later, young lady!” their mother calls after her, and she and John watch the girl walk back up the beach to join her friends.

John stares down at the items in front of him, then out toward the ocean, a frown on his face as he replays his sister’s ‘apology’ in his mind. After a moment he feels his mother’s arm slide around him and squeeze gently, her lips brushing over his temple. As they both stare out over the sea, John lays his small head against his mother’s shoulder and sighs.

“Mum, what color is the ocean?”

“The ocean is so many colors, Johnny. It’s cool green, and soft grey, and glittery gold. Some days it’s stormy indigo, and others it’s fiery turquoise, and then sometimes it’s the most peaceful blue you can imagine, the kind of blue that makes you want to wrap yourself in it and sleep for days. The day I met your dad, I saw all those colors in the sea for the very first time. It was so beautiful.”

John sighs and leans more heavily against his mother. He looks out over the waves—at the white hot ball of the sun in the sky and the striated clouds in shades of grey shot through with silvery rays as it sinks beneath the black line of the edge of the smoky charcoal water that churns and runs white with surf over the grey sand of the beach—and wants to believe that Harry is wrong. That one day a chance meeting with a stranger will finally let him see all the colors that his mum has worked so hard to explain to him when he asks.

“Someday,” he whispers (pink) against his mother’s shoulder, “I want to see all the colors in the ocean.”

“Oh Johnny,” she says as she kisses (red) his forehead. “You will.”

A riot of dark curls framing his pale-eyed face, the boy watches as the insect flutters through the air over the expansive back garden and hovers above the rose bushes that grow alongside the gardener’s shed. With the stealth of a cat, all long limbs and bony elbows, he steadily approaches as the butterfly alights softly onto the petals of the largest bloom. Holding his breath he tries to remain absolutely silent as he nears the flowering bush, carefully extending his arm toward the specimen he’s intent on collecting. He stays very still and slowly tilts his head from side to side observing how the sunlight plays over the insect’s flat, outstretched wings.

Starting at the edge of the upper (dorsum) quarter of the left wing and repeating the scientific terms for each segment silently to himself (apex, termen, tornus, costa), the boy examines the butterfly. He takes note of the darkest marking, the largest spot on the wing (cell), and the variations of grey in the darkly outlined segments that radiate from it (interspaces). His gaze travels to observe the perfect symmetry of the right upper wing quadrant when the butterfly’s wings shiver slightly and the insect slowly folds them up into a perfect vertical plane above its slim dark body.

Seizing the chance, the boy darts out a hand and pinches the wings gently between his thumb and forefinger, mindful not to press too tightly (butterfly wings are very fragile, he’s learned, both by reading about them in the heavy book he found in the library on the second floor of the house, and by pinching them so hard that they all but crumbled between his fingers the first few times he’d gone collecting). Carefully clutching his specimen, he sprints across the grass to where his older brother sits, a book in his lap and long legs crossed, a tall glass of ice water sweating on the table next to him in the afternoon sun.
“Mycroft,” the little boy cries. “Look! I found one! It’s a ‘Vanessa atalanta’!”

The older boy looks up from his book tilts his chin rather slightly higher than necessary to regard his younger brother and the insect he’s holding.

“So you have,” he replies and leans forward a bit in his chair to examine the butterfly still clutched in the little boy’s fingers. “It is indeed a Red Admiral, an excellent addition to your collection. Well done, Sherlock.”

He reaches down and retrieves a large glass jar, unscrews the lid and holds it out for Sherlock to place his prize inside atop a layer of sawdust soaked in ethyl acetate scattered over the bottom, then screws the lid on tightly and sets the jar gently down on the table at his side. The younger boy drops to his knees and presses his face close to the vessel, his nose nearly touching the smooth glass. He watches the butterfly slowly open and close its wings a few times, sees its long curled tongue dart out to taste the strange material it finds itself standing on, and knows that it won’t be long before the chemicals in the sealed environment of the jar do their job and the butterfly dies. It made him sad at first, he remembers. He cried the first time Mycroft had shown him how to do this, wet tears gathering in the corners of his eyes, threatening to spill as he asked the older boy why the butterfly had to die. He recalls the way his brother looked at him, the split second of warmth in his eyes before they narrowed with a coolness that made him shiver.

“Everything dies, Sherlock. Like Father always says—caring is not an advantage,” the older boy had replied, and when he heard the small sniffle from the little boy next to him added, “Besides, how would you spread and mount this specimen for your collection if it was still alive? It will be easier to study this way, don’t you agree?”

He did. Of course he did. But it still made him sad.

Now the boy watches this butterfly gradually still, wings fluttering less and less frequently as the minutes wear on, until all at once it stops moving all together, its wings half way up as it falls to one side and lies stiff at the bottom of the jar.

“Mycroft,” he asks, without looking at his older brother, “why is it called a Red Admiral?”

“Because its most distinctive wing markings are red in color,” the older boy replies, his eyes never leaving the page he’s reading.

The younger boy looks thoughtfully at the newest member of his collection for a moment, his chin resting on his fists on the table. “What is red like, Mycroft?”

Raising an eyebrow, his eyes still fixed on the book in his lap, he says “I have no way of knowing, Sherlock. As you are well aware.”

“But don’t you want to know?” the little boy asks, turning his gaze from the butterfly now dead in the jar to his brother’s face.

“I don’t see why it matters,” he replies.

“Well, I want to know,” Sherlock says, his eyebrows knitting together in a frown. “I want to see all the colors. I want to see them and understand them and know why my Vanessa atalanta is called the Red Admiral.”

With a sigh, Mycroft closes his book and sets it aside. He looks at the little boy frowning before him, at the mess of curls that spring out in every direction from his head, and for a brief moment he wants to reach out and run his fingers through them fondly and tame the wild spirals into some semblance
of order—but he resists the urge.

“We’ve been over this before, Sherlock,” sighs Mycroft.

“I know, I know. You can only see colors when you find your soulmate,” Sherlock recites in a sing-song voice. “And you haven’t found yours so you can’t see them. And neither can I.” The younger boy looks over at his butterfly for a moment, his forehead wrinkled in thought, and with a small gasp turns back to his brother as a smile breaks out over his face. “I know, I’ll ask Mummy! She can tell me what red is like!”

“Mummy doesn’t see colors either, Sherlock,” Mycroft replies, wearing a look that should be far too imperious for his 13 year old face, yet suits him.

Sherlock looks confused for a moment his eyes drifting up and to the left as he takes in this new piece of information. “But Mycroft, of course she does. You said people get to see colors when they find their soulmate. Mummy’s married to Father. She must know what red is.”

“No, Sherlock. She doesn’t. Neither does Father.”

“But, you said…” Sherlock begins.

“Yes,” Mycroft snaps, “I know what I said.”

Sherlock flinches as though stung and Mycroft sighs to see it. He takes a deep breath, his face softening as he looks down at the little brother he has been looking after his whole life.

“Just because two people are married, it doesn’t mean that they are soulmates, Sherlock,” Mycroft explains, and as he says the words and watches his clever younger brother glean his meaning from them, he feels his carefully constructed cool exterior crumble slightly. “Colors are merely a different way of seeing the world around us, another set of hues from light to dark in addition to the hundreds of shades of grey we all see every day. And while the concept may be novel, color certainly isn’t necessary to live and learn and do meaningful work in the world.”

“You sounded like Father just now,” Sherlock replies sulkily.

As much as he wants to deny it, Mycroft admits to himself that he did indeed sound like their father.

Sherlock slips sideways off his knees to sit on the ground in front of the older boy, and without stopping himself this time Mycroft stretches out his arm and runs the palm of his hand over the back of his younger brother’s head before settling it on his slim shoulder. Sherlock leans slightly into the pressure and looks out over the lawn, the perfectly mown blades of grass rippling in waves of grey and smoke and ash and throwing off silver light from the afternoon sun.

“Someday, I will see all the colors,” Sherlock whispers.

Mycroft feels an unfamiliar tug in in the pit of his stomach, a tightness in his throat that he swallows against until it eases as he follows his brother’s gaze out over the grey landscape.

“Perhaps you will, Sherlock,” he says quietly. “Perhaps you will.”
Hunched over the carefully constructed form of the half-built model schooner before him, John grips the fine grit sandpaper between two fingers and rubs it lightly with the grain of the delicate wood from bow to stern. The surface of the worn wooden table he and Dad had dragged out onto the porch of the cottage is covered in a fine layer of powdery dust, the miniscule particles of balsa wood falling as the edges of the model are smoothed with each pass of John’s hands. When his father had suggested the project at the beginning of the summer John hadn’t been terribly enthusiastic about the idea. But Dad had seemed so excited about it, grinning and telling his son about the summer that he and his own father built the model ship that sits proudly on the shelf over the couch in the comfortable sitting room of the beach house where John has spent every summer for as long as he can remember.

“It’ll be good fun, Johnny boy,” Dad had promised, settling an arm around his son’s shoulders and then backing away and looking at him with exaggerated surprise and saying “Cor, son, I think you’ve grown an inch since the weekend! Soon you’ll be taller than me.”

John had huffed out an exasperated sigh, and Dad laughed and put his arm back around him pulling him into a half-hug, his other hand coming up to ruffle through his 14 year old son’s shaggy hair. Jack Watson was not a tall man, to say the least. Standing at just over 5’6” it was a running family joke that one day his children would tower over him–and the world would still consider them short. He was a compact man, his strong limbs and stocky build housing a quick mind and a big personality that often made him seem larger than he was.

“Just a bit of sport, son,” he said fondly, and winked. “What we Watson men lack in brawn we make up for in brains. And you’ve already got more of both than your old man, my boy.”

So John had agreed to the project, had helped his Dad draw up the plans and gather the materials, and for the last few weeks they’ve spent every afternoon out on the porch, sawing the planks and fixing them to the frame, sanding them smooth and repeating the process. And to his surprise, John found that he really enjoyed it.

He loves the feel of the wood beneath his hands, the way that the tiny rough fibers catch slightly on his skin as he runs his palm over the raw planks. He loves the whisper of the sandpaper as it passes over each piece, he loves how smooth the surface feels after being sanded, and he loves the way a pile of thin sheets of wood have somehow transformed into what actually is starting to look like a boat. But mostly he loves sitting across the table from his Dad, sometimes talking about the ship, sometimes talking about other things John finds interesting, and other times working in companionable silence with the sound of the waves rushing up the beach the only conversation to be heard.

John sets down the sandpaper, runs a soft dry cloth carefully over the length of the boat, and holds it up to his father for inspection. The older man runs a finger around each edge of the model and smiles up at his son.

“Tomorrow we start work on the masts,” he tells John.

“Tomorrow?” John asks, “Why not today?”
“Because tonight Clara and her parents are joining us for dinner,” Dad responds, “and I promised your sister we’d have all this cleaned up and put away long before they arrive.”

As if on cue, Harry Watson appears on the sand at the edge of the porch, a towel wrapped low around her bikini clad hips and a beach bag slung over her arm. She looks windblown and surly, a mood confirmed moments later when she slides her sunglasses up onto the top of her head and stares at her Dad and brother with narrowed eyes.

“Haven’t you cleaned this up yet?” she huffs. “They will be here any minute now and we can’t have dinner out here with all that rubbish lying about!”

The screened door to the cottage swings open with a soft whoosh and Lynette Watson steps onto the porch holding a pie fresh out of the oven in front of her.

“They’ll not be here for three hours yet, Harry,” she sighs, then smiles down at her daughter as the girl climbs the steps from the beach. “I’m sure the boys will be able to clear away their project in far less time than that.”

Setting the pie out on the broad porch railing to cool, she looks over at her husband who is shaking his head and smiling. John sees his father catch his mother’s eye, notes the look of fondness that passes effortlessly between them, and almost can’t suppress the snort of laughter that rises from his throat when he sees his dad roll his eyes toward Harry.

“We’ve got plenty of time,” their mother says to her still frowning daughter, swiping her hands together and rubbing them clean on the front of her apron. “Why don’t you and your dad drive down to the shops and pick up some wine to go with dinner?”

“Excellent idea, dear,” their dad responds as he rises from the table and crosses the porch to put his arms around his wife and plants a kiss on her cheek. “A word of advice to both of you kids: If at all possible, marry someone cleverer than you are. Makes for a much easier life.”

“Clara is really smart,” Harry gushes. “You’ll see, Dad. She’s brilliant.”

“I can’t wait, love.” Jack Watson says with a wink. “Let me just wash my hands and grab my keys and I’ll be back in a tick.” He follows his wife back into the house, the door clacking shut behind them.

Harry crosses the porch to one of the wooden Adirondack chairs that John and his Dad repainted last week and flops gracefully into it, sliding her long legs over one arm and looking over at her brother. Out of the corner of his eye, John sees her reach down into her bag and retrieve the pocket sized volume she’s barely put down since she came home from uni for the summer holidays. She leafs through it for a few moments before stopping on a specific page and holding it out in front of her.

She looks down at the book, then at her brother, then back at the book, before turning the page and holding it up again to look at the book, then her brother, then the book. Then she flips back to the previous page and repeats the process. After the third time she does this, John can’t take it anymore.

“Is there a problem, Harry?” he demands.

“No problem at all, Johnny,” she replies. “It’s just…interesting, is all. I can’t decide whether the color of your shirt is ‘evergreen’ or closer to ‘olive green’. At a glance it could be either, but your shirt is a really interesting shade of green. It’s just slightly different than both of them. It’s very…interesting.”

“Oh, is it interesting, Harry?” John says, turning to face her. “You keep using that word. I’m not sure
it means what you think it means.”

He turns back to his schooner, doing his best to ignore the indignant huff she aims at him. If John had found his older sister insufferable before, it was nothing compared to this new version of Harry that had gone color during her last term at uni. She’d colorbonded with another student named Clara, and the two families are meeting for the first time tonight. He supposes he should be happy for his sister, and he thinks he is, deep down. And admittedly, he’s more than a bit curious to see exactly what kind of person turns out to be the soulmate of one Harriet J. Watson. If nothing else, tonight should be, well, interesting.

“Look at that sky,” Harriet sighs, looking out over the water. “It’s so blue today.”

John rolls his eyes and begins to gather the various pieces of the schooner along with the tools and materials to pack them away for the night. “Right. Blue. I’ll take your word for it.”

“No really, Johnny,” Harry continues. “I mean, the sky is almost always blue here, but today it’s an especially bright shade. And the sun glows so yellow against it, it’s really quite…”

John slams the handful of wood scraps he’s gathered back down onto the table with a bang.

“Right, Harry. I get it. It’s very blue. Maybe the bluest blue that anyone in the world has ever seen. It’s quite possibly a miracle, it’s so blue.” John hadn’t meant to lose his temper, but now he was on a roll. “Someone should call Rome and let the Pope know about this. Oh, wait…could the Pope even see it? I mean, he’s not married and there’s that celibacy rule and all. You know what? Never mind. Just call the media instead. ‘Bluest sky ever witnessed reported by loudmouthed sister, film at eleven!’”

He waits for Harry to lash back at him, to raise her voice and sneer and poke until he rises from the table and turns on her and they circle each other like fighter planes taking aim and shooting angry insults at one another until one of their parents tells them to cut out the noise and apologize to each other. That’s how it has always worked between them. It’s what he expects, and he readies himself for the fight.

Instead, Harry smiles at him. She smiles. She closes the book she is still holding, drops it back into her bag, then stands up and walks over to the table. Laying her hand on his shoulder, she looks down at him. “Sorry, Johnny. I wasn’t trying to make you mad, honest I wasn’t. It’s just…” she pauses for a moment, appearing to think over her next words carefully, and then continues “you’re still just a little boy. You couldn’t possibly understand. Maybe someday.”

Then she pats his shoulder, smiles patronizingly, and adds, “Or maybe not.”

Ah, another lovely Watson sibling moment.

Just then John’s Dad steps out onto the porch and he and Harry make their way down the stairs and to the carpark at the side of the house for their trip to the shops in town. John listens as the engine starts and hears the motor fade as the car drives away. He gazes out over the water and can’t help letting his eyes slide up over the horizon toward the sky that is, he’s been told, quite blue today. He hears the feet of the chair to his left scrape against the wooden floor of the porch as his mom pulls it next to his and sits down beside him.

“Harriet is my daughter,” she says. “And I love her as much as I love you. But she can be a bit of a git sometimes, can’t she?”

John smiles, still looking at the sky. “A bit, yeah.”
“For the record, though, the sky is quite blue today. It’s a blue that feels like an ice cube melting in your hand. And I’d call the shade of your shirt ‘hunter green’. It’s a very smart color on you, you know.” She looks at him fondly, and he can’t help but smile back. “I’ve got a present for you,” she says, reaching into her pocket.

She pulls out a small book identical to the one Harry had been referencing earlier, and hands it to her son.

He knows the book, of course. Everyone does. There’s at least one copy of ‘Price’s Color Key’ in every home in Britain. Its pages are filled with squares that represent the 200 most commonly seen hues, grouped by base color and shade. You can always identify the recently colorbonded by the way they pull it out and study it, hold it up against whatever object now looks different than it did when they were grey. When he’d asked about it as a child his Mum had done her best to explain how different the world looked once you had color, and how the book helps people understand all the new shades their eyes can suddenly see.

“It’s the copy your Gran gave me when I met your Dad,” his mum continues. “It’s a bit old and worn on the edges now, but the colors are all there and ready to help you learn to see the world in a brand new way.”

“But Mum,” John protests. “What do I need it for? I don’t have colors.”

“You don’t have colors, yet,” she corrects. “But one day you will, and this way you’ll be ready when it happens. And until then, you can make notes about all the ways that colors feel. Look, I’ve filled in a few already.”

She takes the book from him, flips through the first few pages, and then shows him a small square with the word “PINK” in bold letters beneath it. Just below, the phrase “soft like a whisper” is written in pen. He takes the book from her and flips through the pages until he finds another note in his mother’s familiar flowing script under a darker grey square marked “RED” that says “hot like a huff of breath or a kiss”. Flipping through the pages he finds other notations and each one makes him recall the time he asked his mum about that color the explanation she had given him. A medium grey square defined as “YELLOW” says “warm like butter melting into toast”, and a dark grey square titled “NAVY BLUE” has the words “like the air at the beach just before a storm” printed neatly beneath it.

John turns the book over in his hands a few times, runs his fingers across the cover and down the spine, then looks up at his mother. “Ta, Mum.”

“You’re welcome, love,” she tells him fondly, running a hand through his hair and turning toward the cottage door.

“Mum,” he blurts out without meaning to, “what if I never get colors?”

A look of surprise crosses her features and then melts into something tender. “You will, John.”

“But how do you know that?” John asks, urgency building in his voice. “Some people don’t ever go color. Like my history teacher Mr. Gillen, or Ms. Brady who works at the bike shop back home. What if I never meet my soulmate or see anything except what I’ve always seen. What if I’m grey forever?”

Lynette Watson has never lied to her children, and she’s not about to start now.

“That’s true, Johnny,” she says. “Some people stay grey their whole lives. But I don’t believe you’ll
be one of them.”

“But you can’t know that for sure,” John insists.

She looks at her son thoughtfully, considering. “You’re right, I can’t know that for sure. But I believe with everything in me that the world won’t stay grey for you. From the time you could talk you’ve been fascinated by the idea of colors, long before you should have even understood what they were. I don’t know when it will be, or who will make it happen, but one day when you least expect it everything you’ve ever seen will change. One moment the world will be the same comfortable and familiar grey it’s always been, and the next it will be something new.”

“Is that how it happened for you,” he asks, “when you met Dad?”

“Yes,” she says, smiling at the memory. “One moment everything was normal, nothing special, same old same old, sitting on the beach looking out over the white sun setting behind the waves rolling dark and grey into the sand, and then your father took my hand and it’s like the world…shivered…went fuzzy at the edges, and all of a sudden everything changed. It was the same sun, the same sea, the same beach, the same young man sitting next to me…but more.”

She turns her head to see her son staring back at her raptly with wide eyes, a stunned look on his face. And suddenly it’s funny to her, trying to explain the most intense moment of her life to her 14 year old son, and she can’t help but laugh. He looks startled for a moment, then smiles back at her.

“It’s tough to describe,” she explains.

“The way Harry tells it,” John complains, “Clara rode out of the sky on a bolt of lighting, zapped her on the head, and suddenly everything on earth had the most interesting hues.”

John’s mom fails to suppress the giggle his description prompts in her, so she gives up and throws her head back and laughs, a sound so genuine and infectious her son can’t help but join her.

“Between you and me, Johnny, that’s not quite how it happened. No matter what Harry says now, it wasn’t exactly a ‘bolt of lightning’ as you put it. Her colors came in over a few days, new shades and tones getting stronger and brighter. And Clara didn’t go color until a several days after Harry did. I was on the phone with your sister for hours at night, assuring her that it happens differently for everyone, telling her to be patient, that sometimes the bond can take time to grow but that just means it will be all the stronger for it.”

“What’s Clara like, do you think?” John wonders.

“I don’t know, but we’ll find out in,” she checks the watch on her wrist, “oh, just over two hours or so. But from what your sister says, she’s kind and smart and Harry loves her so I’m inclined to already as well.”

“Kind, smart and she loves Harry?” John asks increduulously. “Seems a bit dodgy to me.”

His mother huffs out another small laugh and reaches up to ruffle her son’s hair. “You’re very different people, you and your sister. And to be honest I wondered a bit about just who this person who brought my daughter colors would be. I love Harry, and I want her to be happy, but I worry about her sometimes. When you’re given things easily, you don’t always appreciate them. But with you, Johnny, I’m not worried. When it happens for you, love, it will be wonderful. You’ll be amazed by what you see. I can’t wait to hear which color is your favorite.”

She stands up from the table, leans over and brushes a kiss onto the top of her son’s head. John looks down at the copy of Price’s Color Key in his hand, and on a whim asks “Mum, what is your favorite
She smiles down at him. “That’s easy,” she replies. “Purple.”

“Yeah?” her son replies. “What does purple feel like?”

She thinks for a moment, looks over the items still scattered on the table, then picks up the soft dusting cloth in her hand. “Purple is a complicated color, Johnny. It starts soft and mellow,” she says and runs the edge of the soft fabric down the back of his neck, “but it finishes like a shiver.” And she skitters the tips of her fingernails up the same skin and scratches the hair on the back of his head affectionately. John does shiver, and they both laugh.

“Come on, then,” his mother says, “clear off this table and come help me get ready for our guests.”

John turns back to the table and goes to slip his new book into his pocket, but stops and flips through the pages searching for the right square and thinks: *Purple, huh? I better write that down.*

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“MYCROFT!”

At the sound of his name being bellowed down the hall from several rooms away, Mycroft Holmes glances up from the book he’s been reading in his favorite chair in the library, closes his eyes and sighs heavily.

The door bursts open and his thirteen year old brother stands in the doorway, gangly limbs and wild hair protruding at impossible angles from his wiry frame. Framed as he is by the afternoon light, Mycroft notices again how tall the boy has grown this past school year. He’d barely recognized the young man who’d approached the car their father had sent to pick him up from Eton at the end of term, scowled at his older brother’s greeting, then folded himself into the back seat next to him and sulked silently the entire drive home.

Mycroft hasn’t seen much of Sherlock around the house these past few weeks. Hardly surprising, he thinks. The manor itself is one of the largest private homes in the area that still serves as a primary residence, and the full time staff outnumber the family occupants three to one. Even with generous living quarters allotted for the four family members in residence and the large common spaces they use for meals and the occasional strained social gathering, large portions of the house haven’t been in use for years. Someone knowledgeable about the layout could find space enough to wander and explore without ever crossing paths with another person for days at a time, and his younger brother is familiar with every nook and cranny of the old house, and every acre of the grounds as well.

A bright and imaginative child, Sherlock was prone to exploration almost from the time he could walk. Before Mycroft was sent away to school, he had delighted in leading his little brother on countless adventures. As the only two children of preoccupied parents of a social class who believed that children should be left to the care of household staff until of an age that they could be relied upon to comport themselves in a civilized manner, after their lessons were completed each day Mycroft and Sherlock had been free to explore all the wonders that the Holmes estate had to offer. They roamed the woods that surrounded the grounds and splashed in the nearby stream, spent long summer days crawling through their mother’s prize winning gardens collecting insects and digging for worms, followed the head groundskeeper around while he supervised the stable hands in grooming and exercising the horses, and darted between the long benches in the kitchen house begging the cook to sample the latest baked goods left to cool on the window sills.

And on the days when the weather kept them from roaming the grounds, the grand house was their
lunar landscape, their Amazonian jungle terrain, and the vast dunes of the Gobi desert. Mycroft and his little brother would wander down to the staff quarters, seeking out the day old newspapers gathered up by the housekeepers to fold into long pointed tip hats and asking the bored undergardeners to help them fashion fireplace kindling into makeshift pirate swords. Weapons brandished, they would take off up the back staircase to plunder what riches could be found in the house’s large attic. Or, as on one memorable occasion, they would let one of the hunting dogs sheltering from the rain under the back steps of the servant’s quarters into the house so they could chase him down, tail wagging and yipping happily through the long halls until it knocked them over to lick at their faces and the housekeeper had ordered the dog be tossed overboard for the crime of tracking mud all over her floors, and back out the door it would be sent.

In short, Mycroft had loved his little brother more than anything in the world. The summer he turned twelve, his parents informed him that he was to be sent to school that fall. Sherlock cried when he learned that his big brother would be leaving.

“Who will play pirates with me?” he asked, his lip quivering.

“I will,” Mycroft replied, “when I’m home from school on holidays.”

“Who will help me tie my shoes when they come undone?” Sherlock continued. “Who will let me sleep in their bed when the thunder wakes me up and tell me not to be scared? Who will remind me not to fidget at the table so that Father doesn’t get angry and send me to my rooms without dinner?”

Mycroft had looked down at his brother and realized that he didn’t know who would do those things in his absence. So instead of answering he forced a smile and said “It’s not for a few weeks yet, Sherlock.” The younger boy stepped forward and threw his arms around his big brother’s waist, pressing his cheek against the older boy’s slightly pudgy tummy.

When he left for Eton that fall, Mycroft stood in the long drive out front watching his trunks being loaded into the back of the car. Looking back toward the house he could see his brother’s curly head outlined in the second floor window of his bedroom chamber. He listened to his father’s admonitions about ‘tradition’ and ‘honor’ and ‘upholding the fine reputation of the name of Holmes’ and nodded at all the appropriate intervals until his father turned and walked back toward the house, leaving his eldest son standing by the car that would take him away from home for the first time, alone. He had looked back up to the window where Sherlock stood, raised his hand and gave a small wave then watched as the younger boy turned around and walked away from the window and out of sight.

Mycroft had loved Eton from the very first day. Had excelled in his coursework and enjoyed the strange mix of new freedom and strict tradition that school offered. But when he’d returned home before Christmas, the curly haired boy who sat in the library reading a book so large that it looked ridiculous on his small lap wasn’t the same child he’d left just months before. That night at dinner Sherlock sat straight in his chair, responding when addressed but never speaking out of turn. He didn’t come out of his room at all that evening, even when Mycroft knocked on his bedroom door. And late that night, when a peal of thunder shook the window panes and lightning streaked the sky, habit had propelled Mycroft out of his bed and down the hall to make sure Sherlock was all right. When he opened the door, his eyes fell on the small form of his brother beneath the sheets, face slack with sleep seemingly not bothered in the least. He stared for a moment longer, then quietly shut the door and returned to his own room.

It had never been quite the same between them again. Sometimes Mycroft would catch the ghost of a look from his younger brother, a glimpse of the little boy who’d watched him leave for school from the second floor window, but just as quickly as it was there it would be gone. Mycroft would think to himself later that he wasn’t sure that Sherlock ever really forgave him for leaving him alone in that
house. And if he was feeling particularly honest, he would admit that he’d never quite forgiven himself, either.

Now home for the summer holidays before his last year at university, Mycroft looks at this adolescent version of the little boy who loved to play pirates and was afraid of thunder and finds it hard to reconcile that innocent, carefree child with the petulant, angry young man before him.

“Where are they, Mycroft?” Sherlock demands. “What have you done with them?”

“I’m afraid you’ll have to be more specific, brother dear,” Mycroft patiently replies. “To what, exactly, are you referring?”

“My laboratory specimens,” he replies, as though Mycroft is being unbearably dull. “I had three rabbits in various stages of dissection on the table in my sitting room, and now they are GONE, along with all my tools, my chemicals, and even my notes! I demand to know where they are!”

“They’ve been removed, Sherlock,” Mycroft tells him simply. “Apparently three freshly disemboweled rabbit corpses was a sight unexpected enough to send the day maid into hysterics when she went to tidy your rooms.”

“Oh please,” the younger boy retorts, “I didn’t kill them, Mycroft. They were caught in the gardener’s snares, apparently executed for the crime of nibbling at Mummy’s roses. And besides, it’s not as if it’s the first time I’ve performed dissections in my rooms. I was there when Susannah tidied my sitting room a few weeks ago and the dozen toads I had pinned out on trays didn’t seem to come as a shock to her then.”

“Well, Sherlock,” Mycroft replies coolly. “I am given to understand that half dissected animal corpses are slightly more shocking when the blood smeared into their fur and dripped across the floors to be cleaned appears bright red in color to the observer.”

“Oh God,” Sherlock huffs. “So I can no longer perform perfectly valid scientific experiments because the day maid was foolish enough to lose her head and think herself in love? How is that fair?”

“No one ever said life was fair, Sherlock.”

“I was gathering valuable information from those dissections, Mycroft,” Sherlock insists, continuing his rant. “I was supplementing my rather dreadfully pedestrian education with actual science. I can’t believe you would throw away all my work before I’d even had a chance to collect the data. But I suppose unless it’s to do with international politics, or British foreign relations, or cake, or something else you care about then it’s just not important at all and can be binned without a second thought!”

“Sherlock,” sighs Mycroft, “if you will calm yourself for just a moment and try to think rationally, I believe you would throw away all my work before I’d even had a chance to collect the data. But I suppose unless it’s to do with international politics, or British foreign relations, or something else you care about then it’s just not important at all and can be binned without a second thought!”

“Sherlock,” sighs Mycroft, “if you will calm yourself for just a moment and try to think rationally, I believe you’ll realize that I said that they’d been ‘removed’, not ‘binned’. Your experiment is completely intact, it is simply no longer in your rooms, which have been deemed to be an atmosphere unsuitable to laboratory work.”

Mycroft presses his lips together in a small smile and observes his brother’s air of righteous indignation deflate slightly before the younger boy catches himself in the act of conceding a fair point to his older brother and puffs himself back up to haughtily inquire. “Where, then, might it be?”

“I’ve arranged for the attic room of the carriage house to serve as your laboratory for the summer,” Mycroft informs him. “I think you will find the light there more than adequate for observation, and you’ll have plenty of room to perform your experiments without terrorizing the household staff with
the colorful nature of your work."

Sherlock blinks a few times at this unexpectedly sensible solution to the problem at hand. With a small nod, he looks down at his older brother and says, “Acceptable.” Mycroft nods at this rare display of civility and nearly gracious response before Sherlock rolls his eyes and adds, “I suppose.”

Mycroft sighs, and turns his eyes back to his book. "You’re welcome, brother dear.”

To his surprise, Sherlock doesn’t twirl around and storm from the room, but instead walks forward and flounces into the chair next to his brother with a huff.

“It’s so dreadfully boring here,” he says with all the petulance a thirteen year old genius can muster. “I don’t understand why I couldn’t just stay at school for the summer.”

“I am given to understand that the official answer to that question included the words ‘irresponsible’, ‘uncooperative’, ‘liability' and ‘explosion’,,” Mycroft replies smoothly.

“Did it also include the word ‘alleged’? There was absolutely no proof that I was responsible for that mishap in the science wing. Besides, if they don’t want their students to experiment, why do they have all those chemicals available in the labs?”

“Are you referring to the chemicals that are kept locked in a secure cabinet in a locked room to which only the staff of the Chemistry department have access to?”

“Well, if they meant them to be truly inaccessible they would have installed locks that were slightly more secure than could be picked with just a hairpin and a few moments time. It’s hardly my fault they are so lax about security.” Sherlock replies, then glances over at Mycroft with a small smirk lifting the corner of his mouth. “Allegedly.”

Mycroft shakes his head slightly and pretends to read his book, but can’t quite stop the smile that threatens from behind his lips.

“Besides, it should have been a simple experiment, the instructions were very clear. The compound could be reliably said to be stable as long as the precise proportions of each ingredient were added at just the right intervals. And when it started to smoke, I didn’t think anything of it—because it was supposed to smoke…it’s just that it turns out that the color of the smoke was important to the timing of the last addition to the mixture. And I had no way of knowing that it was blue instead of the green it was meant to be,” Sherlock explains, his forehead creasing in distress. “I didn’t know. I dislike not knowing.”

“Well Sherlock, as a good portion of the world sees only in greyscale,” Mycroft advises, “you would do well to learn how to manage without color in matters such as those.”

Sherlock raises a brow skeptically. “How?”

“As I’ve told you before, Colors are merely—”

“Yes, yes, yes, Mycroft. ‘Colors are merely a different way of seeing the world around us, another set of hues from light to dark in addition to the hundreds of shades of grey we all see every day,’” he repeats in a slightly mocking tone.

“Precisely. So if you cannot see the hue, you must find a way to deduce what it is using your other senses and your powers of observation. For instance: there are stains on the knees of your dungarees. They are green and brown.”
Sherlock sits up a little straighter, looks down at his knees and then back up at his brother with narrowed eyes. “How do you know?”

“I know that you were not in your rooms for very long before you barged through the door yelling at the top of your lungs, demanding to know the location of your specimens. I also know that said specimens were relocated just under two hours before you noticed they were gone and so vocally expressed your displeasure. When you entered the library I could see by the state of your hair that it had been recently mussed, and since I know that you had already showered this morning and that you spend an inordinate amount of time arranging your curls to look as though they are artfully disheveled, I deduce that you’ve been outside in the wind, which has been quite strong today if the sound of it rushing over the dormers outside this very room is any indication. Add to this observation that there are three blades of grass sticking out of your left trouser cuff, another small one caught in the watchband at your wrist, and one more precariously balanced in the curve of a particularly obstinate curl over your right ear, and the fact that I can detect the faint scent of freshly mown grass on your clothing, I can therefore deduce that you’ve been on your knees at some point on the lawn—most likely the south lawn as it is mowed regularly on Tuesdays—and grass being green, and freshly cut grass being particularly prone to staining, the stains on your knees are therefore green.”

Sherlock’s mouth hangs slightly open, but for a change he looks more intrigued than annoyed. “Ok. But you said they were green and brown. Explain.”

“Simple, really. One must only look at the appalling state of your fingernails to discern that there’s enough soil underneath them to grow potatoes in, and that the stains on your knees are of two separate types: first, a wet stain that bleeds into the fabric—the grass stain, which is green—and a surface stain that sits atop the fibers, with small particles of dirt clinging to the fabric. If you were on your knees on the south lawn, then I can fairly assume that you were crawling from the edge of the grass and into the garden collecting various insects which now reside in the small jar that is in your right hip pocket, the outline of which is clearly visible through your trousers. And since dirt is, in general and specifically on the south lawn of this estate, brown, then the stains on your knees must be both green and brown.” Mycroft finishes the speech with an expectant look at his younger brother.

“Well, you may be correct,” Sherlock concedes. “But since I know for a fact that you cannot see colors, and neither can I, there’s no way to prove whether or not you’re right.”

Mycroft smiles indulgently at his younger brother, then reaches out and and picks up a small silver handled bell from the table beside him. He shakes it gently, then sets it down and goes back to reading his book. The brothers sit in silence, Mycroft looking at his book, and Sherlock looking at Mycroft.

After a few moments, a young woman in a maid’s uniform enters the room. “You called for me, Mr. Holmes?”

“Ah yes, Susannah,” Mycroft replies. “I wonder if you might help young Sherlock and I settle something?”

“Of course, Mr. Holmes,” Susannah says with a smile.

“It seems my brother has stained the knees of his trousers rather dreadfully. I wonder if you might tell us what color, or colors, those stains are?”

Susannah looks confused for just a moment, then regards Sherlock’s knees. “They’re green sir, and brown.”
“Yes, thank you Susannah,” Mycroft says. “That will be all.”

The young day maid nods and leaves the room. Sherlock turns to his brother and simply stares at him for a few moments. Mycroft watches the flurry of thoughts pass through his brother’s remarkable brain, imagining that he can see in the movement of his eyes the synapses rearranging and meeting and sparking to life.

“Mycroft, how does Susannah know what ‘brown’ and ‘green’ look like?” Sherlock asks. “If she’s seen only grey for most of her life, how does seeing a new hue become associated with the name the world has given it?”

“There’s a book that the newly colorbonded use to help define the new shades and hues they see, a primer of sorts to aid in the transition. I’m sure there’s a copy around here somewhere.” Mycroft rises to look over one of the many sets of shelves inset into the walls of the room. He reaches up between two taller volumes and retrieves a small pocket sized book, walks back to his brother and hands it to him.

Sherlock snatches it from his hands, flips through the pages eying each of the apparently various grey shaded boxes until he finds the one marked “GREEN”. He holds it out next to his right knee, his eyes darting from the square in the book to the stain on his trousers, then back again. With a flurry of pages he locates the swatch labeled “BROWN” and repeats the same motions with his eyes. Stain, book, stain, book. He closes the book, brings it up toward his mouth and taps it against his lips then pops up out of his chair, spins around once frantically, then turns and nearly sprints for the door.

“Change your trousers before dinner, Sherlock,” Mycroft calls after him.

“No time, Mycroft!” Sherlock shouts over his shoulder. “If anyone needs me, I’ll be in my lab!”

Mycroft watches his brother run out of the room, and is startled when Sherlock suddenly reappears in the doorway, his eyes narrowed thoughtfully, before reaching into his pocket and pulling out a small glass jar and holding it up.

“Oh by the way, I wasn’t collecting insects. I was collecting worms. You got that part wrong.” Then the younger boy flashes a smirk at his brother, and takes off again down the hall.

In the wake of Sherlock’s departure, Mycroft Holmes huffs out a small laugh in spite of himself.

“Worms. Damned. It’s always something.”

Chapter End Notes

Yeah, so there may or may not be a shameless homage to a certain classic 1980’s John Hughes flick in this chapter. Just saying.
Moonlight seeps into the smallest bedroom of the third floor flat, cool night air and the ever present sounds of London drifting in through the open window he’d meant to close before he left that night and then couldn’t be bothered to close when he’d returned home a few hours later.

In his defense, he had been somewhat preoccupied at the time.

He’d taken Lucy Chaplain out on a date, their fourth in as many weeks. They’d had a lovely dinner full of interesting conversation and punctuated often by her sparkling laugh. He entertained her with stories about his family, of the long happy summers spent wandering the beach and epic quarrels with his older sister. She gushed about her nieces and nephews, her ambition to travel, and commiserated about the toll that medical school took on one’s social life in general. He rested a knee against hers under the table, and she slid her fingers over his gently while he talked. And when the waiter tried to tempt them with the dessert trolley, Lucy had run the toe of one stocking clad foot up underneath the hem of his left trouser leg and raised her eyebrows suggestively over the rim of her wine glass.

John Watson had cleared his throat and asked for the check.

Now the light that slants in a narrow beam across the bedroom floor falls on a rumpled pair of trousers, the inside-out sleeve of plaid button-down shirt, a single thigh-high stocking draped over a perilously high heeled shoe, a hastily removed and tossed aside pair of socks, a scandalously tiny pair of knickers tangled with a pair of sensible cotton boxer briefs, and one lacy cup of the bra John had slipped off Lucy’s shoulders to reveal the pert, round breasts he’s been waiting for weeks to see.

He can see them now, along with the rest of lovely Lucy—all soft curves and sweet pale skin spread
out before him on her back, her delicate fingers knotted in his hair as he nuzzles his face between her thighs and licks his way inside. He reaches underneath to cradle her bum with his hands, and works the wet folds of skin with his tongue and lips and the occasional light scrape of teeth until he feels her thighs start to quiver, her breath hitching at the peak of each soft moan from her lips. Tightening his grip on her soft round cheeks he presses closer, nudging his entire face against her before wrapping his lips around her swollen pleasure center and sucking firmly. He hears her cry out his name and she bucks up against his mouth, her body shuddering in his grasp. He rides it out, slowing the rhythm of his tongue to ease her through the aftershocks, then presses his lips to the inside of her thigh, kisses up to her hip, then across her stomach and up further to nuzzle a pale nipple. He looks up to see her smiling, rests his chin on her chest and asks, “Good?”

“Brilliant,” she replies, still breathing heavily, and pulls him up for a kiss.

Sinking slowly in her welcoming heat, John thinks he could get used to this. To being surrounded by the soft warmth of Lucy, to wrapping his arms around her petite frame and burying his face in her fragrant hair splayed out over his pillow. Setting a languid pace, he slides his left hand down between them until his fingertips find the sensitive flesh he’d tasted earlier, rubbing softly and whispering words of affection and encouragement into the warm skin of her neck. He brings her off again, swallowing her broken cries with his lips, then feels the familiar tingle at the base of his spine begin to spread outward before pressing his forehead to hers and emptying himself into the thin latex barrier between them.

After he’s knotted and binned the condom, he slides back down onto the mattress and turns intending to pull Lucy in for a cuddle, but stops short. She is lying on her back, her eyes shut tightly, panting soft ragged breaths. John reaches out and gently strokes his fingers down her cheek, cups her jaw and asks “Are you all right?”

She nods, a tense smile playing on her lips, but keeps her eyes closed tight.

“Hey,” John says soothingly, “It’s ok, Lucy. Look at me.”

She shakes her head, bringing her arm up and laying the back of her wrist over her eyes, her voice shaking as she says “I can’t.”

“Why not, love?” John asks.

She takes a few more breaths, then shakes her head trapped beneath her arm. “I’m afraid,”

And suddenly John understands. He lets out a breath didn’t realize he’s been holding, and rubs his palm along her pale, bare shoulder. “Ok, we’ll just lie here in the dark together for a bit, all right?”

He lies next to her and reaches down to pull the duvet up over them. After a few minutes, Lucy turns and lays her head on his shoulder, eyes still firmly closed, and he wraps his arm around her and rubs lazy, soft circles into the skin of her back.

Turning his head to brush his lips against her forehead, he whispers against her silky hair. “It’s fine, Luce. It’s all fine. You don’t have to open your eyes yet. Go to sleep.”

He feels her nod against his neck, and listens as her breaths gradually even out and sleep takes her. He stares up the dark ceiling and resists the urge to look around at the lighter sections of the room. He tells himself that sleep is the best thing for them both right now. That maybe they’ll wake up and the sunlight slanting through the window in the morning will look like it never has before for either of them. Who knows? After what feels like a very long time, he follows the woman in his arms into slumber.
When he opens his eyes a few hours later, the room is brighter in the predawn light. He feels the empty space in the bed beside him, and turns to see Lucy standing a few feet away slipping into her dress. Her curly hair shines in the light coming in the window, casting silvery hues through the ash and platinum strands. Her skin glows pale, and she looks as lovely as she has since the day he met her… but not any different.

She feels his gaze on her and turns to meet his eyes, a flash of hope playing in them for a moment until she realizes that there’s no new wonder in his expression. She smiles sadly at him, reaches out her hand and John takes it and pulls her down to sit next to him on the bed. The stay like that for a while, holding hands, neither of them speaking.

“My girlfriends all say that it happened suddenly for them,” she says. “That one day the world was grey, and then the next moment it was like nothing they’d ever imagined. It wasn’t always instant for them, but at some point after their first touch, or kiss, or the first shag, the colors came.”

“It doesn’t happen the same way for everyone,” John says quietly.

“I know,” she agrees. “But John, if it didn’t happen for either of us after last night…”

“Maybe we just need to practice a bit more,” he says, only half joking.

“Believe me,” she tells him, a small smile lifting at the corners of her lovely lips, “you don’t need a bit of practice, love.”

John huffs out a quiet laugh, then pats her hand and gets up to pull on a pair of pants and jeans and drag a shirt over his head while Lucy collects the rest of her things. He follows her out of his bedroom into the sitting room and she stops at the door to face him.

“Look,” he says, raising a hand to halt her from speaking. “I really like you, Lucy. We’re compatible and we have fun together, and maybe if we just give it a bit more time…” John lets his voice trail off at the look on her face, then gives a tight, resigned nod. “At least let me walk you home.”

“That’s all right,” she says with a shake of her head. “I’ll get a cab.”

They stand there awkwardly for a few moments, then Lucy leans forward and kisses him softly.

“It really is too bad, John,” she says. “I was so hoping it would be you.”

“Yeah,” John replies. “Me too.”

He closes the door behind her, then turns and leans heavily against it. He takes a few deep breaths, sighs into the empty room, and says “You can come out now, Mike. We don’t have to pretend you didn’t hear any of that.”

Mike Stamford walks into view through the kitchen doorway, a bowl of Weetabix in one hand, and a steaming mug of tea in the other. He looks at his flatmate and fellow Bart’s medical resident kindly and asks “Rough night?”

“Brilliant night, actually,” John replies, truthfully. “Hit a bit of a rough patch in the morning, unfortunately.”

Shuffling over to his friend, Mike pushes the tea toward him. “Here, mate. You need this more than I do.”

“Ta, Mike.” John takes the mug gratefully and raises it to his lips, blows gently, and takes a sip.
“Shame about Lucy. I really thought there was a chance that she was the one for you.”

“Well, um, yeah,” John says from behind his tea, “I guess I did too.”

Mike shovels a spoonful of cereal into his mouth, but doesn’t let the mouthful stop him from continuing on. “Right, mate, I mean she did seem to me to be the best match you’ve brought home in a while, thought for sure one of you’d go color by now, too ba—”

“Um, Mike?” John tries to interject, “Could we maybe…”

“—d for both of you really. You were well suited for each other and, if you don’t mind me saying so, last night it did sound as though a good time was had by all, but you never can tell how these things go—”

“MIKE!” John says, raising his voice a bit louder than he’d intended, but years of experience have taught him that once Mike Stamford is on a roll it is nearly impossible to shut him up without employing a shock and awe strategy. “I appreciate the support, I really do. But you’ve already made me tea, so how about we act like the Englishmen we are and pretend none of that ever happened, yeah?”

“Sorry,” Mike says and grins sheepishly at his friend. “Ran off a bit at the mouth again, didn’t I? Ellen is always telling me to think before I speak, that she knows I mean well but that I don’t have to keep talking just to fill up the silence. Says that sometimes saying nothing at all is the very best thing to say. Which seems a bit strange to me, but what do I know? Before I met her I would never even have thought to…Oh god, I’m doing it again, aren’t I?”

John can’t help but laugh. It starts as a giggle and bubbles up into something bigger, until his whole body is shaking with it and he has to put down his tea so he doesn’t spill all over the floor.

“You ok, mate?” Mike asks, looking a bit alarmed.

“Ah, I’m fine.” John sighs, wiping the corners of his eyes, smiling and trying to compose himself. “Feels good to laugh, really. No worries.” He picks his tea back up and takes a drink. “You’re up early, by the way.”

“Yes,” Mike says, slipping on his shoes and reaching for his case. “Taking a couple of extra shifts at A&E to stay caught up before the wedding, you know. Ellen’s got her heart set on that honeymoon, something about finally seeing just how blue the water is in Majorca, or some such,” he explains as he pats his pockets to make sure he’s got his wallet. “You on today as well?”

“Yeah,” Mike says with a nod as he opens the front door. “See you in a bit then, Oh—your mum called, by the way. When you were out last night, told her I’d pass it on. Cheers!”

John turns to take his mug into the kitchen and stops on the way to pick up Mike’s cereal bowl as well (as usual, he thinks, and as much as he likes his friend part of him is glad that soon Ellen will be the one picking up after him endlessly, because if you’re going to spend time cleaning up your flatmate’s messes, you may as well get be getting a regular shag out of the arrangement. So, you know, good for them and all, he supposes) and rinses them off in the sink. He looks toward his bedroom door and considers crawling back into bed to catch a few more hours sleep, then wonders if the sheets still smell like Lucy—all soft floral perfume and musky arousal—and suddenly a shower, a load of laundry and a few more cups of tea sound like the right plan.
Two hours later, freshly showered, shaved and dressed in soft hospital scrubs, with clean sheets on his bed and his third cup of tea in hand, John knows he’s made the right decision. After all, he is nothing if not English, and prides himself on having the very stiffest of upper lips. With some time yet before he’s got to be at the hospital, He grabs the cordless phone from the cradle on the coffee table and dials his parents’ home number. His mother picks up on the third ring.

“Hello Johnny,” she says, and he almost can feel the warmth of her smile.

“Hi Mum, Mike said you called. Everything Ok?”

“Of course, love,” she replies. “Mike said you were out for the evening with Lucy—what’s that, date number four?”

“Yeah,” John sighs, “it was.”

Even over the phone, Lynette Watson can read her youngest child like a book. “Not going to be a fifth date, I take it?” she asks gently.

“No, no fifth date.”

“I’m sorry, love. You liked her a lot, I know,” she says, then changes the subject with her customary grace and skill. “We’re leaving for the cottage tomorrow, just wanted to check in with you and see if you’ll have a bit of time off to join us this summer?”

“I’m working double shifts at A&E most weeks, but I’ll try and take a few days later this month. I could do with some sand between my toes, to be honest.”

“That can be arranged,” his mother assures him. “And I could do with some quality time with my youngest child, as long as we’re putting in orders. The girls are coming down in July, if they can be convinced that the law firm will still be standing when the founding partners return after a week away. Clara says that she and Harry practically live at the office these days.”

“Well Harry never does anything half way, Mum.”

“Truer words were never spoken, love,” she replies with a soft laugh. “Let me know when you’ll be able to get away, you know where to find us if you need us. Oh, and your dad wanted a word, let me call him.”

John hears the soft slide of his mother’s hand over the mouthpiece end of the phone and the muffled “Jack! John’s on the phone, pick up!” she yells down the stairs to his father. Her voice comes back on the line, and she says “John?”

“Yeah?”

“I am sorry about Lucy”.

“I know Mum,” he replies. “Thanks.”

“It will happen, love.” She says it was such confidence, such calm certainty, that—even if he can’t quite bring himself to believe her—John can’t help but hope she’s right. “Oh, here’s your Dad.”

“Johnny boy!” Jack Watson says, his voice booming over the line so loudly that his son has to hold the receiver away from his head before bringing it back to his ear to respond.

“Hi Dad, all ready for the summer at the cottage?”. 
“Nearly, just helping your mum by loading up the car. I need to go out and make sure there’s room on the roof for the kitchen sink, since that’s about the only thing she hasn’t packed yet.”

“I heard that, Jack Watson,” his mum’s voice calls out from the background. “You’d best watch out or I’ll leave you behind this summer. There will be plenty of room in the car then!” John’s laugh mingles with his fathers, nearly drowning out the sharp smacking sound that he’s ninety-nine percent certain is his father’s hand slapping his mother on the bum, and the faint yelp his mother gives in reply effectively eliminates the remaining one percent of uncertainty. He’s torn between giggling at just how damned adorable his parents are after all these years and frantically wishing he could banish the image from his brain forever.

When his dad comes back on the line, the pitch of his voice is much lower than usual when he asks “Just wanted to ask if you’d had any more meetings with the recruiter since we talked last?”

“One,” John confirms. “I’m still making up my mind.”

“I know you’ve thought it through, John, and I’m behind you all the way whatever you decide. And I know your mum will be too, just give me a little time to soften her up to the idea once you’re sure, yeah?”

“Thanks, Dad. That means a lot to me.” John says, a slight choke in his voice.

“My son, serving Queen and country in the RAMC. Can’t wait to brag about it to the boys.”

“It’s a great opportunity, Dad. I’ll see the world, I’ll help people.” John says, his tone matching the excitement of his father’s. “And if your skills are good enough, the Army doesn’t care if you’re still grey.”

“The army would be lucky to have you if you were blind, son,” Jack Watson, his voice full of pride. “You’re a damn fine doctor.”

“You know what, Dad? You’re right. I am.”

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Walking into the hospital an hour later, John’s feet have barely crossed the threshold before a chart is flung in his face and he is riding astride a gurney holding a stabbing victim’s intestines as they rush him back to the triage unit. Slipping effortlessly into Dr. Watson mode he barks out orders, instructs the medical student standing next to him to replace his hands with her own and keep applying pressure, takes the laryngoscope the trauma nurse is holding out for him and skillfully intubates the unconscious man, then quickly backs out of the way as the patient is whisked down the hall to surgery.

Just another day at Bart’s A&E.

After a quick wash and a change of scrubs he is standing looking at the slightly swollen skin over the next young patient’s nose and cheeks. Donning a pair of gloves John carefully runs his fingers over the surface where it looks a bit shinier than the surrounding skin and says “Most likely an infection.”

“But the area isn’t reddened at all,” the medical student assisting John on his cases today says, brown knit skeptically as she examines the affected area. “That would be the customary symptom of infected tissue.”

John clenches his teeth slightly, but keeps his face impassive. It’s hardly the first time someone has questioned his diagnosis by suggesting that perhaps his status as grey might be hindering his
“True,” he replies, his tone pleasant. “But redness is only one of the common indicators. Another is noticeably elevated skin temperature at the site of the suspected infection, which I think you’ll agree is present.”

He steps aside to allow the student to touch the patient’s skin, and feels a satisfied grin that he doesn’t let take shape yet begin to bloom when she nods in agreement.

“Other symptoms,” John continues, “include fever and an elevated white blood cell count, which according to the chart, are present as well. Given all the information, I think we can safely say that this is a case of cellulitis and treat it with the normal course of antibiotics and recheck in 48 hours, wouldn’t you agree?”

“Yes, Dr. Watson,” she replies, clearly impressed.

The young woman on the examination table in front of John had been rushed through the doors of the A&E nearly thirty minutes earlier, and they still hadn’t managed to stop the bleeding. The damage from the accident was extensive, the patient having been wedged against the caved in dash and the passenger side door, and they couldn’t even begin to assess the injuries to her limbs until they had her stable enough for surgery. When her blood pressure suddenly crashed fifteen minutes into the case and the chest tube they’d inserted to clear the fluid around her heart had done its job but her heart hadn’t resumed beating on its own, John had seized the only chance they had left and reached into her thoracic cavity and administered compressions directly to her heart muscle. Now his hand is cramping, and she’s already lost so much blood that he knows there is very little hope, but he keeps up a steady rhythm until the lead physician on the case holds up his hands and tells everyone to stop. He relaxes his fingers, and they all watch as the line goes flat…and stays that way. The patient is pronounced dead at 18:41.

John strips off his gloves and blood soaked gown and follows the lead physician out of the room. Half way down the hall, he sees a young man hunched over in a chair, arm in a sling and a cold pack held to his head, his chest heaving with silent sobs. An older woman kneels beside him, rubbing his back and crying herself, and John watches as his colleague approaches the pair. John knows what he is saying to them, that he’s sorry, that they’d done everything they could, but the injuries were simply too extensive. John sees the young man look up with stricken eyes into the woman’s face and hears the abject pain in his voice as he sobs, “Mum, it’s all grey. There’s no color left at all. She’s gone. It’s so grey…”

John spins away from the scene and his feet begin to carry him down the hall, and before he even knows it he is running, weaving around the people and equipment between himself and the nearest exit. He can’t breathe, can barely see as he bursts through the ambulance bay doors and out of the building. He stands bent over with his hands on his knees, gasping for breath and trying desperately not to vomit. Gradually, over the next few minutes, his breathing slows and the pounding in his head begins to subside. He rubs a hand over his face, willing himself to get a grip.

He knows how it works, of course. He understands that colorbonds are broken when one half of the pair dies. But this was the first time he’d actually seen it happen. Seen someone who’d lost their soulmate look out at the world that no longer held any of the miraculous hues his mother had taught him the names of and helped him imagine. And that’s the thing: John can imagine them, can see their names and recite the descriptions he’s spent years transcribing into the book that even now is in his pocket. But what he cannot imagine is having seen them, having looked into the eyes of his soulmate and knowing for sure what color those eyes really are…and then having that taken away.
Shoving the books he’ll need for the day into his leather messenger bag and assembling a large sheaf of papers culled from the various stacks piled high in the chaos of his second floor room, Sherlock slings the strap of his bag over his head and one broad shoulder then tucks the folio of documents under his arm before he ducks out the door of his room and through the stairway door directly across from it. Descending the run of stairs to the main floor two at a time, he reaches down to adjust the strap of his bag and pushes through the door that opens into the large common room of Exeter House.

He can hear the chatter of voices from the clusters of fellow students gathered around tables and lounging in chairs, some laughing and shouting about last night’s exploits and others surrounded by open textbooks and stacks of lecture notes. He catches snippets of conversation as he makes his way across the wide room intent on reaching the broad front doors of the residence without attracting additional attention.

Half way to this goal he’s so lost in thought about the direction his research has taken recently (mentally reciting the common compositional elements of hues one-hundred-seventeen through one-hundred-thirty-four and contemplating the notion that he should consider including the adjacent three hues on each end of the sub-spectrum), that he doesn’t see the other student until he’s run headfirst into him. The force propels him backward and he drops the folio he’s carrying, his arms unconsciously flailing in an attempt to break his fall. He hits the ground in an explosion of paper, his carefully assembled pages fluttering to the ground all around him. The room goes silent but for a snicker or two, and a voice booms out from somewhere above.

“Oi, Holmes! Watch where the hell you’re going. You nearly ran me over!”

“And yet,” Sherlock mutters, as he gets to his knees and begins to gather up his scattered work, “I am the one on the floor.”

Sherlock continues to gather his fallen papers, much of the room falling back into normal conversation, pretending not to notice the two men who’ve just collided.

As he reaches out for a pile of papers that fell to the floor in a conveniently orderly fashion, a large foot clad in a shiny black leather shoe descends to step directly on top of them. Sherlock looks at the shoe, at the scuffing on the heel and the worn outside edge near the sole that’s been partially camouflaged by a recent polishing, then looks up the length of the leg attached to it, rolls his narrowed eyes and says, “Hello, Sebastian. Thank you so much for preventing this particular stack of papers from moving any further away from the rest of the mess you’ve made. Now if you’d be so kind as to remove last year’s Prada wingtip from my research, I’d appreciate it.”

“What are you talking about, Holmes?” Sebastian snarls, “These aren’t last year’s style.”

Sherlock looks down at the man’s foot, tilts his head thoughtfully.

“You’re absolutely correct,” he replies. “They’re from two years ago. My mistake.”

There’s a muffled laugh from somewhere to their left, and when Sebastian’s eyes shoot toward the
sound Sherlock snatches the papers from underneath his foot, extracting them easily while the other man is distracted. Gathering the remaining papers from the floor around him and shoving them back into his folio, he clutches it tightly under one arm as he gets to his feet.

Sebastian Wilkes stands a few inches taller than the man he’s just knocked to the floor, and is considerably wider as well. He raises his shoulders and puffs out his chest to exaggerate the height difference and glowers down at Sherlock, anger building in his beady eyes. “I don’t know what you’re playing at, Holmes, but—”

“I’m not playing at anything, Sebastian,” Sherlock replies innocently. “But if fostering the false impression that your family is as affluent as it was before your father’s gambling problem worsened over the last few years is so important that you’d rather I pretend not to notice, I’ll be happy to indulge you.” There’s no laughter this time, and the silence that’s fallen over the common room is thick and tense.

Clenching his teeth in fury, the taller man takes a step toward him until they are just inches apart, sneers down into Sherlock’s impassive face and says “You’re think you’re so bloody clever, don’t you?”

“No, I don’t think that at all, Sebastian,” Sherlock replies. “I know it.”

“You?” Sebastian hisses through clenched teeth, his hands balling into fists at his side, “You don’t know anything.”

“I know that you didn’t sleep in your room last night,” Sherlock says coolly. “And I also know that wherever you were, you weren’t alone.”

Sebastian glares at him for a moment, then huffs out a forced laugh. “So I got lucky last night, Holmes. What of it? Jealous?”

“Hardly,” Sherlock replies with a smile. “But I imagine your fiancée will be.”

There’s a cough of surprise from one of the onlookers, and no one is even pretending not to listen to the confrontation any more.

“Now see here,” Wilkes begins before Sherlock cuts him off.

“Come now, Sebastian,” He says in a soothing tone. “I’m not going to be the one to tell the lovely Cynthia that the man she’s marrying came home this morning with the faint scent of a perfume that isn’t hers on his clothes. Or that the long strand of hair stuck on the elbow of his sleeve clearly isn’t one from the stylish chin length bob she’s sporting these days. And I’d never point out to her the way you keep shifting your legs slightly from side to side, like you’ve got an itch that you’d very much like to scratch but it’s in such a location that attending to it in public would be frowned upon, which suggests that you very well may have brought home an unexpected souvenir as well. And of course I wouldn’t dream of drawing her attention to the faint bruise that is obviously a recently acquired love bite that sits just below your collar, but to be fair she’d likely notice that without any help from me, assuming she isn’t blind,” he pauses for a moment, considering, then asks “She not, is she?”

“Not what?” Sebastian asks, confused.

“Blind.” Sherlock repeats, rolling his eyes. “Do try and keep up Sebastian, I dislike repeating myself.”

Wilkes looks confused for a moment then sputters and says, “Of course she’s not blind!”
“Just turning a blind eye willfully, then,” Sherlock continues. “Ah, well. Probably for the best, really. Perhaps it’s better that she not know that the man she’s colorbonded with, the same man she’s agreed to marry, spends his Friday nights trolling the pubs chatting up attractive young women and waxing on about how drab and grey the world is before miraculously professing to see his first glimpse of color after snogging them in the bathroom, guaranteeing that they’ll take him home, never dreaming for a moment that their “soulmate” will be gone come morning. No, best Cynthia doesn’t know any of that. What would she think of you then?”

As Wilkes stares back at him, Sherlock notes that the fury in Sebastian’s eyes is now tinged with a hint of guilt and something else that he’s fairly certain is fear. Sherlock straightens his bag on his shoulder, looks around a final time to be sure he’s retrieved all his papers, then steps around Sebastian and continues toward the exit.

“Oi, Holmes,” Wilkes calls after him.

Keeping his face impassive, he slowly turns back toward the other man. “Yes?”

“You keep your mouth shut,” he says, a bit of bravado returning to his voice.

“Oh don’t worry, Sebastian, your secret is safe with me.” Sherlock replies, and looks pointedly at the sea of faces that had witnessed the entire exchange. “But,” he continues, then gestures vaguely around the room. “I can’t speak for all of them.” He turns away again and pushes through the exit out into the morning sunlight.

As the doors close behind him he hears Sebastian yell “Fucking Freak!”

He takes a deep breath, and keeps walking.

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Leaving the lab several hours later, his mind preoccupied with reviewing the progress he’d made on his project this afternoon, Sherlock doesn’t immediately realize that the sleek black sedan making its way up the narrow street he’s walking along has slowed to keep pace with him. When he does notice, he stops walking, turns his head toward the darkly tinted windows and scowls at his reflection in the glass.

“What do you want, Mycroft?”

The window rolls smoothly down and Mycroft Holmes regards his brother with a tight smile on his lips.

“Hello to you too, brother dear,” he says with a sigh. “Get in, won’t you?”

“No. I don’t think I will.” Sherlock turns away and continues walking.

“Come now, Sherlock,” Mycroft says from the car keeping perfect pace with the younger man’s gait. “I can have my driver continue to follow you all day and we can shout at each other from a distance, or we can elect not to make a spectacle of ourselves and you can get in the car so we can have a discussion like civilized human beings.”

“I have nothing to say to you, Mycroft.” Sherlock hisses.

“Excellent, then you need only listen,” the elder Holmes replies. “In fact, feel free to stay completely silent, brother. What a refreshing change of pace that would be.”
Sherlock smirks in spite of himself, and turns toward the car which comes to a smooth stop immediately. “If I agree, then will you go away?”

“Of course,” Mycroft replies.

“Fine. You have ten minutes.” He opens the car door and slides onto the leather bench beside his brother. The car pulls away from the curb and back into traffic.

“It seems your pet project has attracted some notice of late,” Mycroft begins. “Personally I find ‘The Holmes Comprehensive Differentiated Grey Scale Spectral Classification System’ to be a bit of a mouthful, but despite the very thorough name you’ve chosen the concept is being received well. It’s being hailed as quite the innovation by some very powerful people.”

“So? Why should I care what other people think?” Sherlock replies, putting on his most disinterestedly, looking out the window. After a minute of silence he looks at his brother out of the corner of his eye and asks “What people?”

“Colleagues of mine,” Mycroft responds vaguely, “people in various high ranking positions who are interested to know what sort of career you’re planning to pursue after you graduate in the spring.”

“Oh not this again,” Sherlock sighs. “I’ve no interest in working for you, Mycroft.”

“Well if you won’t do it for me,” his brother continues, “perhaps you’ll consider it a service to your country.”

“Same thing, brother.” Sherlock replies.

“Sherlock,” Mycroft sighs, “You’ve been blessed with an intelligence and level of ability that few can claim to match, surely you would agree that putting both to use in a way that benefits mankind as a whole is a sensible path to pursue.”

“Good Lord, Mycroft. Do you even listen to yourself?” Sherlock asks with a sneer. “Have you been watching old recruitment films again?”

“All I ask is that you give the matter some serious thought,” Mycroft says calmly. “You’re not a child any more, Sherlock. Perhaps it’s time to consider what you’d like to be when you grow up.”

“Well when I grow up, I’ll let you know. Oh, look! Your ten minutes are up. Pull over and let me out.”

With a sigh, Mycroft signals the driver through the dividing window and the car begins to slow. “Think it over, Sherlock. We’ll talk again soon.”

“No,” Sherlock says petulantly, “we won’t.”

“As you wish, little brother,” Mycroft replies as the car pulls to the curb and stops. “Ah, here we are. Do say hello to Mr. Trevor for me.”

Sherlock blinks at his brother, then looks out the window at the building they’ve pulled up to, then eyes his brother suspiciously and asks “How did you know…”

Mycroft looks back at him, eyebrows raised, a knowing expression on his face.

“Of course,” Sherlock sighs, opening the car door. “You know everything.”
In the bedroom on the second floor of the renovated Victorian row house, the tall, fair haired man lying back against the stack of pillows on the four poster bed weaves his fingers into Sherlock’s ebony curls and watches his cock disappear between those ridiculously full lips. He tries to hold still, to resist the urge to thrust up into that perfect cupid’s bow of a mouth, but Sherlock is just so damn good at this, so attentive and observant. He knows exactly how much suction is just the right amount, how to keep his mouth wet and hollow his cheeks with each long pull, when to relax his throat and swallow around him, when to flatten his tongue and rub it just under the head, when to push the tip of that same tongue into the slit, and the precise moment to grasp his bollocks, tugging and squeezing exactly the way Victor likes it just before he empties himself down that impossibly long, creamy throat.

Tightening the fingers wrapped in Sherlock’s hair, Victor can’t help but push his hips up to meet those lips, his orgasm building quickly toward the point of no return. Sherlock reaches up to lay his forearm over the other man’s hips, holding him down firmly against the mattress and increasing his tempo, the slick sound of lips on skin mixing with the heavy breaths and moans from the man beneath him.

“Sherl,” he warns, his voice strained, “I’m going to—right—now!”

Sherlock hums his understanding around the cock in his mouth and sucks it down to the root, his nose pressed into the hair at the other man’s groin while he listens to him howl and groan, swallowing rhythmically as Victor ejaculates down his throat. He pulls his mouth up and off, sits up and rubs the back of one hand over his lips, wiping away saliva and the stray trickle of semen from the corner of his mouth.

Victor looks up at him and smiles, reaches out and grabs his shoulders and pulls him forward into a kiss.

“Jesus, love,” Victor huffs out, still breathing hard, “I should ask your brother to kidnap you off the street more often if it means I’ll get blown like that.”

“I’ll tell him you said so,” Sherlock says, rolling off of him. “And he’ll never kidnap me again.”

Victor laughs. “Then no, absolutely don’t tell him that.”

Sherlock moves to sit, intending to get out of bed, but Victor turns and throws an arm over his shoulders, gently pinning him to the bed. He leans forward and nuzzles his nose into the side of his lover’s neck and lays a gentle kiss just under his jaw. “That was brilliant, Sherl. As always. But one of these times I wish you’d let me reciprocate. Or at least let me get you out of your pants.” He smiles, reaching down and snapping a finger under the waistband of Sherlock’s boxer briefs.

Sherlock turns his head and smiles, “Not necessary, Victor. I like getting you off, it clears my mind.”

“I know it isn’t necessary, Sherlock,” Victor replies, “but I want to. I’d like to taste you for a change. I want to make you feel good.”

“But you do,” the younger man replies, his brow knitted. “I’ve just told you, this helps me. It stops the rush of data, slows things down. It’s an enjoyable experience for me.”

Victor smiles. “I think you’d enjoy being on the other end of things as well, love.”

Sherlock’s own smile falters, his face becoming serious. “I don’t think it would work.”

“You don’t think what would work?”
“Nothing. You wouldn’t understand,” Sherlock says, starting to sit up.

Victor rolls so that he’s half on top of him and says “Then help me to.”

Sherlock closes his eyes and takes a deep breath. “It doesn’t work, Victor. I’ve tried. I’ve taken myself in hand and experimented with several techniques and methods, and every time it’s the same. My brain is like a circuit board, an endless series of connections and terminals and I can’t get it to shut down long enough to make it happen. I’ve rubbed myself raw trying. It’s no use.” He keeps his eyes shut and swallows against the embarrassment of the revelation.

“Hey,” Victor says gently. “It’s OK, Sherlock, look at me.”

Sherlock shakes his head.

“No really,” he tries again, and Sherlock can hear the smile on his lips. “Look at me.”

Opening his eyes cautiously, Sherlock looks at him.

“I think I understand what you’re saying,” Victor says, and reaches out and runs his fingers softly through the other man’s hair. “I don’t pretend to know what’s going on in that big brain of yours, but it seems like you need something to shut out the noise. I’ve got an idea.”

Victor leans over the edge of the bed, reaches underneath it, and brings out a small dark enamel box. He opens it to reveal an expensive glass syringe set into a plush velvet lining along with several small glass vials of clear liquid. He takes out the syringe, attaches the needle to the barrel, and pulls a long elastic band out from the bottom of the box.

“It’s just cocaine,” he tells Sherlock, calmly. “A seven percent solution. Very pure, I promise. If you’re looking for something to shut off your brain, this is a sure bet.” Straddling Sherlock’s hips, he reaches out and slips the elastic under the other man’s bicep, just above his elbow, crosses the ends and pulls it taut, looping one end underneath the tight band stretched across his arm.

Sherlock has been uncharacteristically silent all this time, and Victor looks up into his eyes. “Is this ok?” he asks.

Looking down at the tourniquet, Sherlock realizes that his curiosity outweighs any objections he might raise. This is something different, a chance to collect new data. Perhaps Victor is right. He looks up at the other man and nods.

“All right,” he responds. “Now make a fist.”

Sherlock obeys, and Victor prepares the syringe pulling a small amount of liquid into the barrel and pressing out any air still in the tube. He lays it aside, then pulls Sherlock’s arm up at the elbow and taps two fingers into the crook. A vein pops up almost immediately, and he turns the arm a few times looking for the best angle. He picks up the syringe, and looks Sherlock in the eye.

“You’re sure?” He asks again.

“Yes,” Sherlock replies.

Victor leans forward and lays a soft kiss on Sherlock’s lips. “Ok, then. Just relax, love. I’m going to make you feel so good, you’ll see colors.”

He presses the tip of the needle against the vein. Sherlock feels it pierce his skin, watches as Victor pulls up the plunger slightly and sees the dark rush of blood move up into the barrel and mix with the
cocaine solution, then watches as he slowly depresses the plunger and the liquid disappears into his arm.

He feels the heat of the foreign substance entering his bloodstream, and wonders how long it will be before he knows if it’s working…when suddenly the room seems to get brighter, he can hear the blood pumping through his body, feel every beat of his heart like a tympani drum, feels his breath catch and an instant of panic that something’s gone terribly wrong and then suddenly…silence. His eyes want to close, and the world has taken on a bright sheen, a halo of light surrounding everything in the room. He looks up at Victor through slowly blinking eyes, and returns the smile he sees on his face. Feels his lips being kissed, hears Victor tell him again to relax, then feels those same lips on his chest, trailing down his stomach, feels hot breath over the front of his pants…

It’s new.

It’s amazing.

It’s quiet.

Finally.
SMOKE

Chapter Notes

I’ve got an unusually busy few days ahead of me, so please enjoy this week’s update a bit early—Two new chapters (Ch 5: SMOKE & Ch 6: JET) for your reading pleasure. (Well, I say pleasure…)

Continued thanks to my brilliant beta (who I managed to make gasp in surprise reading a recently revealed plot point, which was gratifying but also a little weird since it was essentially HER idea to begin with) for all the red-penning and encouragement.

Our boys are getting closer to the day their paths finally cross, and the greys are getting darker accordingly. I have loved the feedback and so appreciate all your comments and subscriptions. Thank you so much for reading. Now grab your shock blanket and a nice cup of tea and remember: it’s always darkest before the dawn…

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It’s hardly the first time he’s had sand stuck between his toes.

As a boy he’d roamed the beach for hours on endless summer afternoons, and while his younger self sometimes resented the bother of having to stop and rinse his feet in the ever present bucket of water his mother left standing sentinel at the cottage door, it was a small price to pay for the privilege of spending his days by the sea. Even now he loves to stand barefooted at the edge of the surf, toes digging into the wet sand as the water rushes in and laps against his ankles. The sand beneath his feet and the smell of the sea never fails to remind him of countless long afternoons he spent gathering small objects the tide washed in, treasures to add to his ever growing collection. No, John Watson doesn’t mind sand between his toes at all.

Captain Watson, however, is a bit less fond of it these days.

Wet sand between your toes, he’s learned, is somewhat more welcome than the piles of it he empties from his boots each evening or that he shakes out of the padded fibers of his socks when he pulls them inside out to hang on the end of his bunk overnight. It coats his scalp where the wind blows it into the tiny space between each shortly cropped hair on his head. A swipe of his hand over the back of his neck can leave him holding a handful of the gritty stuff, and some nights there’s so much lodged in the crack of his arse he’s fairly certain he could build a castle out of it. Say what you like about Afghanistan and the war that continues to rage here, but there’s one thing everyone can agree on: There is certainly no shortage of sand.

John was enjoying that rarest of wartime luxuries when he heard the alarm sound: A shower. Sure, the water was lukewarm at best and the strictly set and obeyed usage limits prevented him from spending as much time as he’d like getting as clean as he ever did these days, but having to cut his time even shorter meant that he still had sand lodged in crevices he hadn’t even known existed before he deployed—only now it was also wet. Barely even 0600 and already he could tell it was going to be another eventful day on the Korengal. He dried himself off with quick and brutal efficiency and pulled on his fatigues in seconds with practiced ease. Slipping into his boots and grabbing his med kit he bursts out of his quarters and toward the open side door of the waiting helicopter. His feet have barely cleared the doorway before they are lifting off into the pre-dawn twilight.
He bends forward to pull his boot laces tight and barks out a request for a briefing of the situation they’re headed into.

“Routine patrol attacked by snipers, Sir,” shouts the young lieutenant sitting next to him. “One confirmed casualty—theirs, and one injury reported—ours. They’ve taken out one of the snipers but haven’t yet located the second.”

“Anything larger than sniper fire reported, Lieutenant?” John asks.

“No Sir,” he replies. “The patrol encountered a suspected IED on the road and shots were fired when they stopped their vehicle to investigate.” John looks out of the open chopper door as they crest a small ridge and sees the Hummer stopped on the narrow dirt road below, can make out the shadows of two shapes pressed against it and see the bright burst of light from their rifle muzzles as they shoot over the vehicle toward the hills beyond at an enemy they can’t see.

“Get me as close as you can, head back up to see if you can locate the active shooter, then be ready to haul arse out of here on my order,” John shouts as the chopper begins to descend.

“Yes, Captain!” The lieutenant shouts in response.

The pilot lowers the chopper down about 20 meters away from the vehicle on the same side the two soldiers taking aim at the hidden sniper are sheltered on. Between the hovering helicopter and the hummer is a cluster of sizeable boulders, and John can see a pair of boots sticking out from between two of them. At the sound of the approaching aircraft, the two armed soldiers aim their fire at the dark hills where he sniper is hiding, providing some cover for John as he jumps to the ground, rolls into the fall, then snaps back up onto his feet and runs the 15 meters to his patient hidden behind the rocks.

Wedging himself into the small space where the wounded soldier sits with his back propped up against the rock, John can see the outline of the second sniper face down in the sand a few meters away near the open roadside. The dark stain on the ground like a halo around his head confirms that there’s nothing John can do to help, so he falls to his knees and begins to assess the damage on the soldier in front of him. The young man’s eyes are closed, and a careful press of John’s fingers against his hip and thigh, fatigues soaked dark with blood.

“What’s your name?” John asks, reaching into his pack and pulling out a lollipop and pulling off the thin wrapper that surrounds it.

“Graves, Sir,” the soldier replies. “Private Parker Graves of the…”

“Nice to meet you, Parker,” John interrupts. “I’m Captain John Watson, and I need to get a look at that leg. This is a fentanyl lollipop, it’ll help with the pain. Open your mouth for me, yeah?”

Private Graves does as he’s asked, and John slips the medication laced sweet into his mouth. “Hold that against your cheek, and try and keep your eyes open and stay with me. Ok?”

The younger man closes his lips around the stick of the lolly and nods, and within seconds John can see the tension start to leave his shoulders. “There’s a good lad,” John tells him, then pulls Parker’s hand away from the wound he’s been covering and gets to work.
It’s a bad shot. John can see immediately. There’s a lot of blood, and he suspects the femoral artery has been nicked, at the very least. He belts off the leg as efficiently as he can, tying the tourniquet just taut enough to staunch the bleeding but hopefully not so tight that there isn’t a slight chance they might save the leg. Assuming they can get out of this firefight in time for that to be an option, of course. The gunfire around them has yet to let up, and no matter how well John tries to manage this wound in the field his patient will bleed out right here on the desert floor if they can’t get him back to camp soon. Suddenly there’s a high pitched whine near his right ear and John instinctively ducks forward and over his patient as he hears the bullet hit and ricochet off the top of the rock at his back. Jesus, that was close.

Peering around the boulder toward the vehicle on the road, John sees that one soldier is still taking aim over the back of the truck and that the other is no longer there, presumably having been able to move toward the hill where the sniper is still hiding, getting closer to finding and dispatching him, the hum of the chopper circling in that direction as well with the same goal in mind. He looks longingly at the space underneath the Hummer, thinking that there’s more than enough room for two grown men beneath it, and that it would be far better cover than they’ve got out here. But he can’t risk moving Graves in his condition.

John slips back behind the rock and looks again at the wound he’s packed and wrapped as tightly as possible, then up at into the young soldier’s face to see that it has gone slack. Knowing how quickly shock can set in and take hold, John leans up to loom over the younger man, pulls the medication laced sweet from his mouth, and slaps him squarely across the face. The private’s eyes flutter a few times before opening to look up at John in surprise.

“I believe I told you to keep your eyes open, Private!” John barks, shifting from Kind Dr. John Watson to Badass Captain Watson in the space of a heartbeat.

“Yes, Sir,” Private Graves responds, his training coming back to him just as quickly. “Sorry, Captain.”

“Good man,” the Captain replies. “That’s more like it,” he says, then pushes the fentanyl lolly back into the younger man’s mouth.

“Have they got him yet, sir?” Graves asks, teeth gritted against the pain.

“No, but they’re getting closer,” John replies. “Listen to the gunfire, there’s more of it further away from us now. We’re closing in on him.”

“Captain,” Graves asks quietly, “Am I going to die?”

John looks down at the bandaged wound that even now is starting to show the slow seep of dark blood through the clean white gauze he’d applied just moments ago. He isn’t the habit of lying to the soldiers in his care, but nor is he willing to deprive them of hope while it still exists.

“Not if I can help it, private.” There’s another round of gunfire from near the road, and John hears the footsteps of the remaining soldier sheltering there begin to move away from the truck and toward the hill beyond it. He notices the young man’s eyes begin to droop again, and to keep him talking asks, “So, is there someone special at home waiting for you, Parker?”

Private Graves gives a small smile. “No sir, not very special. Well, there’s a girl I met just before I shipped out, Cassie, we write back and forth a bit.”

“That’s good then,” John smiles. “You’ll have to write while you’re recovering and tell her all about...
the mad doctor who slapped your face and took your lolly.”

The younger soldier smiles and lets out a small laugh, saying, “She’ll like to hear it, I think. Pretty sure she’s wanted to slap me a time or two.” He pauses then, a sadness creeping into his eyes. “My mum thinks Cassie’s the one I’ll go color for, once I’m back home. I sure wanted to see if she was right.”

John looks down at Parker’s wounded hip and leg, then presses another few layers of gauze over the ones now dark with blood, applying pressure that makes the younger man wince. “She might be, private. You’ll just have to hold on and find out, won’t you?”

Private Graves turns his head and rests it against the rock he’s leaning on, and John watches his face brighten, literally, as he gazes into the sky.

“Would you look at that sunrise, Captain,” Parker says, a dreamy quality seeping into his voice. “Always wanted to see one in color.”

John looks on as the edge of the sun begins to crest over the mountains in the distance. “My mum used to tell me me all about the colors when I was a boy,” He tells the young man. “She said the yellow of the sun is like butter melting into warm toast.”

Graves smiles. “I love warm toast. What about the sky?”

“The sky,” John says, smiling at the memory, “is a blue that feels like an ice cube melting in your hand.”

“It sounds…beautiful…” Private Graves sighs, his eyelids beginning to grow heavy.

John keeps his hands pressed firmly to the still seeping wound, and as he and the private both stare out at the white ball of light rising over the line of smoky mountains in the distance throwing rays of silvery light over the grey dunes, he hears the chopper shift course and move back toward them. There are the heavy footfalls of army issue boots nearing as well, and he hears a voice shouting into the radio that the sniper has been neutralized. He feels the wind from the rotors when the chopper sets down, and prepares to help load the nearly unconscious patient for transport back to camp.

John smiles down at his young patient. “That’s our ride, soldier. You hold on for just a bit longer, and one day you’ll see those colors for yourself.”

“Yes, Captain,” Private Graves says with a smile, just before he passes out.

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Stepping casually out of the path of an oncoming jeep, Captain John H. Watson walks away from the crowded mess hall on his way to the hospital building across camp. When he was a child, John’s dad had been a big fan of the American television show *M*A*S*H*. He loved to hear his father’s deep laugh at the antics of Hawkeye and Trapper and vividly remembers the same man’s eyes bright with unshed tears when they learned that Henry Blake’s plane had been shot down. As an adult, he’d watched the series again with a new appreciation for it. But as fond as he is of all the characters of the 4077th Mobile Army Surgical Hospital, he is glad that his medical career in Her Majesty’s Army takes place in a time where tent poles and canvas aren’t the standard hospital construction materials in use. There are still tents in camp, of course, but he finds himself amazed at just how well appointed the mobile battlefield hospital he spends most of his time in these days is. After making his way through the stifling desert heat, pushing through the hospital doors into the blessedly air conditioned interior is a welcome reprieve from the unrelenting Afghanistan sun. He stops at the
small physician’s dressing room and exchanges his fatigues for scrubs and a white coat, then heads into the ward to make his rounds.

The young men in his care all know that when he’s on the ward he claims only the rank of Doctor, but he’s still not surprised when several of them turn and salute from whatever positions they’re able. He takes it for the compliment that it is, and returns the salute with practiced form. He stops at the first bed and leans forward to grasp and shake the hand of the young man lying in it.

“Private Graves,” John says, flipping through the chart he’s picked up from the end of the bed. “Looks like the circulation continues to improve in that leg, and your latest blood work looks very good as well. Seems you’ll be fit to be transferred in the next few days. You’ll be going home, son.”

“Yes Sir,” Parker Graves replies. “Hell of a job you did patching it up, sir.”

“Well,” John says, brushing the praise aside, “It was you who had the hardest job. Fought like hell to keep breathing on that chopper ride back here. I just sewed a few things back together.”

“All the same, Captain, thank you.”

“Tell your Cassie hello for me when you see her,” John says with a grin, then moves toward the next patient.

As he reaches to pick up the chart hanging on the bed, the door to the ward opens and one of the nurses steps up to John, a large brown paper wrapped parcel in his hands. He holds the package toward the Captain and says, “This just arrived for you, sir. The boys at post thought you’d want it right away.”

John smiles at the nurse and shakes his head slightly. All heads on the ward turn toward the scene as John takes the package from Lieutenant Murray. He holds it under his arm and continues to look through the chart of the patient in the bed in front of him, until the man lying in the bed pushes himself up to a sitting position and says, “Come on, Captain, aren’t you going to open it?”

John looks around the room at the eager faces and sighs. Some of these men haven’t been here but a few days, yet somehow all of them seem to know that John receives a package nearly identical to this one each week. John can’t blame them, really. It’s been his habit to bring the contents in to share with the men recuperating on the ward, and at some point the packages had started making their way directly to the hospital when they arrived with the post. Lynette Watson’s baking skills are legendary back home, so it’s hardly a surprise that they’ve achieved the same status here. Home baked goods are a rare treat indeed, and when he’d mentioned to his mother how much his fellow soldiers enjoyed them, she’d started sending bigger batches of them more frequently.

Setting the parcel down at the edge of the nearest bed, he rips off the paper and slices through the tape holding down the flaps and opens the box. Even through the layers of cello wrap, the distinctive scent of oranges wafts up and out into the room, and the few men closest to him take a deep sniff. Marmalade sugar biscuits, John’s favorite. And enough of them, it looks like, to feed—well, an army. He pockets the small envelope with his name printed on it and the smallest wrapped packet of biscuits then turns his hands palm out and gestures to the box.

“Go on, then,” he says. “Pass them around.”

He smiles at the general whoop of excitement that goes up around him, and picks up the chart he’d been looking at before the package arrived. “So let’s take a look at that abdominal incision, shall we corporal?”
“Sure thing, Captain,” the young man replies, smiling through a mouthful of biscuit.

John can’t help but smile back.

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With his rounds completed and a few hours of paperwork he’d been putting off finally finished, John changes back into his fatigues and heads out into the late afternoon heat. He walks across the dusty common space toward the edge of camp, a place he likes to go for a bit of peace sometimes. There’s an outcropping of rock, a cluster of boulders arranged a bit like stairs that can be climbed and the flat surface of the second highest one offers both a good view of the camp itself, as well as the valley on the other side of the rocks.

He scales the smaller rocks and sits with his back against the tallest boulder, the flat side of which rises up about six feet from where he sits and looks back out over the tents and buildings that have been his home for the last few years. He reaches into his pocket and pulls out the packet of biscuits, and pops one whole into his mouth before tearing open the envelope that has his name written on it in his mum’s neat hand.

It’s a short note, and he reads it a few times just to let his eyes linger over the familiar script, a little piece of home here in the desert.

“Dear Johnny,

Favorite biscuits for my favorite boy. Your Dad ate a few of them before I could get them wrapped up, claimed it was for “quality control”. Seems they passed the test. The batch of marmalade I used in them was a good one—maybe the best I’ve made. The color orange is a lot like the fruit, really. Warm and sweet but with a bit of a shock to it as well. Enjoy them, love. Stay safe.

Love, Mum.”

John reads the words one last time before sliding the note back into the envelope and reaching back into his pocket. His fingers slide over the smooth cover of the small book he is never without, and he pulls out the copy of Price’s Color Key that his mum gave him so many years ago. He flips through the pages until he finds the square marked “ORANGE”, then pulls a pen out of his front pocket and writes “Warm and sweet, with a bit of shock” below it. He pops another biscuit in his mouth, puts the few remaining back into his pocket for later along with the book and note, then extends his legs out to stand up on the rock.

His foot strikes something metallic, and the cylindrical object rolls up and then back down the stone slope and stops against the toe of his boot. He reaches down to pick up the can of spray paint with a smile. He takes a few steps back, looks up at the rock he’s been leaning on and reads the names that have been written on the stone, the light surface worn smooth by years of blowing sand. He knows that many of his fellow soldiers come up to this rock to enjoy the view, to think about the people they’ve left behind. The bonded write the names of their soulmates here, and John recognizes some of the names, others predate his arrival at camp. Over the years John has gotten very good at not dwelling on the fact that he’s still grey, that he and his soulmate haven’t yet managed to cross paths. On most days it doesn’t bother him, he has learned that he can have both the hope of color someday and the satisfaction of the life he has now. He reads over the names again, and hopes that wherever “Marianne”, “Victoria”, “Joshua” and all the others are now, that their soulmates have made it back to them from this place safely.

He looks down at the half empty can of paint in his hand, probably nicked by one of the boys from the motorpool, and turns it to read the paint color off the side of the cap. “Sand”, it says, and John
can’t help but laugh. Of course, he thinks, what other color would it be? And in a moment of inspiration he removes the cap, shakes the can a few times, then holds down the tip and moves his hand over an empty space on the rock. He takes a step back and looks at his handiwork, at the shiny new question mark amongst all the names around it. Satisfied, he caps the paint and sets it back down at his feet.

“Oi, Watson!” a voice calls out.

John looks back toward camp where he sees a group of men kicking around a football on the open common space in front of the hospital.

“Come on, Cap!” calls Lieutenant Murray, “We need a seventh!”

John smiles and turns to look out over the valley on the other side of the rock, then turns back toward camp and raises a hand toward the men gathered on the makeshift football field.

“All right, Murray,” he shouts, “I’m on my wa—”

He hears the shot before he feels anything, a burst of sound from behind him that didn’t sound nearly loud enough to cause the impact that slams into his shoulder and propels him forward and off the rock. He’s falling now, and on his way down he wonders idly if it will hurt when he hits the ground, and when he does he’s vaguely surprised that he doesn’t feel a thing. The world goes silent for a moment, he’s face first in the sand and he thinks to himself that he should probably feel something, and just like that his senses snap back on line and the pain is so intense that the edges of his sight go bright white and he can hear someone choking, someone trying to scream but unable to get the sound to come out.

He thinks it might be him.

There are other voices too, the shouts of his fellow soldiers, his friends, charging up the hill toward him—their heavy boots shaking the ground beneath his head. He sees Lieutenant Murray drop down to his stomach several meters away as another shot rings out somewhere behind the rock, watches the other man crawl over the sand toward him as quickly as he can, hears him saying “I’m coming Captain, we’re almost there, stay with us…”

He feels his senses shutting down, his eyelids growing heavy and the chaotic din around him starting to fade, and knows he’s completely at the mercy of a body intent on pushing him toward unconsciousness. He turns his head to the side, cheek pressed against the ground, and concentrates on breathing—trying desperately to ignore how each intake of air makes the ragged pain in his shoulder and chest rage anew.

John Watson has spent his entire life wishing he could see the world in color, preparing himself for the day that the road he’s chosen to follow finally intersects with the path being walked by the one other person on earth moving toward the exact same moment.

It’s ironic then, as his eyes remain fixed on the dark spread of his own blood flowing over and seeping into the sand beneath him, that his very last thought is that he’s glad he can’t see how red it is.

*****************************************************************

Two.

There are only two left.
He holds one up to the diffused light that enters the room through the smudged windowpane, and swears under his breath.

*One and a half,* it would seem.

It was only three days ago that he’d meticulously prepared twelve vials of the precise seven percent solution he prefers from the last of the cocaine he had stashed in the single hiding place that had eluded his corpulent brother’s incredibly thorough minions on their last sweep of his flat. He had been confident that those twelve vials would last him precisely six days, at the end of which he’d have access to the minimum monthly stipend the interest on his trust fund afforded him, regardless of how tightly Mycroft had managed to wrap his fat fingers around the principal.

He holds up each empty vial and counts them again, refusing to acknowledge the feeling that quickens his pulse and increases his respiration when he again confirms the count he had set out to disprove. *This cannot* be correct. He is too careful with his dosages, far too in control of his usage to name the rising panic making its way up his spine as anything even close to *desperation*.

He is absolutely certain there were *six* left just yesterday. Reasonably certain, anyway. Fairly certain, at the very least. He *knows* there were six. (Weren’t there?)

He nestles the vials back into their well-worn depressions on the velvet lining, and resolutely ignores the trembling in his fingers as he snaps the lid of the enamel box closed. Huffing out a deep breath, he leans forward to rest his sharp elbows on his knees and steeples his fingers against his lips.

This had never been an issue when Victor was here.

He picks his phone up off the coffee table and considers making the call. The mobile in his hand has never dialed the number. Nor have the three he owned before this this model, for that matter. But he’s transferred the contact information each time, refusing to let himself dwell on why. He hasn’t heard that voice in so long that he’s nearly forgotten the sound of his name in the once familiar brogue, nearly forgotten the warm tones he woke to on so many mornings, nearly forgotten the melodic rhythm of it whispering to him as he fell asleep. *Nearly.*

But the sadness, the anger, the hurt it had all but dripped with on the last day he heard it? That he remembers with perfect clarity. It’s a sound that refuses to be erased, an immovable object in his brain that has resisted every attempt he’s made to delete it. He presses his eyes shut against the memory as it rises even now, willing it to vanish once and for all.

“I didn’t go looking for this, you know. It just happened,” Victor tells him, “That’s how it works, Sherl. It just happens.”

*Sherlock* looks up at him through the fringe of curls on his forehead, eyes narrowed and lip curled into a sneer. “Really, Victor? *Your* soulmate is a bartender at the new boy bar in Chelsea? *How* very *cliché* of you. *The two of you* must have so much to talk about.”

“I know you’re upset,” Victor replies, taking a deep breath and clenching his teeth the way he always *does* when he’s trying not to lose his temper, “and I’m sure you won’t believe me when I tell you that—”

“If you’re so sure I won’t believe you,” Sherlock says, cutting him off. “I wonder why you bother to say anything at all. Seems a bit of a waste, really.”

“Damn it, *Sherlock*—you had to know this might happen. We’ve known for ages that there wasn’t a colorbond between us. *We* talked about it, for God’s sake!” Victor says, raising his voice.
“As I recall,” Sherlock replies, his voice growing cooler and calmer in direct proportion to Victor’s loss of composure, “it was you who told me that a colorbond wasn’t a necessary component of a successful partnership and that we should be content to let our relationship progress without one. You waged quite an enthusiastic campaign to that end, if memory serves.”

“Yeah, I know what I said,” Victor retorts, “but that was before--”

“Yes, yes,” Sherlock says, his tone bored, “that was before…Ian, is it?”

“You don’t understand,” Victor tells him, and when his eyes meet Sherlock’s, he looks stricken. “I love you Sherlock. I really do. But the colors just came. I didn’t seek them out, but they came.”


Victor looks at the ground for a long moment, picks up the large bag of his things that Sherlock collected from around the flat and packed up for him, and looks back up at him one more time. He opens his mouth to say something, but before he can speak Sherlock turns his back on him and begins looking intently at the spines of the books stacked on the shelves he’s facing. He doesn’t turn around when he hears Victor rummage around in and remove something from the bag, doesn’t look over his shoulder to see what it is he’s set down on the small table by the door.

“You should keep this, love.” Victor says quietly, a hitch in his voice, his throat thick with emotion. “I think it’s what you’ve always liked best about me anyway.” And when it becomes clear that Sherlock isn’t going to turn around, he leaves, shutting the door quietly behind him.

Only then does Sherlock turn around, and when he sees the sleek, dark enamel box on the table—when he remembers that first afternoon Victor had pulled it out from under the bed, how the world had changed in the time it took for a needle to pierce his skin—he can’t help but think that maybe Victor is right.

Sherlock shakes his head to clear the memory, rubs his palms over his face and pulls his fingers through his hair, artfully mussing his dark curls and somehow managing to look better for it. No, this will not do, he thinks. One and a half vials simply isn’t enough. He pulls out his wallet and counts the bills, content with the fact that while there’s not enough to buy what he needs, there is enough for cab fare. And where he’s going, there’s always someone willing to negotiate.

He snaps the lid of the enamel box open, pulls out the syringe and the coiled length of elastic beneath it, and carefully draws the remaining liquid in the half empty vial up through the needle. He rolls up the cuff of his white tailored shirt, ties off the elastic on his bicep, and searches amongst the faint bruises and track marks on his arm for a vein. After a few moments flexing his fist, he finds one that will work and pierces his skin with practiced ease and delivers the fix. He closes his eyes and breathes through the first few minutes of the high, waits for the initial blinding rush to pass, then rolls his sleeve back down and buttons the cuff. He stands up, checks that his well fitted shirt is tucked in and that his trousers aren’t creased. He stops and looks at himself in the mirror by the door, uses his fingers to tame his curls into exactly the right state of disarray, then leaves the flat to hail a cab.

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He walks past the long line of people outside the club, where the guard at the door unclips the velvet rope across the entrance and waves him in. There are a few disgruntled sighs from those who have been waiting to get inside, but there are just as many appreciative looks as there are jealous ones aimed his way. Most of them know that it may not be fair, but when you look like Sherlock Holmes, you don’t wait in line.
He steps easily through the crowd, makes his way to the bar and orders a gin and tonic. Sherlock isn’t unaware of the profile he cuts, and he’s not above using his inherent attractiveness to his advantage. An expertly shammed shy smile and an “accidental” brush of his hip against the thigh of the older man vying for the attention of the bartender insures that what little money remains in his wallet stays there. When his benefactor turns to pay the tab, Sherlock slips away and into the crush of people in the club, drink in hand.

He scans the edges of the crowd, knowing exactly who he’s looking for. Not a specific person, but a specific type of person. It’s not the shirtless young man (university student, majoring in business, parents don’t know he’s gay) eyeing him from the dance floor, or the gaggle of overdressed giggling women (hen night, the bride is having cold feet, none of her bridesmaids seem to know this) staring at him appreciatively and whooping cat calls his direction before dissolving back into laughter, and it’s not the pair of attractive thirty something men (committed couple looking to spice things up, wondering if Sherlock might be a willing third) dancing a few meters away. After a few moments he sees exactly who he came here to find. Ten meters away, nondescript jeans and leather coat, eyes never resting as he scans the crowd while leaning against the wall and nursing a beer, the fingers of the hand stuck in his pocket moving ceaselessly in quick, short motions.

His target in sight, he starts across the dance floor and stops suddenly, face to face with the fit young man who’d been staring at him earlier.

“Hello. I’m Thomas,” he says with a sly smile, “and you…are beautiful.”

Distracted temporarily from his goal, Sherlock looks back at him, his gaze sliding down along the contours of the sleek, bare chest. “Sorry,” he replies with a tight smile, “but I’m looking for someone.”

“I can see that,” Thomas replies, with a smoky stare. “I was hoping it might be me.”

Sherlock looks down at the younger man, and can’t hold back a small grin. “Unfortunately, no,” he tells him. “Some other time, maybe.”

Thomas affects a small pout, holds up a folded piece of paper between two fingers, then reaches down and slips it into Sherlock’s front trouser pocket. “Call me,” he says with a wink, and walks away.

Turning his eyes back to his prey, Sherlock crosses the dance floor and casually stands next to the man leaning along the wall. He keeps his face impassive, raises his glass to his lips and takes a drink, all the while keeping his eyes on the crowd. After a few moments of silence, the other man clears his throat and says, “Something I can help you with, mate?”

“I don’t know,” Sherlock replies smiling into his drink, “Is there?” He turns his head and looks at the man for the first time (Nervous, fairly fit, obviously gay but also very obviously closeted).

The other man’s lips tip up in a nervous smile. He takes a sip of his beer, and the hand in his pocket continues its constant motion, like he’s turning something over in his fingers. “Maybe,” he replies, “what exactly are you looking for?”

“Depends on what you’re offering,” Sherlock replies, turning the corner of his mouth up in a mischievous grin.

The other man smiles nervously, looks back out over the crowd and says “Well I know you’re not looking for a date, posh thing like you wouldn’t waste your time on me.”
“You might be surprised,” Sherlock replies.

“No,” The man says with a small laugh, “I don’t think so. I figure you’re looking for something a bit more exotic. Peruvian, maybe.”

Sherlock turns ninety degrees toward the other man and leans one shoulder against the wall. “I am rather fond of Peru, now that you mention it.”

“How much are you looking to score?” he replies.

“Half an ounce, if you have it.” Sherlock says casually.

The man purses his lips and blows a puff of air through them. “Might have. If you’ve got three hundred quid, that is.”

Sherlock takes another step, turning until he’s fully facing him, and slides one sleek black shoe into the space between his feet. The high is in full swing now, the invincibility it brings with it cresting with each step closer he gets to what he came here for. He leans forward slightly until the front of his thigh finds the rigid outline of the other man’s erection, then smiles predatorily at the gasp of surprise this elicits. Tilting his head to place his mouth at the man’s ear, he whispers, “You have something I want, and it’s quite clear that you want me. It seems that we may be able to come to an arrangement beneficial to both of us, don’t you think?”

“So,” the man replies, swallowing nervously, “A half an ounce of cocaine in exchange for, what… exactly?”

“Oh I don’t know,” Sherlock purrs into his ear. “Surprise me.”

The man reaches out a hand and runs his fingertips over Sherlock’s hand, then closes his fingers around one of his pale wrists. “How’s this for a surprise,” he whispers, “You’re under arrest.”

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Detective Inspector Greg Lestrade is walking out of a suspect interview room on the way back to his office when he hears the commotion up at the intake desk. He hurries down the hall toward the sound of raised voices and steps into the room just as a metal folding chair sails past his knees, sliding on its side. Two officers are attempting to restrain a hulking man with tattoos inked up and down his bare handcuffed arms who is doing his best to break free of their grasp and reach a thin young man with a shock of dark curly hair sitting primly in the one of the folding chairs that hasn’t yet been tossed across the room.

“You little fuck, you TAKE THAT BACK!” the man yells, and the target of his rage merely rolls his eyes.

“I can tell you that your wife isn’t cheating on you with your brother, if you like,” the younger man replies, as though he’s speaking to a small child, “but that won’t make it any less true. Pity you’ve been arrested for assaulting the wrong man, though. Hardly seems worth it.”

The larger man lunges again, and the officers barely succeed in restraining him before they lead him away from the scene to a holding cell down the hall. Lestrade watches as the young man turns away from the commotion he’s just caused, and fixes his eyes on the detective standing at the Intake desk arguing with the sergeant on duty.

“What the hell do you mean, he’s free to go?” Detective Dimmock shouts, “I arrested him not half an hour ago in an undercover club sting where he tried to buy drugs from me!”
"Technically," says the young man sitting handcuffed in the chair petulantly, “the only person who ever brought up the exchange of money was you.”

“You shut your damn mouth!” Dimmock yells at him, and turns back to the desk sergeant, “On whose authority is he being released?”

The sergeant checks her paperwork and replies, “The order came down from upstairs, Detective. We’re to release Mr. Holmes into the custody of his brother when he arrives.”

“I’m not releasing him to his brother or anyone else!” Dimmock shouts. “He was attempting to purchase cocaine from an undercover officer and it was a fair arrest!”

“Really, Detective,” the young man interjects, “as no monetary sum was ever agreed upon between us, I can hardly be said to have attempted to purchase anything.”

“You propositioned me in lieu of cash!” Dimmock yells at him, any pretense of composure long gone.

“I could be wrong,” Holmes says with a tilt of his head, “But I believe it was you who asked me what I might be willing to do for the, imaginary as it turns out, cocaine in question and my response was to let you tell me exactly what it is you wanted in exchange for it.”

“I was doing my job, you obnoxious little prat,” Dimmock spit back, “I wasn’t trying to get off with you!”

“The surprisingly impressive erection you were sporting at the time would seem to suggest otherwise...” the handcuffed man begins, but finds himself cut off when the detective launches himself across the small space, the seated man pulling his head back just in time to avoid a punch intended for one of his prominent cheekbones.

“OI, DIMMOCK!” shouts a third voice, and DI Lestrade jumps into the fray and hauls the young detective off the suspect by the back of his shirt. He pulls him across the space and tosses him forcefully down into an empty chair. “You watch yourself, Detective. You’re a good officer, and I know you’ve got your eye on moving up—but if you punch every snot nosed arse who gives you lip you’ll never make DI, and I’ll help make sure it doesn’t happen, do you understand me?”

Dimmock takes a few deep breaths and nods, seeming to come back to his senses.

“Good man,” Lestrade says. “Now go and file your report, and I’ll make sure Junior here is released into the proper hands.”

Dimmock stands up and shoots a last baleful glance in the dark haired young man’s direction, then leaves the room.

“You,” Lestrade says, turning toward the younger man, “Holmes, is it?”

“Sherlock Holmes,” he replies, imperiously.

“Right,” Lestrade replies with a short bark of a laugh, leaning over to remove the cuffs from his wrists, “with a name like that and the mouth on you, this can hardly be the first time someone’s tried to punch you in the face, yeah? Sergeant Jarvis, when the brother arrives, let him know that Mr. Holmes will be in my office.” Then, to Sherlock, he says, “Follow me. And try not to piss anyone off on the way.”

After a short elevator ride and an uneventful walk through a mostly empty squad room, Lestrade
leads Sherlock into a medium sized generic looking office and points toward one of the chairs in front of the desk. “Sit down,” he instructs, and after a pause adds “and don’t touch anything.”

Sherlock looks around the room once, looks back at the detective inspector, narrows his eyes and huffs out a small “Hmm” in his direction.

Lestrade looks back at him, raises and eyebrow, and asks “What?”

“Oh, nothing,” Sherlock replies. “I was simply wondering how a man your age finds himself promoted to detective inspector when it’s been my experience that most of the DIs in the employ of New Scotland Yard are a bit more experienced than you. I admit that you did seem a bit older than you actually are at first, owing to the various shades of what I can only assume are silver and grey in your hair and your obvious lack of any kind of skin moisturising regimen. The lack of a wedding ring isn’t a completely reliable indication of marital status, nor is appalling taste in suit jackets--but one look at your office and it’s obvious from the lack of any photographs or personal items displayed that you’re single. I can therefore reasonably conclude that your unbonded status, combined with the kind of can-do attitude that leads one to come to the rescue of strung out junior detectives, has left you plenty of time to focus on your career. So, like I said, nothing.”

Lestrade peers at him for a moment, then says “Yeah, I get why he tried to punch you.”

Sherlock rolls his eyes, but can’t quite stop the smirk that wants to form on his lips.

“Well,” Lestrade says, “I’m going to get some coffee. You stay put.”

When Lestrade returns a few minutes later, two cups of coffee in hand, it’s to Sherlock sitting behind his desk, his feet propped up on the edge and a file open on his lap.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” Lestrade sputters, “Is that the Morrison file?”

“Yes,” the younger man replies, and continues reading.

Lestrade sets the coffees down, walks around the desk, plucks the file from Sherlock’s hands and knocks his feet to the ground. “I thought I told you not to touch anything!”

“True,” Sherlock says, then stands up and walks around the desk to flop down gracefully into the empty chair. “But it may interest you to know that you’ve arrested the wrong man.”

The detective inspector nearly spits out the mouthful of coffee he’s just taken, and looks at the younger man skeptically. “The hell we did,” he chokes out, “we matched the footprints in the blood at the scene with a pair of his shoes that still had traces of the victim’s DNA on them!”

“Yes, but your suspect wasn’t the one wearing the shoes when the prints were left.” Sherlock replies.

“What are you on about,” Lestrade asks, his curiosity to hear what the young man has to say outweighing the instinct to tell him to go to hell, “the prints matched.”

Sherlock reaches back across the desk for the file, and Lestrade instinctively pulls it away before heaving a resigned sigh and pushing it back toward him. Sherlock spreads it open, flips through the pictures of the scene and lays two photographs on the desk facing the DI. “Look at the tread pattern, a man wearing a size twelve shoe walking through that much blood would leave a footprint that is fairly uniform in terms of distribution of the blood on a flat surface. But these prints are much heavier near the center of the front of the shoe, and there’s a slight smearing of the pattern on each step forward.”
“Well, yeah,” Lestrade replies, his eyes narrowing on the prints in the photos, “But he could’ve just been walking on the balls of his feet, trying not to leave full prints, couldn’t he?”

“Of course, but if he had been walking on the balls of his feet, there wouldn’t be distinct heel prints visible on each of the footprints left at the scene, which are clearly present here,” Sherlock explained. “This suggests that a person with much smaller feet wore the shoes, committed the murder and purposely left those prints at the scene, then planted the shoes where they would be found, thus implicating the person you arrested for a murder that they did not commit.”

Lestrade watches as Sherlock reaches forward and takes the offered cup of coffee from the desk, and notices the slight tremor in his fingers as he lifts it to his mouth.

“It’s wrong, you know,” the DI says.

“It most certainly isn’t,” Sherlock says haughtily, “I’ve explained very clearly why you’ve likely arrested the wrong man. If I were you I’d look for someone with much smaller feet, most likely a woman who has a grievance of some kind with the…”

“I’m not talking about the footprints,” Lestrade interrupts. “You’re obviously a smart kid, but you’re a junkie. It’s a waste.”

Sherlock looks at the DI and blinks a few times, he opens his mouth to respond but Lestrade cuts him off again.

“No, save your breath. I don’t want to hear any excuses. You sat down for two minutes and saw something new in a case we’ve spent months building. You’ve got a natural talent there, and it’s a shame you can’t use it. You ever find the courage to get off the drugs, you give me a call,” he says taking back the file and setting it aside. “But until then, these files are police property, and you’re no good to me high.”

The sound of a sharp tap against the cold tile floor startles them both, and they turn to see a tall, impeccably dressed man standing in the doorway leaning on an umbrella.

“Can I help you?” Lestrade asks.

The new arrival looks at him, and then down at the young man sitting in the chair in front of the desk and replies, “Yes, Detective Inspector, I think you can. My name is Mycroft Holmes, and I believe you have taken temporary custody of my brother.”

Sherlock rolls his eyes, and sinks his lanky frame lower in the chair.

“Yeah, lucky me,” replies Lestrade. “Young Sherlock has made quite an impression around here tonight, it’s a good thing he has family looking out for him.”

“Quite,” Mycroft agrees. “I’ve already spoken with the desk sergeant downstairs and filled out the appropriate paperwork.” Turning to Sherlock he says “Really, brother. Propositioning an undercover officer in an attempt to procure drugs? Your deductive skills are clearly slipping.”

“Shove off, Mycroft,” Sherlock sulks.

“Actually,” Lestrade says, “His deductive skills are pretty damn impressive, the whole allegedly propositioning an officer thing aside, of course. He just might have discovered something important about a murder investigation in progress.”

Mycroft raises and eyebrow toward his brother, then looks back at the DI. “Thank you for your
assistance tonight, Detective Inspector, I am assured that Sherlock may well have sustained bodily harm without your intervention.”

“No problem,” Lestrade replies, standing up from his chair. “It was a very…interesting night.”

“Come Sherlock,” Mycroft says, “You’ve consumed enough of the resources of New Scotland Yard for one evening, don’t you think?”

“I meant what I said,” Lestrade says to Sherlock as he makes his way around the desk. “You get clean, you come see me, yeah? Pleasure to meet you both,” he says and extends a hand toward the elder Holmes brother.

Mycroft Holmes reaches forward and grasps the offered hand firmly, and takes a sharp breath of surprise. He looks into the detective inspector’s face, and both men stand absolutely still, their eyes wide and unblinking. Lestrade shakes his head slightly, blinks his eyes a few times then looks down to where their hands are still clasped. Mycroft follows his gaze and both men stare at the place where their bodies intersect. After a few long seconds of silence, Mycroft tightens his grip on Gregory Lestrade’s fingers and smiles.

“Well,” he says softly, “This is…unexpected.”

Greg Lestrade huffs out a laugh and lifts his other hand up and covers Mycroft’s with it. “Yeah,” he says, with a small smile. “It really is.”

Sherlock watches the exchange from the chair he’s still seated in, his eyes darting between the faces of the two men still holding hands in the nondescript third floor office at New Scotland Yard, then rolls his eyes dramatically and huffs out an exasperated sigh.

“Oh my God, you have got to be kidding me…”

Sherlock stares down at the shiny lid of the black enamel box on the coffee table in front of him knowing there is only one full vial left inside. His bags are packed and sitting near the door, Mycroft is sending a car for him that will arrive at seven a.m. sharp tomorrow morning. The rehab facility comes very highly recommended, with a success record and amenities proportionate to the exorbitant prices they charge for treatment.

There were no threats this time, no ultimatums, no tantrums or any drama whatsoever. Mycroft had asked him if he was ready to get clean, and it just so happened that he was. That night at NSY, he caught a glimpse of something he might actually enjoy doing, a way to use his skills that isn’t boring at all. He knows that getting clean is the price required, and he’s ready to pay it. Tomorrow.

But if this is the last night he’ll ever get high, then it’s likely that it is also the last night he’ll ever have the chance to let go, to bask in the silence that the cocaine brings, to relax enough to enjoy what normal people don’t need to get high to do. He opens the box and goes through the motions one last time. He ties off the elastic on his upper arm. He loads the syringe with one half of what’s left in the last vial. He taps two fingers at the crook of his elbow, finds a suitable vein, then injects this last dose of seven percent solution. As his vision starts to clear he gathers up the pieces of his kit, carefully places it all back in the box properly, then takes it into the other room and puts it back in the one hiding place his brother still hasn’t found.

There’s a knock at the door, and Sherlock walks across the sitting room to answer it.

Thomas stands in the doorway of his flat, fit and young with his dazzling smile and perfect abs.
“Hello, Gorgeous,” he says with a smile. “Got your text. Are we going out tonight?”

Sherlock smiles, looks at the softly glowing halo that surrounds the man in front of him and everything else in the room. “No,” he says, pulling Thomas through the door and closing it behind him, “I thought we’d stay in.”

Chapter End Notes

For those of you playing “pin the shameless homage on the favorite Johnlock fanfic” along at home, this update included a not so subtle shout out to abundantlyqueer’s legendary Two Two One Bravo Baker universe, which is responsible for the clarifying phrase “How hot? Like under a hummer, hot?” being added to my lexicon.

Also, if anyone out there is more knowledgeable than I am re: UK clandestine drug purchase measurement lingo, please feel free to let me know what increments cocaine might actually be sold in there. My googling on the subject was a tad confusing. (grams AND ounces? That’s just crazy talk!) But on the plus side, I’m fairly certain my recent search history landed me on a new FBI watch list or two.

Thank you so much for reading, and I hope you’ll keep coming back!
Chapter Notes

This is the second of two chapters in this update. Enjoy.

The walls are grey.

The industrial tile that covers the floor is grey.

The mug sitting next to the lamp that sits on the surface of the desk next to the neatly made narrow bed below the small window with the coarse curtains drawn tightly closed?

Grey as well.

John Watson may not be able to see what color the sparse contents of his tiny, drab bedsit actually are, but he suspects it wouldn’t matter even if he could.

It’s all grey.

During her single brief visit to him in this place, his sister had looked around the room through bleary, bloodshot eyes and pronounced it ‘dreadfully beige’. He’d accepted her offering of the mobile phone she no longer wanted, listened as she told him how much their parents were looking forward to seeing him again. He pretended not to notice the slight slur to her words as she told him how she and Clara were managing to try and maintain their working relationship even as their personal one continued to fall apart, and tried very hard not to be bitter that his sister, who had the ability to see every color in the world, spent most of her life staring at just one: the amber liquid at the bottom of a glass.

When she’d finally left, he pulled out the small book he always carried with him, flipped through the pages until he found the light square marked “BEIGE”, and underneath it wrote “feels like dread”.

Now he sits at the small desk in his room, a cup of tea steaming next to his hand, and prepares for the day. He’ll start by staring at the glowing screen of his laptop, at the blog he has yet to post a single word on. Then he’ll spend an hour lying to his therapist about what he hasn’t written there. Later he’ll talk to his parents on his hand me down phone, put a smile in his voice and tell them how well his recovery is going and how much he’s looking forward to spending some time at the beach this summer. Then he might go for a walk.

Or maybe he won’t do any of that.

John Watson may live in a world that is grey, but there’s one color he can describe with perfect clarity. If he wanted to, he could flip to the page in Price’s Color Key with the square marked “BLACK” and write an essay about it.

Black is staring at the handgun that lies at the bottom of the open desk drawer. Black is being surprised at how heavy it is each time he picks it up. Black is the sound of a round entering the chamber, and the weight of the grip against his palm. Black is the cool drag of metal over the skin of his cheek, the oily slide of the barrel on his lips, the faint taste of smoke on his tongue as it rests against his bottom teeth. Black is knowing that with one small pull of his finger, there will be no
more grey.

Black is a decision he makes every day.

Today he slides the gun back into the drawer and closes it.

He’ll decide again tomorrow.

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Lying back on the long leather couch, his eyes closed tightly against the sunlight streaming in through the tall windows, Sherlock concentrates on loosening his fingers from where they are coiled tightly in his hair.

He’s alphabetized the bookshelves by title, re-alphabetized them by subject, then once again by author. He’s reorganized his sock index (twice), and played his violin non stop for long enough that the neighbors complained to his landlady and she had come upstairs and taken his bow away.

There hasn’t been a case in nearly four days—four DAYS—and the boredom is starting to take its toll.

He pulls in a deep breath and tries reciting primes, a trick his brother taught him when he was a boy--the fat git was occasionally good for something, he admits, if only to himself. It helps sometimes (two, three, five, seven, eleven, thirteen, seventeen…), gives his brain a task to concentrate on (two hundred forty one, two hundred fifty one, two hundred fifty seven, two hundred sixty three…), helps him to tune out all the constantly streaming data that he can’t help but absorb (one thousand five hundred seventy nine, one thousand five hundred and eighty three, one thousand five hundred and ninety seven… and if he can just hold on, cover his ears and recite the next number in the infinite sequence (four thousand nine hundred and ninety nine, five thousand and three, five thousand and nine, five thousand and…) then maybe he won’t have to listen to the sound of the telly from next door and the traffic rushing by and the laughter from the tables at the café below his window, and—

CRASH!

The sound of the teacup exploding against the brick of the fireplace startles him, and when he opens his eyes he’s surprised to find himself sitting at the edge of the couch holding the matching saucer aloft, preparing to throw it as well.

He lowers his hand and sets the saucer back down, then stands up and walks through the kitchen and into his bedroom. There’s a noise that sounds like furniture scraping against the floor, followed by a faint creak, then Sherlock steps back through the door and walks into the sitting room.

Sitting down on the long leather couch, he places the black enamel box gently onto the coffee table in front of him.

He runs his palm over the smooth surface, slides a fingertip over each edge, then gently lifts the lid. The syringe sits nestled in the bottom of the box, a single glass vial pressed into a depression in the velvet lining of the lid. He reaches out and carefully removes the half-empty tube of liquid, turning it over in his fingers, watching the light catch on the surface of the solution within it.

Other than to move it from his last flat to the new one, he hasn’t touched the box since he’s been clean. After returning from rehab, his new brother-in-law made good on his promise—as long as Sherlock stays clean, Lestrade will call him in to consult when he needs him. He hasn’t even been tempted to use. Until now.
He holds the vial up to the light, remembering the once familiar burn of it in his veins, the rush of sensation that was quickly followed by the blessed *absence* of it, and for a moment allows himself to miss the silence.

The sharp text alert chime of his mobile phone snaps him back to the present.

Snatching it up he’s initially disappointed that it isn’t from Lestrade, but after reading the description of the size and condition of the liver belonging to the seemingly healthy forty three year old man who is currently on the autopsy table after suddenly dropping dead not twenty four hours ago, it doesn’t seem to matter that it wasn’t the message he was hoping for.

He stands up and starts toward the bedroom intending to get dressed and head to the morgue at St. Bart’s immediately, when he suddenly remembers what is still in his hand. He looks down at the vial, walks back over to the coffee table and slides it back into its space in the lid, closes the box and walks back to his room to return it to where it was a few moments ago.

He doesn’t want to get high. Not really. But there is some comfort in knowing that he *could*. He’ll keep the box, and everything in it. He might need it someday.

But not today.
Springtime in London is a study in contradictions. The sky can never quite decide whether to let the ever present clouds let loose the rain they keep on constant hold for release at a moment’s notice, or instead order them to suddenly clear the sky, allowing the sun to temporarily chase away the damp and warm the perpetual chill in the air. And even having made its choice, there’s no guarantee it won’t change its mind without warning.

John Watson doesn’t mind the unpredictability. It’s one of his favorite things about the city, really, and he’d missed it during the years the desert was his home.

Today the London sky has opted for both; the clouds soaking the city early in the day, rain clattering against rooftops, splattering the pavement, and running in shining rivulets down the glass of the tall windows in his therapist’s office—then suddenly retreating from the sky to reveal the shining white ball of the sun just as he steps out onto the street to make his way back to the little one room bedsit that he currently calls home.

The sun feels good on his skin, a welcome heat that he’d grown used to during his deployment. It’s strange to realize that you miss something you were fairly certain you didn’t like even when you had it, but that’s hardly a new feeling for John. He remembers laying in his bunk at night, trying to tune out the sound of jeep engines and heavy machinery, the drone of the voices of hundreds of fellow soldiers that made up the constant thrum of sound in the background of life in camp, and wishing for a few moments of peace and quiet.

It’s quiet when he goes to sleep now, and often he lies awake listening—straining his ears to hear the traffic several stories below his small window, the occasional hum of a television from another room or the sound of footsteps fading away down the corridor. He misses the comfort of being a part of something larger than himself, of knowing that he’s not alone. He had no idea how deafening silence could be. Be careful what you wish for, soldier.
It’s not quiet here, though, in the park just a few blocks away from St. Bartholomew’s Hospital. The appearance of the sun has drawn quite a few Londoners out of their homes and offices and into the well-kept common space. John used to spend quite a lot of time here himself, in his younger days. He recalls meeting a girlfriend or two for a quick lunch (and possibly a snog) when he had a break between classes. He, his flatmate and a few other young doctors would come over and kick a football around the green on the rare days they found the time. It’s an excellent place to people-watch, and John tells himself that’s why he’s been sitting here on this bench for the last hour: he’s watching the other people in the park. He’s not sitting here because his leg has cramped up and he needs to rest it a bit. Or because he’s got a long walk ahead of him and doesn’t want to spend what little cash he has left this month on a cab. And it’s certainly not because he would rather be almost anywhere than the dreary little room he returns to each night.

Across the grass he watches as a woman spreads a blanket under a tree and kneels down to unpack containers of food from a hamper. A small boy of perhaps four runs up and collapses next to her on the blanket, followed closely by man who smiles at them before sitting down with his family for a picnic lunch.

A few meters from that idyllic scene, a young couple walks hand in hand down the winding path through the park, their heads bent close together as the man whispers something in the woman’s ear and she playfully smacks him on the shoulder, eyes wide with exaggerated shock. He throws back his head and laughs and his eyes focus on something in the tree overhead. He turns to his companion and points up into the branches and John follows the direction of his arm to see a bird perched amongst the still sparse leaves. The woman leans closer to her partner as they gaze up at it, then reaches down into her purse and pulls out a small book. Flipping through the pages, she finds the one she’s looking for and holds it out in front of them. They look from the book to the bird, exchange a few words and then seem to agree on exactly what color they see. Smiling up at the man, the young woman rises up on her toes and presses her lips to his.

Watching as the kiss lingers on, John is suddenly aware that he’s staring and quickly moves his eyes away from the terribly intimate moment he’s just witnessed. As he scans for somewhere else to focus his gaze, his eyes fall on a woman seated on another bench just down the path. She’s about his age, pleasant looking, John thinks, with the sun shining on her dark hair. A popular novel John can recognize by the cover even from this distance is open in her hands, but she’s not reading it, her head raised instead, eyes focused across the way. John follows her gaze to where it lands on the same couple he’d been watching just a moment ago. They’ve seated themselves on the grass now, his arm around her waist as she leans against his side, and they’re both studying the small book the woman still has in her hands. Every so often one will look up and point to something nearby, and then they’ll both flip through the pages and settle on the one that seems to fit best. John knows he should stop watching them, but can’t bring himself to look away.

A soft thud and a flurry of movement from down the path distracts him, and he watches as the woman he’d noticed earlier reaches down to retrieve the book from where it has fallen in front of her. She wipes her hand over the cover, then closes it and stares down for a moment. She raises her eyes back up to the couple still snuggled up on the lawn then looks back down at the book with a pained expression, her shoulders slumping slightly. He sees her bring one hand up to her face and press the tips of her fingers against her lips, then slide it back down to her side in a loose fist. Standing slowly, she tucks the book under her arm, turns her back to the oblivious couple, and walks away down the path.

For a brief moment, John considers going after her. Maybe it’s no coincidence that they are both here in this park, on this day, watching the same happy young couple explore their new colorbond. Maybe this is the moment they’ve both been waiting for, and instead of reaching out and seizing it he’s sitting alone on a park bench and watching it walk away. Before he can think too much more
about it, John picks up his cane from where it rests beside him, and pushes himself up to stand next to the bench. He stretches out his leg, leans on his cane, and starts down the path toward the woman walking away from him. He’s so focused on making up the distance between them that it doesn’t immediately register that a voice has just called out his name.

“John?” someone says, off to his right.

John pauses in mid stride, watching the woman walk closer to the edge of the park and out of his life, and sighs. He’ll never catch her now, he thinks, and really—what would he say to her if he did? Hello Miss, I couldn’t help but notice that you and I were both staring jealously at the same young pair of soulmates in the park and I thought I’d just pop over and check if maybe you’re mine? Ridiculous. He’s getting too old for this kind of foolishness.

“Oi, John,” calls the voice again, “is that you?”

John turns toward the sound and finds himself face to face with Mike Stamford.

Well, at least he’s pretty sure it’s Mike Stamford, he’s not seen his friend in years and this fellow in front of him has a bit more around the middle than the young man who used to make a mess of their flat back in their residency days. He smiles and extends a hand toward the man. Mike reaches out and takes it, but instead of merely shaking it pulls John forward into an awkward hug.

“John Watson!” he says, with a laugh. “Good Lord, I thought I recognized that face but I couldn’t tell if it was you or just an old man who looked a bit like my old flatmate.”

John barks out a genuine laugh, and looks his friend up and down before saying “And I almost didn’t recognize you, either, mate. Didn’t know if I was looking at Mike Stamford, or someone who ate him.”

“Yeah, I know,” Mike replies, with a good natured sigh. “I got fat. I see you’re grey!”

John flinches unconsciously, the smile on his face faltering. He looks up at his friend who is still beaming down at him then looks down at the ground and clears his throat before responding quietly “Well, Mike, we weren’t all lucky enough to meet our soulmate back in university.”

Mike gasps, and reaches a hand forward to grasp John’s shoulder. “Ah hell, John. I was talking about your hair, mate. Sorry, I would never have said anything like that--”

John snaps his head up and looks at the man, at the horror in his face and the stumbling apology that continues to pour out of his mouth and suddenly it’s as though they’re 25 years old again. Some things, he thinks with a smile, never change.

“It’s ok, Mike,” he says, “Really, it--”

“—to you, I swear it. Good Lord, Ellen is going to have my hide when she hears about this, always after me about thinking before I speak, she is, even our girls have started to try and stop me now, telling me ‘Dad, we love you, but sometimes you should just shut your mouth--’”

“MIKE!” John shouts, and laughs at the shocked look on Stamford’s face. “Really, mate, its fine.”

Mike grins sheepishly, and now there’s not a shred of doubt in John’s mind that the middle-aged man in front of him is the same young man he went to school with so long ago.

“Well, it’s good to see you, John,” Mike says, “Last I heard you were abroad somewhere getting shot at. What happened?”
“I got shot,” John says with a shrug.

“Well,” Mike replies, putting on his trademark smile. “I bet there’s a quite a story there. Come on, I’ll buy you a coffee and you can tell me all about it.”

Ten minutes later, coffees in hand and settled back on a bench in the park, John says “So you’re still at Bart’s then?”

“Teaching now, yeah. Bright young things like we used to be. God, I hate them.” He laughs, and John joins him. “What about you? Just staying in town until you get yourself sorted?”

“Yeah,” John sighs, “I can’t afford London on an army pension.”

“The John Watson I know couldn’t bear to be anywhere else!” Mike replies with a smile.

“Yeah, well,” John says, “I’m not the John Watson you knew…” his voice fading out as he looks down and clenches his left hand against the small tremor present in his fingers.

Mike lets the moment pass, takes a drink of his coffee, and asks “Couldn’t Harry help? Or your folks?”

“Yeah right, Harry,” John scoffs, “Like that’s going to happen. And my parents—well, I think I’m a bit old to go running to Mummy and Daddy for help. Besides, I don’t want to worry them any more than I already have.”

Mike nods thoughtfully, then says “Couldn’t you, I don’t know, get a flat share or something?”

“Come on, who’d want me for a flatmate?” John says, and when Mike huffs out a small laugh, John turns to him and asks “What?”

“Well, it’s just that you’re the second person to say that to me today,” Mike replies.

John looks back at him with interest and asks “Who was the first?”

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Stepping through the door into the hospital laboratory, John is struck by how much has changed since he was a student at Bart’s. The equipment is state of the art, and the lab is all but deserted at this time of day. “Well,” he says to Mike, as he looks around the room, “looks a bit different from my day.”

Mike huffs out a small laugh and says, “You have no idea.”

“Ah, Mike,” a rich baritone interjects, “Confirm something for me, will you?”

John looks up, tracing the deep voice to its source, his eyes landing on a man sitting at a microscope at one of the high tables in the center of the room. He’s seated on a stool, his head of dark sculpted curls adding an inch or two to his obviously already tall frame, and his tailored suit looks like it probably cost at least a few months of John’s meager army pension. He turns his long, angular face toward the two men who’ve just entered the lab, and John watches Mike smile and nod before his old friend crosses the lab towards the other man.

“Sure,” Mike tells him, good naturedly, “How can I help?”

“There are some minute flecks of paint mounted here,” he tells Mike. “Given the saturation of light vs. dark I put the hue at between 143 and 144 on the comprehensive grey scale, but it would be nice
to have that assessment confirmed. Would you please take a look and tell me what color you see?"

Moving aside to give Stamford a bit of room, the man keeps his eyes focused on Mike as he looks through the eyepiece at the sample illuminated beneath the lens.

“IT’s green,” Mike tells him.

“As I suspected,” the man replies. “Greens can be difficult to place on the scale owing to the sheer number of shades between the two primary colors they consist of, thank you for the confirmation,” he finishes, pulling out his mobile phone and looking at the screen.

“Wow,” John thinks to himself, impressed.

Both Mike and the stranger look up at him, the former with a knowing grin and the latter with a somewhat puzzled look.

Shit. Had he said that out loud?

“Sorry,” John says, “didn’t mean to interrupt.”

Keeping his strangely piercing eyes focused on John, the man says “Mike, can I borrow your phone? There’s no signal on mine.”

“And what’s wrong with the landline?” Stamford asks.

Turning his head to look back down at his microscope he replies “I prefer to text.”

“Sorry,” Mike tells him, “it’s in my coat.”

“Here,” John interjects, reaching into his pocket and holding up his phone, “use mine.”

“Oh,” the other man says, looking up at John, his eyebrows raised in surprise. “Thank you.”

“This is an old friend of mine,” Mike tells the man, “John Watson.”

Crossing the room to take the offered phone, the man turns it on its side and begins to type furiously with his thumbs, stopping only for a moment half way through the text to scan John quickly from head to toe before turning his eyes back to the phone and asking “Afghanistan or Iraq?”

John looks at Mike, who offers a small smile and a shrug, then back at the stranger. “Sorry?” he asks the man.

The dark haired man looks up from the phone and back at John expectantly and repeats “Which was it, Afghanistan or Iraq?”

John looks confused for a moment, then says “Afghanistan, sorry, how did you--” but is interrupted by the appearance of a petite dark haired young woman in a lab coat who hands the man a cup of coffee. He asks her a question (something about lipstick, he thinks?) but John is too busy considering the question he’d asked him that he doesn’t pay much attention to the exchange, and soon the woman leaves as quickly as she appeared.

“How do you feel about the violin?” the man says, looking down at a computer terminal and beginning to type.

John looks at the door where the young woman just exited, then over at Mike who shrugs at him, then looks over at the man and asks “Sorry?”
“I play the violin when I’m thinking,” he continues, with a slight nod of his head, “and sometimes I don’t talk for days on end.” He looks up at John quizzically. “Would that bother you? Potential flatmates should know the worst about each other,” he says, then smiles.

John looks at him for a moment, then over at Mike. “You told him about me?” he asks his friend.

“Not a word,” Mike says, shaking his head.

“Then who said anything about flatmates?” John inquires, suspiciously.

“I did,” the man says, picking up a long dark coat and shrugging into it. “I was just telling Mike this morning that I must be a difficult man to find a flatmate for. Now here he is, just after lunch, with an old friend clearly just home from military service in Afghanistan. Wasn’t that difficult of a leap.”

John stares at him for a moment then asks, “How did you know about Afghanistan?”

“Got my eye on a nice little place in central London,” the man continues, eyes on his phone, “together we should be able to afford it. We’ll meet there tomorrow evening, seven o’clock.” He looks up and says with a smile, “Sorry, I’ve got to dash, I think I left my riding crop in the mortuary,” then walks past John toward the door.

“Is that it?” John says incredulously, turning to face the man who has just presumed that John is interested in sharing a flat.

The man turns back to him, a slightly puzzled look on his face. “Is what it?”

“We’ve only just met each other,” John replies, “and we’re going to go look at a flat?”

“Problem?” the man asks, raising an eyebrow at John.

John smiles tersely at the man, looks over at Mike, then back at the stranger before saying “We don’t know a thing about each other, I don’t know where we’re meeting, I don’t even know your name.”

The taller man narrows his eyes, focuses intently on John, then says “I know you’re an army doctor and you’ve been invalided home from Afghanistan, I know you’ve got a brother who’s worried about you but you won’t go to him for help because you don’t approve of him, possibly because he’s an alcoholic, more likely because he recently walked out on his wife, and I know that your parents would help but you won’t go them because you don’t want to worry them. I also know that your therapist thinks your limp is psychosomatic, quite correctly, I’m afraid…that’s quite enough to be going on with, don’t you think?”

John looks down at his leg and the cane supporting it, purses his lips and looks back up at the man who is wearing a smug half-grin as he turns and walks out of the lab, the door almost closing behind him before he leans back in and looks at John. “The name is Sherlock Holmes, and the address is 221B Baker Street,” he says, with a wink, and is gone.

John stares in confusion at the door of the lab, wondering if it’s possible he imagined the whole exchange, then turns back and looks at his friend.

“Yeah,” Mike Stamford tells him. “He’s always like that.”

Looking down at his phone, John navigates to the text messaging screen and reviews his sent items. The most recent one reads:

*If brother has green ladder, arrest brother. -SH*
John Watson is not a naive man. He’s served his country, and fought alongside his fellow soldiers nearly as often as he’s patched them up. The army took him all around the world before it sent him to Afghanistan, and the nickname “Three Continents Watson” is one he earned, and he’s got the stories to prove it. He’s an army doctor, and a good one. A very good one. He’s seen his share of injuries, violent deaths, and quite a bit of trouble in general. With all that on his C.V., sharing a flat with a potential madman hardly seems like challenge in comparison.

And in all fairness, 221B is quite a nice place. The flat has two good sized bedrooms (of course they’ll be needing both), the sitting room is well appointed and spacious (well, it will be after a bit of tidying, anyway) and the landlady, Mrs. Hudson (who, he is given to understand, is absolutely not their housekeeper) seems like a lovely woman. John is ready to sign the lease on the spot, and by all rights should be sitting in the more comfortable of the two armchairs by the fireplace right now. Instead, he’s following Sherlock into the back of a cab.

When the man he later recognized as New Scotland Yard Detective Inspector Lestrade had bounded up the stairs and into the sitting room of his (almost) flat he’d watched the exchange between his (maybe) flatmate and the policeman with confused interest. He’d seen the news coverage of the recent rash of suicides, of course, and after the detective left and Sherlock had finished jumping around the flat in barely contained glee, he had to admit that his curiosity was piqued. And then when Sherlock had invited him to come along, he had already prepared his response, intending to say that it had been a long day and he needed to rest his leg with a nice cuppa, then go back to his bedsit and begin packing up his meager belongings for the move, so he’d rather not come along, thank you very much. But when he opened his mouth, what came out instead was:

“Oh, God yes.”

So here he is, sitting in a cab navigating the rapidly darkening streets of London next to a man he met barely twenty four hours ago who is staring silently at his phone, when he realizes he has no idea where they are going. Or why. Which, he’s fairly certain, should bother him more than it does at the moment. He looks over at the man next to him, then back out the window, then over at the man again.

Sensing his gaze, Sherlock rolls his eyes and says “Ok, you’ve got questions.”

“Yeah,” John replies. “Where are we going?”

“Crime scene,” Sherlock answers simply. “Next?”

“Who are you?” John asks him, “What do you do?”

“What do you think?” the other man inquires.

“Well,” John says, thinking, “I’d say private detective…”

“But?” Sherlock asks.

“But the police don’t go to private detectives,” John asserts.

Sherlock’s mouth lifts in a sardonic grin. “I’m a consulting detective,” he says. “The only one in the world, I invented the job.”

“And what does that mean?” John asks.
“It means that when the police are out of their depth, which is always,” Sherlock replies, “They consult me.”

John smiles incredulously and says, “The police don’t consult amateurs.”

Sherlock turns his head toward John slowly, his eyes narrowing in concentration. “When I met you for the first time yesterday, I said ‘Afghanistan or Iraq?’ and you looked surprised. Why?”

“How did you know?” John asks.

“I didn’t know,” Sherlock replies, “I saw. The haircut, the way you hold yourself says military. Your conversation as you entered the room said that you’d trained at Bart’s, so: Army doctor, obvious. Your face is tanned, but no tan above the wrists, so you’ve been abroad—but not sunbathing. Your limp is really bad when you walk, but you don’t ask for a chair when you stand, like you’ve forgotten about it. So it’s at least partly psychosomatic, that says the original circumstances of the injury were traumatic, wounded in action then. Wounded in action? Suntan? Simple: Afghanistan or Iraq.”

“You said I had a therapist,” John adds.

“With a psychosomatic limp? Of course you’ve got a therapist,” Sherlock tells him. “Then there’s your brother. Your phone, it’s expensive, email enabled, mp3 player. You’re looking for a flat share, you wouldn’t waste money on this, and if you did buy it you wouldn’t have paid extra for the color model, as it’s quite a bit more expensive and hardly necessary for a single, unbonded man. It’s a gift, then. Then there are the scratches, not one, many over time, it’s been in the same pocket as keys and coins—the man sitting next to me wouldn’t treat his one luxury item like this, so it’s had a previous owner. Now the next bit’s easy, you know it already.”


“Harry Watson,” Sherlock confirms, “clearly a family member who’s given you his old phone. Not your father, this is a young man’s gadget. Could be a cousin, but you’re a war hero who can’t find a place to live, so it’s unlikely you’ve got an extended family, and certainly not one you’re close to, so brother it is. Now, who is Clara? The three kisses says it’s a romantic attachment, expense of the phone says wife, not girlfriend. Must have given it to him recently, this model is only six months old. Marriage in trouble then, six months on and he’s just giving it away? If she’d left him, he would have kept it—people do, sentiment—but no, he wanted rid of it, he left her. He gave the phone to you, that says he wants you to keep in touch—or at least that he knows that your parents want you to keep in touch. You’re looking for cheap accommodation, but you’re not going to your brother for help, that says you’ve got problems with him. Maybe you liked his wife, maybe you don’t like his drinking.”

“How can you possibly know about the drinking?” John asks with an air of incredulity.

“Shot in the dark,” Sherlock says with a smirk. “A good one, though. It’s the power connection,” he says, holding it up for John’s examination. “Tiny little scuff marks around the edge of it, every night he goes to plug it in to charge, but his hands are shaking. You never see those marks on a sober man’s phone, never see a drunk’s without them. Pity it’s caused him such trouble, must be very disappointing to your parents.”

“My parents? They could be dead for all you know.” John challenges.

“True, they could be, but if they were you’d never speak so casually about it, so I can conclude that your parents are alive. But beyond that, there’s the matter of the faint rectangular outline worn into
the front right pocket of your trousers, created by the edges of an object you keep there—at all times, it seems—a fact confirmed by the same pattern of wear visible on the trousers you wore yesterday. The size and shape suggest something flat, something you’d like to have at our disposal at a moment’s notice. The fact that the dimensions are nearly identical to a ubiquitous book carried by tens of thousands of people every day leads me to conclude that you carry a copy of Price’s Color Key on you wherever you go, in fact you’re carrying it now. Your history of long military service abroad, the lack of wedding ring or any evidence thereof, and the fact that you are seeking out a flat share are all compelling evidence that you are now, and have always been, single. If your brother was your closest family member, then I suspect watching his drinking tear apart his relationship with his soulmate would very likely have soured you on the prospect of someday still finding your own, but the fact that you continue to carry that book with you suggests that you remain hopeful, likely because you grew up admiring the strength of the colorbond between the two people who raised you, and their enduring relationship inspires you to remain constantly prepared in the event that, however unlikely, your own soulmate should present themselves.”

John looks at the man next to him, his mouth agape, and Sherlock looks back at him and says “Now there, you see? You were right.”

John looks puzzled for a moment, and tension fills his voice as he says “I was right? Right about what?”

“The police don’t consult amateurs.” Sherlock replies haughtily.

“That,” John says, then pauses slightly, “was…amazing.”

Sherlock looks slightly startled, then quietly asks “You think so?” while looking at John from the corner of his eye.

“Of course it was,” John affirms. “It was extraordinary. It was quite brilliant, really….extraordinary.”

“Hmm,” Sherlock responds, his eyebrows raised slightly, “that’s not what people normally say.”

“Yeah? What do people normally say?” John asks him.

“Piss off.” Sherlock replies, with a smirk.

John laughs, and looks out the window.

“Did I get anything wrong?” Sherlock asks.

“My parents are alive, and they are indeed wonderful,” John tells him. “Harry and I don’t get along, never have. Harry and Clara split up three months ago, they’re getting a divorce. Harry is a drinker.”

“Spot on then,” Sherlock says, clearly impressed with himself. “I didn’t expect to be right about everything.”

“Harry,” John tells him, “is short for Harriet.”

“Harry is your sister,” Sherlock sighs. “Damn, it’s always something.”

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When John left his room earlier that day to meet with a man he’d known for a sum total of 10 minutes (including the time he spent doing a cursory web search) to look at a flat in Westminster, he hadn’t had much of a plan about how the evening would progress. He suspects, however, that if he
had made such a plan it wouldn’t have looked anything like what had eventually unfolded.

He never imagined he would find himself at an active crime scene, dressed in protective gear and standing around the body of a recently deceased woman who, according to Sherlock Holmes, was the fourth victim of a serial killer who somehow forced his victims to commit suicide by ingesting poison. That they were examining the body at all was more surprising than the presence of the body itself, in John’s opinion, as Sherlock had managed to viciously insult both a police sergeant and a crime scene technician before they even made it through the door (and though John wasn’t privy to all the history there, he was inclined to believe that they had deserved it).

He couldn’t have foreseen that his evening would include watching Sherlock circle a corpse, then after a just a cursory examination of her hair, clothing, jewelry and a few splashes of mud on her stockings that he’d rattle off a string of deductions about everything from her age (late thirties), the status of her marriage (troubled, multiple affairs), her job (media professional), her hometown (Cardiff), to exactly what she’d been trying to carve into the floorboards with her fingernails before she died (Rachel). It was all fantastic, quite brilliant, really—and John said so. Numerous times. Out loud. Then Sherlock had clapped his hands together and muttered something about how the killer had finally made a mistake, that the woman’s suitcase was the key, said something about ‘greyscale hue number 41’ and then yelled out “PINK!” before rushing down the stairs and out of the building in a dramatic twirl of coat tails, leaving John stranded in the middle of a crime scene. In Brixton. He’d hardly been expecting that.

And of all the activities John might have possibly considered for a Tuesday night in London, being kidnapped by an ominous stranger would never have made the list. In all honesty, saying he’d been kidnapped might be a bit inaccurate, but after the third public phone he’d passed began to ring and his curiosity got the better of him, when the voice on the other end of the line that seemed to have complete control of the CCTV cameras told him to get into the car, John felt as though he really didn’t have much of a choice in the matter.

When he found himself in a largely empty warehouse standing in front of a well-dressed man leaning on an umbrella, John had to admit that the night had certainly taken a strange turn.

“Ah, Doctor Watson,” the man said in posh, plummy tones. “So good of you to join me. There is a sign on the wall behind me, would you please tell me what colors it is comprised of?”

John gave the man a hard stare before looking over his shoulder and tilting his head in thought. “I believe the letters on the sign are grey. But as for what color of the sign itself is, well, I guess I’d call it…grey.”

The man smiled indulgently at him, and asked “What is your association with Sherlock Holmes?”

“I could be wrong,” John had responded, “but I think that’s none of your business.”

“It could be,” the stranger replied ominously.

“It really couldn’t,” said John, his voice like stone.

“You’ve only just met, and now you’re solving crimes together and looking at a flat,” the man continued, “might we expect a happy announcement that you’re selecting wedding colors by the end of the week?”

An offer of bribery had followed (which John rejected), along with thinly veiled threats warning him against associating with the likes of Sherlock Holmes, including something poetic about seeing the dark underbelly of the city (he thinks) but to be honest John was only half listening, distracted by the
sound of his mobile phone receiving incoming text messages from the very man who was responsible for his being here in the first place:

*ping*

*Baker Street. Come at once if convenient. —SH*

*ping*

*If inconvenient, come anyway. —SH*

The man in the warehouse had ended their conversation with the pronouncement that John should fire his therapist, saying “You’re not haunted by the war, Dr. Watson. You miss it.”

*ping*

*Could be dangerous. —SH*

And on that at least, John admits, his abductor may have had a point.

After a brief stop to retrieve his firearm, John had found himself back in 221B, where the apparent emergency he’d been summoned to handle was having a very precisely worded text message dictated to him by a lanky, horizontal consulting detective wearing more nicotine patches than was strictly medically advisable, and then sending that text from his phone. To a suspected serial killer.

Now, just a few hours after they first met at Baker Street—if John Watson happens to find himself cutting into a freshly prepared plate of osso bucco, a candle flickering on the table, seated across from a man who is *not his date*, while that man stares intently out the window toward the address John had texted to a murder suspect not half an hour before—well, then it’s the most normal thing that’s happened to him all night.

“So,” John says, breaking the silence, “who exactly did I meet tonight?”

“Hmm?” Sherlock asks, distracted, his eyes still on the street.

“The man, in the warehouse,” John says. “Your ‘arch enemy’ he said. Who is he?”

“One of the most dangerous men you’ll ever meet,” Sherlock responds, “and right now, not my problem.”

John takes a bite of his dinner and chews thoughtfully before he says “People don’t have arch enemies, you know.”

“Don’t they?” Sherlock says. “Sounds a bit dull.”

“There are no arch enemies in real life,” John reiterates. “Doesn’t happen.”

“What do real people have then,” Sherlock asks, his sultry baritone sinking impossibly low, “In their real lives?”

“Friends,” John answers. “You know—people they like, people they don’t like. Girlfriends, boyfriends, soulmates…”

“Soulmates,” Sherlock repeats, “not really my area.”

“So you don’t see colors,” John asks, and when Sherlock narrows his and eyes and fixes them on
him he quickly adds “which is fine, by the way.”

“I know its fine,” Sherlock replies tersely.

“Right,” John replies, “Good. So you’re grey. Just like me.” Then he looks back down at his plate and takes another bite of his dinner.

Sherlock pauses for a few moments, then looks thoughtfully at his dinner companion before saying “Look, John, I think I should make it clear that I consider myself married to my work—and while the concept of soulmates may be interesting, it’s not something I’ve ever been invested in pursuing for myself.”

John considers this as he finishes chewing the bite he’s just taken, “So you don’t mind being grey? I would think that the ability to see colors would come in quite handy in your line of work.”

“Colors are a merely a different way of seeing the world around us,” Sherlock responds dismissively with practiced ease. “Another set of hues from light to dark in addition to the hundreds of shades of grey we all see every day. And while the concept may be novel, color certainly isn’t necessary to live and learn and do meaningful work in the world.”

“Wow,” John replies. “That was a very thorough answer. Did you get that from a book?”

Sherlock looks over at John, the corners of his mouth quirking up in a smile. “It’s something my brother used to say to me when we were children. He encouraged me to find a way to define the world as I already saw it, instead of waiting for the elusive day I might see it differently.”

“Ah yes,” John says, “The ‘Holmes Comprehensive Differentiated Grey Scale Spectral Classification System’ was it?”

“Yes,” Sherlock says, a note of impressed shock in his voice. “You know it?”

“Not really,” John admits with a smile, “I googled you earlier today. Found your website.”

“Oh,” Sherlock replies, his face brightening, “what did you think?”

“Well,” John says, “I didn’t get very far with it, to be honest. Detailed scientific explanation of the light and dark components of two hundred and forty different shades of grey wasn’t exactly riveting.”

“Two hundred and forty three,” Sherlock corrects petulantly.

“Right,” John continues, looking down at his plate and cutting again into his chicken. “I’m sure the science is sound and all, but I’m just saying it’s not exactly exciting to read about, is it? After a while, it’s all just, well, grey.”

“Quite right, John,” Sherlock responds, “Not nearly as exciting as ‘PINK: soft like a whisper’, or ‘GREEN: cool and fresh, like grass’.”

John’s head snaps up and he watches as Sherlock pages slowly through a copy of Price’s Color Key, the book looking strangely small in his long fingers. John automatically pats his hand over his right trouser pocket, which he now notices is empty. “Hey,” he says angrily, “that’s mine! How did you get that?”

“The same way I obtained the stack of police ID’s containing the credentials for one Detective Inspector Lestrade I’ve got back at the flat,” Sherlock tells him with a shrug. “I pickpocketed it.”
“Well cut it out,” John says, leaning over the table and plucking the book from Sherlock’s hands. “If you want to see what’s in my pockets, you could just ask you know.”

“Asking is boring,” Sherlock says, then huffs out a sigh.

“Well, if you had asked,” John continues, “I would have told you that my mother gave me that book, and the notes are the ways she’s been explaining colors to me since I was a boy. Unlike your brother, my Mum was always certain I’d get colors one day. Still is, come to think of it.”

Sherlock looks at him, considering, then says “Your family taught you to expect color, mine prepared me for the opposite.”

“Seems that way, yeah,” John agrees. “So is your brother still grey too then?”

“No,” Sherlock replies, a look of distaste crossing his angular features. “He colorbonded a few years ago, in somewhat unlikely circumstances. I watched it happen.”

“Well,” John says, a small smile tilting up one side of his face, “that’s nice to hear. Means it’s never too late to find your soulmate, I guess.”

“Perhaps.” Sherlock says, reluctantly. “Assuming one actually has a soulmate to be found, of course. And given the number of people in the world and the relatively small number of those that it’s likely any single human being will come into contact with in their lifetime, mathematically the odds of finding that person after a certain age are statistically insignificant. I’ve accepted that it’s unlikely that I even have a soulmate, and in event that such a person does exist, it’s even more unlikely that we will ever cross paths.”

“Well, there’s a cheery outlook,” John chides, a hint of sadness under the teasing tone. “You may be right, but I’d like to see all those colors for myself one day. So for my part, I’ll keep looking.”

“Suit yourself,” Sherlock shrugs, then looks at him thoughtfully before he turns and focuses back on the street in front of the restaurant.

John takes another bite and they sit in companionable silence until Sherlock suddenly straightens in his chair.


When John turns in his seat to look, Sherlock hisses “Don’t stare!”

“But,” John sputters, “you’re staring.”

“We can’t both stare,” Sherlock replies, standing up, slipping into his coat, and running out the door.

John watches him leave, then rolls his eyes, grabs his coat and follows him out the door, leaving behind a half spent candle, a half-full glass of wine, a half-eaten meal…and his cane.

Running down Baker Street, the soles of his shoes smacking against the pavement in a satisfying rhythm, Sherlock listens to the second set of footfalls that follow close behind, and smiles. *This, he thinks, has been an excellent Tuesday night.* First, another crime scene (with a body), then an hour of strategic hunting through alley ways, vacant lots and half-filled skips to find the missing suitcase none of the buffoons on the police force had even known they should be looking for, then a stakeout
at Angelo’s waiting for a moderately clever serial killer to show up that ended in a thrilling chase up fire escapes and over rooftops? Say what you want about Tuesday nights in general, but this particular one certainly hasn’t been boring.

Pushing open the door to 221B, Sherlock pulls off his coat and scarf and leans against the entry way wall, breathing heavily. John follows him in, and as he strips off his coat and moves to hang it on the hooks near the door, Sherlock considers the man carefully. There’s nothing particularly remarkable about him, really. Shorter than the national average for British men by a few centimeters, average looks in general, and—while not quite as idiotic as most of the people Sherlock comes into contact with on a regular basis—of average intelligence as well. No, there’s nothing immediately extraordinary about him at all, except perhaps that he seems to find Sherlock to be so, and says as much. John Watson, it seems, is a bit like the Tuesday night he’s just shared with him: unexpectedly interesting, and not boring at all.

The army doctor collapses against the wall next to him, both of them panting heavily, working to get their breath back.

“That,” John huffs, “was the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever done.”

“And you invaded Afghanistan,” Sherlock jokes.

And when the small laugh that starts in the shorter man’s throat bubbles up and out of his mouth in what can only be described as a giggle, Sherlock finds that he can’t help but laugh as well.

“Well that wasn’t just me,” John tells him with a smile. “Why aren’t we back at the restaurant?”

“They can keep an eye out,” says Sherlock. “It was a longshot anyway.”

“Oh?” John asks, “So then what were we doing there?”

“Just passing the time, really,” Sherlock responds, still breathing hard, “and proving a point.”

“What point?” John asks, his expression confused.

“You.” Sherlock says simply, then shouts up the stairs, “Mrs. Hudson, Dr. Watson will take the room upstairs!”

John looks at him and asks, “Says who?”

“Says the man at the door,” he tells his new flatmate, with a smile, as John goes to answer the impeccably timed knock.

Sherlock watches as Angelo hands John the cane he left at the restaurant earlier, and is surprised to feel something besides the smug sense of pride he’d been expecting. The look of astonishment on John’s face evokes something else inside him, the same electric hum low in his stomach that the doctor’s earlier exclamations of praise had ignited. Before he can examine the feeling too closely, their landlady rushes out of her flat, a pained expression on her face.

“Oh Sherlock,” she says, “What have you done?”

“Mrs. Hudson,” Sherlock replies, concerned, “what is it?”

“Upstairs,” she tells him, gesturing with shaking fingers toward the second floor flat. Sherlock takes the steps two at a time, John following closely on his heels.
Lestrade is in their living room, along with what appears to be half of the staff of New Scotland Yard.

“What are you doing here?” Sherlock demands.

“Well, I knew you’d find the suitcase,” Lestrade replies. “I’m not stupid.”

“You can’t just break into my flat, we’re family!” Sherlock snaps back. “Aren’t there rules about things like that?”

“Yes, but you can’t withhold evidence—there are rules about that too,” says Lestrade.

“Wait,” John interjects, looking between the detective inspector and Sherlock. “You two are related?”

“Yes,” Sherlock tells him, narrowing his eyes at Lestrade. “He’s my brother-in-law.”

“So you’ve got a sister?” John asks him.

“No.” Sherlock says.

“Oh,” John says, looking confused for a moment, then appears to catch on. “Oh! So he’s…”

“Married to my brother, yes.” Sherlock replies.

“Ok,” John says, “so…what exactly is going on here?”

“You can’t just break into my flat!” Sherlock shouts again at Lestrade.

Lestrade looks around at the officers currently looking through every drawer, on every shelf, and under every cushion then says, “I didn’t break in. It’s a drugs bust.”

“Seriously,” John asks, his tone incredulous, “This guy? A junkie? Have you met him?”

Sherlock watches as Lestrade looks at John, then at him, then back at John with an amused look on his face. He turns his back on his brother-in-law and tries to get the shorter man’s attention.

“I’m pretty sure you could search this flat all day,” John continues confidently, “and you wouldn’t find anything you could call recreational.”

“No,” John says quietly, “you probably want to shut up now.”

“Oh but come on,” John says, turning back to the consulting detective, and when their eyes meet and Sherlock watches the realization dawn on his face, he suddenly finds himself wishing he could delete the disappointment that blooms there. Which is ridiculous, of course, he’s just met this man, why should it matter to him what he thinks? It shouldn’t. It doesn’t. (Does it? Why does it?)

“No,” John says quietly, “you?”

“Shut up!” Sherlock tells him, petulantly, then turns back to Lestrade. “What do you want?”

“Well, you could start helping properly, and I’ll tell my guys to stand down.” Lestrade replies.

“This is childish,” Sherlock seethes.

“Well, I’m dealing with a child, aren’t I?” says Lestrade. “We had a deal, Sherlock. You stay clean, I
let you in on cases. You do not go off on your own. Are we clear?”

“Or what,” Sherlock asks him, “you set up a pretend drugs bust to bully me?”

“It stops being pretend if we find anything, Sherlock,” responds Lestrade.

“I am clean!” Sherlock insists.

“Is your flat?” his brother-in-law asks. “All of it?”

The consulting detective turns way with a sigh, his eyes scanning the room until they land on John where he stands watching the exchange, his face full of tense curiosity. Unbidden, an unfamiliar desire to stop John from looking at him that way rises inside him, and he tries to tamp it down. Sherlock takes a deep breath and then looks back at the detective inspector.

“Fine,” he says.

“Good,” Lestrade tells him with a smile. “Now let’s get to work.”

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It turns out he had been right about the victim, her profession, her home town, the state of her marriage. He’d even been right about the name she’d been scratching into the floor as she died, it was indeed “Rachel”. The voices and sounds being made by the officers all around him as they continue to search his flat are distracting to say the least, but Sherlock has learned that if he concentrates on a specific point he can filter out the distractions and focus all his considerable energy on solving the puzzle before him. And today, in this room, John Watson is that focal point.

When the questions bombard him from all sides and the puzzle pieces scatter in the air around his head, it’s John’s voice that grounds him. He aims his deductions at John, who reflects them easily, confirming his point or sending his thoughts in a new direction, even correcting his course when he finds himself in unfamiliar emotional territory. It’s an unexpectedly easy dance, this exchange of ideas, and he finds the answers he’s looking for much more quickly than he might have without it. When the solution clicks into place, when he knows how they can locate the killer, it’s isn’t the highly trained officers of New Scotland Yard who first understand what needs to be done—it’s John.

And when Sherlock finally realizes that the murderer they’re seeking is closer than anyone could have guessed, as he watches the one person in 221B who has no business being there turn around on the landing and walk down the stairs, he knows that he has no choice but to follow him. So he goes, leaving the flat, and the case, in John’s capable hands.

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In the end, Sherlock admits, the murderer himself had been somewhat of a disappointment. Oh he was clever, to be sure. Perhaps even the proper genius he declared himself to be. But after all the exposition, the carefully laid out game of chess using bottles of poison pills as pawns, and the detailed string of deductions (brilliant, if he did say so himself) that crystallized the killer’s motives down to the typical building blocks of the basest human emotions—it was a fake gun that ended the game.

Disappointing, indeed.

Staring across the table in the empty classroom on the second floor of the Roland Kerr Further Education College at the man holding the revolver-shaped novelty cigarette lighter, Sherlock raises his eyebrows and lightly slaps the palms of his hands against the dark stone surface.
“Well, this has been very interesting. I look forward to the court case,” he says, then stands and walks purposefully across the room toward the door.

The taxi driver turns in his seat to watch him as he leaves, then says “Just before you go, did you figure it out? Which one’s the good bottle, the one without the poison?”

“Of course,” Sherlock says, with a small shrug, as he opens the door. “Child’s play.”

“Well which one was it?” the cabbie asks. “Tell me which one would you have picked, just so I know whether I could have beaten you.”

Sherlock pauses for a moment, then closes the door and turns back toward him.

“Come on,” the confessed murderer taunts, motioning Sherlock back toward him with a jerk of his head, “play the game.”

The detective is still for a moment, then begins to walk slowly and purposefully back toward the table, reaches out a hand and snatches up the small bottle in front of his adversary.

“Oh, interesting choice.” The taxi driver says as he reaches forward to grab the bottle left on the table, unscrews the lid and empties the pill inside onto his open palm. He grasps it between the thumb and forefinger of his other hand, then holds it up toward Sherlock. “So what do you think? Shall we?”

He stands and faces Sherlock, staring into his narrowed eyes as he asks, “Really, do you think you can beat me? Are you clever enough to bet your life?”

Sherlock looks down at the bottle in his hand, rolls it between his fingers, considering.

“I bet you get bored, don’t you?” taunts the cabbie, “A man like you, so clever. But what’s the point of being clever if you can’t prove it?”

Sherlock unscrews the lid of the bottle, pulls out the pill and holds it up over his head and examines it in the light.

“Still the addict,” the other man sneers, lifting the pill in his own hand closer to his face. “But this is what you’re really addicted to, isn’t it Mr. Holmes? You’d do anything, anything at all, to stop being bored.”

Sherlock licks his lips and opens them slightly, bringing the pill closer to his mouth.

“You’re not bored now,” the killer asks, his own pill just inches from his lips. “Feels good, doesn’t it--”

A gunshot rings out, echoing so loudly that it startles Sherlock into dropping the pill when he jumps back as the cabbie falls to the ground. Turning immediately to the window where the shot came from, his eyes focus on the small bullet hole in the glass behind him. He swings his feet up and slides over a table then crosses the remaining space to press his hands to the windowsill and looks across to the adjacent building where an identical bullet hole mars a window that looks into an empty room.

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Sitting on the bumper in front of the open ambulance doors, Sherlock watches the spinning lights on the police cars throw shadows over the various shapes bustling around the scene. There’s a slight weight around his shoulders when someone lays yet another blanket over him as Lestrade ducks
under the police tape strewn over the entrance to the building and walks toward him.

“Why have I got this blanket?” Sherlock asks his brother-in-law, “They keep putting this blanket on me.”

“It’s for shock.” Lestrade replies.

“But I’m not in shock,” Sherlock argues.

“Yeah,” says Lestrade, with a smile, “but some of the guys want to take photographs.”

Sherlock rolls his eyes, and asks, “So the shooter—no sign?”

“No,” the policeman tells him, “he cleared off before we got here. But a guy like that would have had enemies, I suppose. One of them could have been following him, but we’ve got nothing to go on.”

“Oh,” Sherlock says, with a glint in his eye, standing up and facing him, “I wouldn’t say that.”

“Ok,” Lestrade says, with a patient sigh, “give it to me. What have you got?”

“The bullet they just dug out of the wall is from a handgun.” Sherlock begins, “A kill shot over that distance with that kind of a weapon, that’s a crack shot you’re looking for. But not just a marksman, a fighter, his hands couldn’t have shaken at all—so clearly he’s acclimatized to violence. He didn’t fire until I was in immediate danger, though, so strong moral principle. You’re looking for a man probably with a history of military service, and nerves of steel…”

Turning his head while speaking, Sherlock’s eyes fall on someone standing between two cars behind a stretch of police tape strung in front of him. He watches as the man folds his arms behind his back, standing at parade rest, his eyes scanning the crowd before he turns his head toward the place Sherlock is standing. The consulting detective’s voice trails off in mid deduction as he links eyes with John Watson. They stare at each other for a beat, then Sherlock turns back to Lestrade and clears his throat.

“Actually, do you know what?” He asks his the detective inspector, then looks down at the blanket draped around his shoulders and picks up one corner of it and worries the rough fabric between his fingers. He opens his mouth to continue when a flash of light at the edge of his vision flares bright and strange, stopping him midsentence. He stares down at the small section of blanket he’s holding and struggles to focus on it, the piece of material seeming to glow strangely in his hand. He presses his eyes shut, and when he opens them again he sees the dark contrast of the grey blanket against his pale skin. He shakes his head a bit, then dismisses the moment as a trick of the revolving police car lights all around him.

“Sherlock?” Lestrade says, a touch of worry in his voice, “You were saying?”

“Oh, yes,” he says, starting to walk away. “Ignore me. Ignore all of that, it’s just the—the shock talking.”

“Where are you going?” asks Lestrade.

“Oh what now, can’t you see I’m in shock?” Sherlock says, exasperated, “Look, I’ve got a blanket! And I just caught you a serial killer. More or less.”

“Oh,” Lestrade concedes after giving him a hard look, “I’ll be over tomorrow to get your statement. Off you go.”
Sherlock peels off the shock blanket, tosses it into the open window of a police car, flips up his coat collar and ducks under the police tape where John is standing.

“The sergeant’s just been telling me all about it,” John begins. “Two pills, huh? Dreadful business.”

“Good shot,” Sherlock tells him, a slight smile on his face.

“Yes,” John agrees, licking his lips and nodding, “Must have been, through two windows and over that distance—”

“Well, you’d know,” Sherlock says, with a knowing glance, and he watches John drop the act and nod slightly. “We need to get the powder burns out of your fingers, I don’t suppose you’d serve time for this but let’s avoid the court case all the same.” He pauses a moment then adds, “Are you all right?”

“Yes, of course I’m all right,” John says, quickly.

“Well you have just killed a man,” Sherlock responds.

“Yes, I…” John begins, then looks up into Sherlock’s eyes and his voice falters a bit. “That’s true. But he wasn’t a very nice, man.”

“No,” the taller man agrees, with a nod. “He really wasn’t, was he?”

“And frankly, a bloody awful cabby.” John adds.

Sherlock laughs. “That’s true, he was a bad cabby. You should have seen the route he took us to get here.” And when John starts to laugh, it morphs into the same infectious giggle that Sherlock first heard a few hours ago in Baker Street, and he can’t help but laugh himself.

“Listen,” John says, still laughing, “we can’t giggle, it’s a crime scene.”

“Well, you’re the one who shot the man,” Sherlock points out helpfully, just as an officer walks by and he and John hastily apologize, blaming their laughter on nerves, when John stops and looks up at the man who’s life he saved earlier tonight.

“You were going to take that damn pill, weren’t you?” he asks.

“No you didn’t,” John denies easily, “Just biding my time. I knew you’d turn up.”

“Why would I do that?” Sherlock asks.

“Because you’re an idiot,” John replies.

Sherlock stares down at him, a smile spreading across his face. “Dinner?”

“Starving,” says John, and follows him toward the street. After a few steps he stops and looks to the right of where they are walking at a tall man who has just emerged from a sleek black car, grabs Sherlock’s sleeve and says “That’s him, Sherlock. That’s the man from earlier.”

“Oh I know exactly who that is,” Sherlock says, narrowing his eyes and stalking toward the man.

“So,” the new arrival begins, leaning on his umbrella and addressing them both. “Another case
cracked, how very public spirited. Though that’s never really your motivation, is it?”

“What are you doing here?” Sherlock demands.

“As ever,” the man continues, “I’m concerned about you, of course. You were nearly killed tonight, according to my husband.”

“Wait,” John interjects, looking at Sherlock and pointing at the man “is this your...”

“Yes, this is my brother, Mycroft,” Sherlock says, distastefully. “Why, who did you think he was?”

“I don’t know,” John says with a shrug, “a criminal mastermind?”

“Close enough,” sneers Sherlock.

“Oh for heaven’s sake,” Mycroft Holmes says, “I hold a minor position in the British government.”

“He IS the British government,” Sherlock says, “When he’s not busy being the British secret service, or the CIA on a freelance basis. Now goodnight, Mycroft. Try not to start a war before I get home, you know what it does to the traffic.”

Sherlock stalks off, and John looks at Mycroft for a moment before turning and following his new flatmate away from the scene.

“So,” John says, “dinner, huh?”

“There’s a good Chinese near here, stays open until two,” Sherlock tells him as they walk. “You can always tell a good Chinese by examining the bottom third of the door handle…”

After a conceding defeat in the (half-hearted, really) disagreement over which of them would pay for the meal they just consumed, John walks outside into the cool night air and waits while his late night dinner companion settles the bill. When Sherlock emerges from the restaurant a few moments later, tying his scarf around his neck and reaching his left hand into a pocket to retrieve his gloves, John smiles and squares his shoulders.

“Thank you for dinner,” John says, “I can honestly say this has been the most interesting night I’ve had in quite a long time.”

“It was a marginally less boring way to spend an evening than most,” Sherlock agrees, with a slight shrug.

“So, then,” John says, hesitating slightly. “I’ll pack up my things and come round Baker Street in the morning? I mean, if the offer still stands, that is.”

“Oh for heaven’s sake,” Mycroft Holmes says, “I hold a minor position in the British government.”

“He IS the British government,” Sherlock says, “When he’s not busy being the British secret service, or the CIA on a freelance basis. Now goodnight, Mycroft. Try not to start a war before I get home, you know what it does to the traffic.”

Sherlock reaches out and grasps John’s hand in his own, and as his fingers close around it he feels a jolt of electricity somewhere near the base of his spine. The sensation shoots down his legs, rooting his feet to the ground and then reverses course and rockets up through the muscles of his back freezing him in place. He hears himself gasp when a brilliant flash of light obscures his vision for a moment, and as it fades he looks down at the man whose hand he’s still grasping. John Watson stares
up at him, eyes a bit wide with alarm.

“Sherlock?” He asks, his tone tense, “Are you all right?”

Shaking his head full of dark curls and pressing his eyelids tightly shut, the world’s only consulting detective takes a deep breath and then slowly opens his eyes again. John is looking back at him, eyes still wide in alarm, but with a bit of bewilderment and more than a hint of doctorly concern there as well. Sherlock wants to answer, opens his mouth to tell him that he’s fine (because of course he’s fine, why wouldn’t be fine?), but the only sound that comes out is something that sounds suspiciously like a squeak.

“Oh,” John says, voice taking on a tone of professional concern, “you’re scaring me a bit now—look here, how many fingers am I holding up?”

Sherlock stares intently at his face for a moment longer, then slowly turns his gaze to the hand that hovers just off to the left of John’s head. He watches the other man waggle his fingers back and forth, tiny trails of light seeming to dance from them with each small movement. He tries to ignore the strangeness of the sight in front of him and concentrates on counting the digits.

“Three,” he replies slowly, then blinks and snaps his eyes back to examine John’s face intently, where the look of alarm has returned. Shaking his head again and attempting to get a hold of himself, he rolls his eyes and huffs out a breath he hadn’t known he was holding. “Three fingers, obviously, I can count you know.”

“Yes, three. That’s good,” John says, with a relieved sigh. “Are you all right now? You looked a bit ill there for a moment.”

“I’m fine,” the taller man replies, dismissively. “The excitement of the night caught up with me, I think, nothing a few hours of sleep won’t cure.”

“All right, then,” John says, then smiles before adding “but you should go right home and get some rest.”

“Yes, of course,” Sherlock agrees, fashioning his face into what he hopes is a convincing smile, “I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Great,” John replies, but doesn’t move. He stands there for a moment longer, his eyes still on the detective’s, before clearing his throat and glancing downwards. “Um, Sherlock?”

“Yes, John?” Sherlock replies, still studying the shorter man’s face intently.

“I’ll be needing my hand back, if that’s all right with you,” he replies, a lilt of amusement in his voice.

“Oh!” Sherlock says, unclenching his fist and releasing the other man’s hand. “Sorry, about that, exhaustion, you know, my apologies. Yes. Tired. I should go,” he stammers over his shoulder, beginning to walk down the street. “Goodnight, then, see you at the flat in the morning.”

“Get some sleep!” John calls after him, “Doctor’s orders!”

Sherlock turns for one more look back at his soon-to-be flatmate, gives him a small wave, then pulls his coat collar up, puts his head down against the chill and begins to walk, his eyes focused on the sidewalk beneath him. He’ll walk a few blocks, he thinks, then hail a cab to take him back to Baker Street. He needs a bit of time to think, to breathe, to let the darkness of the city surround him as he tries to make sense of the last few minutes—when suddenly he finds himself in front of 221B, the
door knocker gleaming warmly in the light from the streetlamp. He lets himself in and takes the stairs two at a time, steps through the door into the darkened flat, then closes it behind him and leans back against it. Pressing the heels of his hands into his eyes, he takes a deep, shaky breath and lets it out slowly.

When he decides he cannot put it off any longer he lifts his head, squares his shoulders, and makes his way across the dark floor toward the bookshelves in the corner of the room. He runs his hand over the tops of the books, feeling along the spines until he comes to a deep dip between two tall volumes. He slides a finger between them and onto the top of the item that rests there, hooks his fingertip on the narrow raised edge of the binding and pulls the small book from the shelf. He carries it over near the windows, closes his eyes and concentrates on what he saw there on the sidewalk outside of Ming’s restaurant, on the memory of John Watson’s face. After a few moments he reaches out and switches on the desk lamp, allowing his eyes a moment to acclimate to the light. Staring down at the book in his hand, he begins to flip through the pages, scanning each one and running a finger over the small named squares printed there—until he finds the one he’s looking for.

Closing the book, he slips it into the pocket of his coat and then walks over to the leather armchair in front of the fire and sinks down into it. He raises his hands to his chin, rests his steepled fingers against his lips, and closes his eyes.

It doesn’t happen very often, of course, but in the rare event that it does occur he is mature enough to admit to it. When the facts prove an assertion he’s made to be false, he has no problem reversing his position (well, very little problem, anyway). Surely someone with his intelligence and respect for discovering the truth should be secure enough to know that there is no shame in admitting when he’s wrong.

Because in this case, he was wrong.

It seems Sherlock Holmes does indeed have a soulmate.

And, according to page 38 of Price’s Color Key, his eyes are blue.
Happy Thursday! (Or late Wednesday night, I guess. Close enough.) This week, in my ongoing journey to get over myself, I learned that I’m incapable of writing a chapter of any length other than that which borders on the ridiculous. I’ve accepted this, and am rolling with it. Please enjoy 12K new words of the story because I have abandonment issues and can’t bear to part with a single one.

Endless thanks to my amazing beta for plying me with pizza and diet Dr. Pepper to help soften the blow when she tells me a scene I’m overly attached to simply has to go, and then ignoring the inevitable tantrum that follows. She’s a saint, folks.

I continue to be truly touched by your wonderful input in the comments, and am thankful to everyone who’s taken the time to drop a line, bookmark, or subscribe. I hope you enjoy this chapter of the story, which my beta insists should be called by its full title: “YELLOW: It’s about freakin’ time!” Have a fantastic week!

Climbing the seventeen stairs from the street, arms laden with Tesco bags filled with items he hopes might be interesting enough to entice his flatmate into eating something that doesn’t come in a takeaway container, John shouts up through the open door of the flat.

“Sherlock! A little help here?”

“Busy!” a deep voice replies, immediately.

Heaving the shopping up the last few steps and over the threshold into the sitting room, John looks over to where the other resident of 221B sits cross legged on the couch, hunched forward over the coffee table. Despite his frustration at having to handle the shopping by himself, John can’t help but be amused by the sight. Dressed in his customary uniform of a bespoke suit tailored within an inch of its life, Sherlock is surrounded by what looks to be about 50 empty sweets bags judging by the large piles of jelly candies sorted into various groups on the table in front of him. With his impossibly long limbs folded underneath and against him and his angular face still with concentration on the table below, John thinks to himself that he looks less like a man than a gigantic, posh praying mantis. With a sweet tooth. The comparison causes a bubble of laughter to form in John’s throat, which erupts from his mouth in a giggle before he can stop it.

“Problem?” Sherlock snaps, turning his narrow eyed gaze at him.

“No,” John says through the laugh, rolling his eyes as he turns to trudge into the kitchen with his heavy load of groceries. “No problem at all. I quite like doing all the shopping, and carrying it six blocks home then up two flights of stairs by myself is actually my favorite part of the experience.”

“Really, John? Sarcasm?” the detective replies, distastefully. “That’s a lazy man’s weapon.”

“It’s a wonder that you don’t wield it daily, then,” the former army doctor mutters under his breath.
“I heard that.”

“I meant you to,” John replies cheerfully, pulling items out of bags and sliding them into cupboards, making room in the fridge for the meat and veg he’s brought home by sliding over a container that he’s 80% certain contains several human ears (a week ago he may have removed the lid to confirm his suspicions, but it had only taken one similar instance for John to conclude that a little mystery isn’t necessarily a bad thing), and opening the new box of teabags and refilling the tin in the cupboard, then dropping one into each of two mugs before filling the kettle and switching it on.

“So this is your version of ‘busy’, today, is it?” John calls from the kitchen as the kettle starts to boil and he switches it off. “Was there a brutal slaying at the Jelly Babies factory that hasn’t made the news yet, or are you building a really inappropriate scale model of a recently discovered mass gravesite?”

“Neither,” replies Sherlock, unperturbed, “It’s an experiment.”

“In what? Tooth decay?”

“Science, John.” Sherlock responds. “I don’t expect you to understand.”

“Of course you don’t,” John sighs, walking over the couch and setting a cup of tea at Sherlock’s elbow, “You’re probably right, I was absent the week they covered Jelly Baby anatomy in medical school anyway.” He reaches down and scoops up a handful of the candies from the table before making his way to sit down at the desk with his own cup of tea.

“You’re eating my data,” the taller man says, his tone cross. But when John looks up at him to argue, Sherlock doesn’t hide the small grin on his face quickly enough, so he bites back his retort and returns the smile.

“True. But to be fair, your data isn’t usually this delicious” John says, popping several of the candies into his mouth and chewing before his eyes widen a bit and his jaw stops moving. “Sherrock,” he asks through a mouthful of sweets, “You dint do anyfing to theeth, did oo?”

His mad flatmate looks back at him through the fringe of curls that have fallen over his forehead, smiles innocently and says, “They’re perfectly safe to eat, John. I haven’t altered them in any way. Yet.”

John considers this for a few seconds, then shrugs and continues chewing. As Sherlock directs his attention back to the mounds of candy in front of him, his long fingers deftly re-sorting them according to some unknown criteria, John grins against the lip of his mug and looks around the sitting room of this place that already feels like home. And while it may be true that the color of the curtains, the floor, the furniture, and even the wallpaper here don’t look any different to him than those in the dreary little bedsit he moved out of a fortnight ago, John has to admit that life in 221B could hardly be described as grey.

Not that it’s all laughs and Jelly Babies, mind you. John’s learned very quickly that there are unexpected hazards one encounters when you agree to share a flat with the world’s only consulting detective. For instance, it’s best to learn right away to distinguish between the tin in the cupboard that’s filled with teabags, and the nearly identical one next to it filled with what John is fairly certain are toenails. Also, it turns out that removing a container of eyeballs from the microwave before warming up your cup of tea that’s gone cold is an easier habit to form (and then repeat regularly) than John might have expected. And if, when you stumble down to the bathroom for your morning piss, there happens to be a live trout swimming in lazy circles in the toilet—a quick splash of bleach down the bathtub drain is sufficient to relieve you of any guilt for what you were forced to do as an
alternative to killing an innocent creature. Or the not so innocent one who put it there, for that matter.

But in between unexpected wildlife in the loo and unreasonable requests for John to fetch him his mobile phone (which was in Sherlock’s own pocket at the time, by the way, and John can’t decide whether that fact—or that he actually retrieved it as requested—is the more disturbing part of the story), there are cases—two already in just the short time they’ve lived together. John can’t help but think that there are tradeoffs to everything in life, and if the price for not spending the first part of every morning tasting the barrel of a British Army Browning L9A1 pistol against his lips is ignoring the occasional body part in the fridge, then it’s one he’s willing to pay at the moment.

Life with Sherlock Holmes might defy explanation on most days, but there’s one thing John Watson can say with certainty:

It is never boring.

Even now, when Sherlock has abandoned his Jelly Baby experiment to sit across from John at the desk and scroll through emails from potential clients (on John’s laptop, he happens to notice, and opens his mouth to protest just as Sherlock’s eyes make contact with his over the edge of the screen and the detective says “mine was in the bedroom” as though that’s a perfectly reasonable explanation for using John’s without asking…and for some reason, this seems fair to John so he just shrugs and pops a few more Jelly Babies into his mouth), the relative lack of conversation isn’t oppressive or fraught with tension. It’s a companionable silence, one that neither of them feels obligated to fill with meaningless chatter. It’s…comfortable, John thinks. He likes it.

Decidedly less comfortable is the overall picture of John’s current financial situation that’s beginning to emerge as he opens and studies each bill that arrived for him in the post this week. He divides the notices into two piles: those his meager army pension check will cover after his half of the rent is taken out, and those he simply can’t afford to pay right now. The second pile is much larger than the first. Rubbing a hand over his face, he considers his options.

He could ask Harry for a loan, the law firm she and Clara have spent the better part of a decade building together has done quite well, even under the specter of his sister’s worsening drinking problem. She’d certainly have the funds available, but asking for them would mean he’d have to call her. And then meet with her. And then in all likelihood be forced to endure a much longer lecture about the limits of familial obligation than she has any right to pontificate on given the current state of her own life, and frankly John thinks he’d rather starve than sit through that.

He knows his parents would loan him some cash, they’ve already offered on numerous occasions these last several months—none of which he solicited, and all of which he’s politely declined. He knows they can afford it, knows that they would help him in any way they can, and yet he simply doesn’t want to put any more burden on them than his injury and subsequent recovery have already laid at their feet. No, he won’t worry them any more than he already has.

Huffing out a long breath, he looks over at his flatmate who is staring intently at something on John’s computer.

“You know,” John begins, “You could use your own laptop from time to time, it would save you the bother of hacking into mine, which is password protected after all.”

“In a manner of speaking, I suppose,” Sherlock replies, eyes never leaving the screen. “Took me less than a minute to guess yours, not exactly Fort Knox.”

“Anything interesting?” John asks, gesturing to the computer.
“Perhaps. An old classmate from university, asking for my help on a business matter.” Sherlock responds, before looking up and John and then down to the piles of paper in front of him. “What about you?” he asks, gesturing to the bills, “anything interesting?”

“Hardly,” John says, gathering the papers toward him and beginning to refold the notices and stuff them back into the envelopes they arrived in. “I need to get a job.”

“Dull,” Sherlock scoffs with a dismissive wave, his attention back on the borrowed laptop screen.

Of course Sherlock finds the subject dull, John thinks. The man has no actual income that he’s aware of, he receives no payment from New Scotland Yard for his invaluable assistance on their cases, and John assumes his expenses are all covered by family money. Must be nice, John thinks, never to worry about how you’ll pay the bills. A thought occurs to him, and he turns the idea over in his mind a few times, deciding that of the choices available to him it’s the least objectionable.

“Listen,” John begins, licking his lips and leaning forward a bit. “If you’d be able to lend me some…” he trails off, noticing that while Sherlock’s head is raised and pointed in his direction, he’s actually staring off at some point over John’s left shoulder. “Sherlock, are you listening to me?”

“I’ve got to go to the bank,” Sherlock says abruptly, then stands and heads toward the door. He pushes one arm through his long coat, then turns and throws John’s coat to him. “Coming?” he asks, before rushing down the stairs.

Well, John thinks, that was easy--then heads out of the flat to catch up with Sherlock.

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Leaving the posh offices of Shad Anderson an hour later, there are a three things John Watson knows for sure.

One: Sebastian Wilkes, Sherlock’s old uni classmate, is a bit of an arsehole.

Two: They have a new case. An invisible intruder entered a locked room without being detected by the state of the art surveillance system in place and left a message consisting of cryptic symbols spray painted on the walls. Arsehole or not, Wilkes had given them a puzzle, and Sherlock can’t resist a good one of those.

Three: While it hadn’t been the “trip to the bank” John had been expecting, the five thousand pound check in his wallet (the one that Sherlock wouldn’t even have taken if John hadn’t been there) means that his money issues are over, temporarily. But that doesn’t change the fact that he still needs to get a job.

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Sitting across the desk from him, Dr. Sarah Sawyer clicks the top of her pen rhythmically while she reads over his C.V. She looks up from the resume at John, examining this man who has walked into her surgery in answer to an inquiry she made about an available opening for a locum tenens physician. The sounds of a busy medical practice fill the air, the ring of a telephone, the cry of a baby, the voices of patients and staff carrying out of examination rooms and through the halls.

“It’s just locum work,” she reiterates.

“That’s fine,” John assures her, with a smile.

“Well,” she begins, looking back down at his C.V. and then back up at him, “you’re a bit over
qualified, to be honest.”

John considers voicing an argument to the contrary, but looking at the shy smile on Dr. Sawyer’s face he realizes that it’s not an accusation, but a compliment of sorts. He considers the woman for a moment, her petite frame and pleasant features, then allows a slow smile to spread on his own face, mirroring hers and says “I could always do with the money.”

“Well,” she replies, her fingers coming up to unconsciously tuck a strand of hair that’s broken free of the simple pony tail she’s wearing back behind her ear, “We have two away on holiday this week, and one’s just left to have a baby, so we could use the help. It might be a bit mundane for you, though.”

“Um, no,” John replies with a small laugh. “Mundane is *good* sometimes, I think. Mundane works for me.”

“It says here you’re a soldier,” Sarah Sawyer says.

“Yes,” John agrees, affecting what he hopes is his most charming smile. “And a doctor.”

Dr. Sawyer returns the smile, then looks back down at his C.V. and asks “Anything else you can do?”

John thinks for a moment, then looks at the pretty doctor interviewing him and says, “I learned the clarinet at school…”

When she laughs, he finds he enjoys the sound.

“Well,” she says, batting her lashes at him, “I’ll look forward to it.”

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Walking back to Baker Street, John’s mood is lighter than when he left, and there’s a distinct spring in his step that hadn’t been there on the walk to the surgery. And it’s no wonder, really. He and Sherlock have taken on a new case, he’s just gotten a job, and if the person he’ll be working for happens to be a lovely woman near his age who wasn’t wearing a wedding ring, so much the better, he thinks.

Walking into the sitting room at 221B, he finds Sherlock staring at the wall over the fireplace where several photographs he’d taken of the graffiti symbols left at the bank are tacked up.

“I said, can you pass me a pen,” the consulting detective tells John as he approaches.

“When?” John asks, confused.

“About an hour ago,” Sherlock replies, extending his open hand in anticipation.

“Didn’t notice I’d gone out then?” John asks, with a roll of his eyes, and tosses him a pen from the small table near his armchair, which Sherlock catches deftly without taking his eyes off the photographs he’s been examining. “I went to see about a job at that surgery,” John tells him.

“Oh?” he asks. “How was it?”

“It was great,” John replies, reaching up absently to adjust a photo of one of the spray-painted symbols. “She’s great.”

“Who?” Sherlock inquires sharply.
“The job,” John tells him, a look of confusion on his face.

“You said ‘she’, just now.”

“No I didn’t,” John denies.

“Yes,” Sherlock says quickly, eyes narrowed and fixed on John’s face, “you did.”

Shit. Had he?

“Well, I meant ‘it’. The job. It is great.” John explains.

“I’m sure it is. But you distinctly said she.”

“Slip of the tongue, Sherlock. We mortals have those occasionally, you know,” he says, exasperated. “And even if I did say she, what business is it of yours?”

Of all the reactions John might have expected from Sherlock right then, a small flinch followed by a short burst of what he’s almost certain is hurt flaring behind his flatmate’s eyes isn’t one of them. He opens his mouth to apologize, but Sherlock’s face goes suddenly blank, all traces of the emotion John thought he’d seen there just a moment ago vanishing in an instant.

“You’re absolutely right, John. It’s none of my concern.” Sherlock tells him, then turns back and continues to examine the case information he’s tacked up on the wall. John stares at his back for a moment, at the tension in the rigid set of the other man’s spine.

“Listen, Sherlock,” John begins, but the taller man cuts him off with a wave, directing his attention instead to an article open in a browser window on the laptop (John’s naturally) in front of him. As Sherlock begins to tell him what he’s learned about the case so far, John finds himself drawn into the narrative, the moment forgotten, for now.

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He’s standing on the beach, looking out over the waves as the water rolls grey and frothy over his feet where they are partially buried in the sand. The silver moon hangs in the sky, casting the reflected light of a burning white sun that set hours ago over the familiar stretch of shoreline. He can hear the creak of the bench swing suspended on the porch of the cottage behind him, smell the salt in the air in this place he’s been visiting his whole life. The gulls cry overhead, swooping gracefully down to drag their beaks through the dark surface of the water, before arcing up and returning to the sky. He watches a particularly large wave approach, sees that it’s carrying something with it to shore, the object rides the swell all pale planes and rolling angles shining in the moonlight. He should move, he thinks, as the wave draws nearer. Whatever the tide is bringing in isn’t small, even from this distance he can see that it’s at least as big as he is, maybe larger, but as the swell of water moves it ever nearer to where he stands, he feels frozen in place, bracing himself for the impact.

The first crash of the wave hits his shins, the water rushing in and rising up past his hips. By all rights, he shouldn’t still be standing. He’d expected to be carried away by the sheer power of the ocean as it broke against the shore—but he is standing, still and unmoving while the water swirls around him. He feels something large bump softly against his legs, but when he looks down all he sees is a cloudy swirl of charcoal sand and bits of slick black seaweed the wave displaced in its charge up the shore. There’s a moment of stillness, the water no longer rising around him, before he feels the slight tug of the wave being pulled back out to sea.

As the dark pool around him recedes, the edges of whatever now sits at his feet become visible gradually, a mysterious form, long and pale, finally taking shape when the last of the water flows
back out into the ocean and John can see the lean lines of the body lying face down on the sand. He
stares at the back of a head, dark curls splayed out around it, at the span of broad shoulders, the sharp
jut of a scapula, and down the gentle slope of ribs as they taper to a slim waist. Bending his knees
and lowering himself into a crouch, he slides the fingers of his right hand over the wet curve of a hip
and pulls the body over onto its back. Pale, dark rimmed irises (a strange fleck of pewter marring the
right one just above the pupil) stare blankly up at him, sharp cheekbones catching the moonlight.

“Sherlock!” John shouts, or tries to, but his voice is muffled to his own ears—the name getting stuck
on the suddenly rough edges of his throat. He drops to his knees, reaches out and grasps the cold
shoulders, shakes them.

“Sherlock, are you all right?” he asks, and when he receives no response his medical training slips
over his shoulders like a second skin. I can save him, he thinks, I know I can. It’s as simple as
ABC.

A is for Airway: John pushes a finger between the cool, full lips and runs it around the inside of the
other man’s mouth, the pad of his index finger gliding over the slick skin searching for any
obstructions hidden there, and finds none.

B is for Breathing: He slides the palm of his right hand under the back of the long pale neck and
pulls upward, tilting the head back until the chin points toward the sky. Leaning down over the
body, John lays his ear close to the slightly parted lips, and watches down the flat plane of his chest
for any sign of respiration. He can hear the cries of the gulls, the whoosh of the water sliding up and
then back down the beach, he can hear his own heartbeat loud and heavy in his ears…but nothing
else. He sits up, presses his left palm onto the unconscious man’s forehead, slides his thumb and
forefinger down to pinch his nose shut, then presses his mouth over the cool lips beneath him and
gives two full breaths.

C is for Circulation: John slides two fingers out from under the neck and over the other man’s
Adam’s apple, then down into the groove beside it, pressing down and feeling for a pulse. Nothing.
He sits up, slides his hands down the long expanse of pale chest and to find the notch where the
ribcages meet, then lays the heel of his left hand on the sternum, covers it with the palm of his right
hand, then presses down, hard, and counts. (One, two, three, four, five…)

He stares at Sherlock’s eerily still face, watches the eyes remain fixed where they stare at the sky,
sees the small trickle foamy water that leaks out of the corner of his still parted lips with each
compression and slides down over his cheek and into the sand below. (Six, seven, eight, nine, ten…)

This isn’t right, he thinks, panic settling into his own chest as he continues compressions to
Sherlock’s, he should be breathing by now, BREATHE, damn it! (eleven, twelve, thirteen, fourteen,
fifteen…)

He knows it’s too late, that there’s no point in continuing. He could push his own breath into the
other man’s water filled lungs all night, press down on his chest and force cold blood through his
veins until his arms give out, and it won’t change anything. He knows this.

And he doesn’t care.

He holds his lifeless friend’s nose closed once more, and huffs two more deep breaths of air through
his lips. He clasps his hands over his chest again and presses down rhythmically until he loses
count. He looks up toward the still face, desperate to see some life in those eyes, to catch the upward
tilt of a knowing smirk on those full lips—and if he squints, he can pretend for a moment that the
way Sherlock’s face ripples and blurs has nothing to do with the tears that fill his eyes. He knows
when his arms are too tired to continue because they collapse beneath him, and he tumbles forward
to press one flushed cheek against the cold, wet skin of Sherlock’s chest.

*It’s not fair,* he thinks, *I’ve only just found him.*

Please, he begs the body below him, *please wake up, Sherlock. Please wake up. Wake up! Wake up…*

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“Wake up,” the voice says, a hand reaching out and settling on his shoulder.

He opens his eyes with a gasp, and he looks around frantically, expecting to see the sea, and sand, and Sherlock, lying cold and dead…

“John,” the voice continues, “are you all right? You fell asleep.”

Blinking his eyes, he focuses on his surroundings. The desk, the chair, the exam table covered with thin paper pulled from a roll at the end…and Dr. Sarah Sawyer standing over him, looking concerned.

“Oh, God, Sarah—I’m sorry.” He says, the mortified apology falling from his lips. “My first day, and…oh hell. That isn’t very professional.”

“No,” she agrees. “not really.”

“I had a bit of a late one, last night,” he mumbles. “I really am sorry. Won’t happen again.”

“Oh,” Sarah replies, her tone less disapproving than it was just a few moments ago and her face open with curiosity. “So, what were you doing, that kept you up so late?”

John pauses, looking for a suitable explanation for why he hadn’t slept that wouldn’t make him look as insane as the truth likely would. In fact, it was hardly a surprise that he’d dreamed about Sherlock dying during the first few moments of sleep he’d had in nearly 48 hours. A night filled with mad chases through museums and train yards and Sherlock being damn near strangled to death while John shouted at him through a letterbox was more than enough fodder for his exhausted subconscious to interpret. “I was—attending a sort of book event, I guess you’d call it.”

“I see,” Sarah says, her face falling slightly, as she looks down and begins to gather papers from the desk. “So she likes books then, does she, your girlfriend?”

“No,” John assures her, “it wasn’t a date.”

“Good,” she says, then looks a bit embarrassed, adding “Oh, I just meant…”

“And,” John interrupts, with a smile. “I don’t have one tonight.”

Which is a lie, as it turns out—he *does* have a date tonight after all. With Sarah Sawyer.

-------------------

When John Watson woke up later that night tied to a chair, his head screaming in protest where he’d been knocked out by a blow to the skull when he answered the door for what he had assumed was his recently placed order of takeaway Thai food, his first thought when he looked to his left and saw a terrified Sarah Sawyer gagged and tied on a chair next to him was:

Of course.
When he’d come down the stairs that night, freshly shaven in a clean shirt and jeans, Sherlock informed him that he needed a bit of air, so they were going out. John then informed him that he had a date; he was going to see a movie with Dr. Sarah Sawyer and would be taking the night off from his new life of crime fighting. True, Sherlock had seemed a bit put out by the pronouncement, but when his flatmate had suggested he forego the cinema and instead take his date to a special performance of the Yellow Dragon Circus, John had scoffed at the prospect. Even if he’d been in the market for dating advice, he certainly wouldn’t have been asking Sherlock for his.

But two fairly expensive, already paid-for-tickets (well, three as it turned out) to a unique limited engagement event had seemed like too good of a deal to pass up, even if the performers were possibly murderous smugglers. And even if Sherlock had shown up uninvited and turned his intimate evening for two into a reluctant threesome, it hadn’t stopped Sarah from twining her arm through his and snuggling closer while they watched a man who had moments before been chained to a post break free of his bonds just in time to avoid a viciously sharp tipped spear launched from the hair trigger crossbow aimed directly at him.

And when Sherlock sneaked out of the performance to have a look around, and then moments later burst through a curtain and right into the middle of the action, John hadn’t hesitated before launching himself into the fray as well, and while he and Sherlock may have started the fight—in the end it was Sarah who ended it, wielding a spear like a club and knocking out their assailant, then the three of them had fled the scene and returned to Baker Street.

It was, John couldn’t help but think, the best first date he’d had in a long time.

But because life has never seen fit to let John Watson enjoy his good fortune for long, now he’s tied up in a dark, abandoned train tunnel, a gun pointed at his head by an accomplished assassin, while blazing barrel fires cast shadows on the high, curved brick walls and on the terrified, tear-stained face of the woman he’d just wanted to see a damned movie with.

He doesn’t have what they need, he’s not who they think he is, and when they drag Sarah’s chair in front of the deadly contraption they’d watched a trained circus performer escape from in the nick of time just hours before, he has no idea how they’re going to survive this. So when he hears Sherlock’s deep baritone voice echo through the tunnel, he heaves an equally deep sigh of relief.

Prematurely, as it turns out.

Sherlock makes quick work of most of their captors, but when he kneels down to remove Sarah’s bonds before the crossbow trigger is activated, one of the assailants appears out of the shadows and wrestles him away from her. John watches in horror as the weight that will send the spear pointed her direction straight through her heart inches closer to the trigger. Summoning all of his strength, John leans forward and moves his chair inch by inch toward the weapon. He heaves himself over on his side and grabs a piece of the structure as he falls, pulling the bow away from Sarah just as the spear launches—directly into the chest of the man doing his best to strangle Sherlock.

That, John thinks, was close.

He watches as Sherlock unties Sarah, and finds himself strangely moved by how gently the man handles his understandably hysterical date. He listens as Sherlock reassures her that she’s safe, his voice low and soft, one hand resting briefly on her shoulder before he makes his way over to John, crouching behind him to remove his bonds. He feels Sherlock’s long fingers tremble slightly as they slide over his wrists working to remove the knots tied there without further injuring his already raw, chafed skin.
As Sherlock works on the ropes that bind him, John looks over to where Sarah sits, tears still streaming down her face, her frame backlit by the light flickering out of the barrel just over her shoulder. He opens his mouth to say something reassuring, to tell her that it’s ok—that their next date won’t be like this—when the fire behind her seems to flare suddenly, the flames glowing brighter. There’s a flash of light near the edge of his vision, a strange burst of…not white…but not grey either. He blinks his eyes a few times, and watches as the flames take on an otherworldly look, a dull throb of light passing through them, pulsing out and away from the fire. It hurts his eyes a bit, and he presses them shut for a few seconds, and when he opens them the fire glows softly again, silver tongues of flame licking up, casting grey shadows over everything their light touches.

Sherlock frees him from his bindings, and then helps him up from where he’d fallen over on the floor. The detective reaches out a hand toward the gash at John’s temple, probing it gently with his fingertips.

“Are you all right?” his flatmates asks, concern in his voice.

“Yeah, I think so,” he replies, “it’s just, the fire—I thought I saw…” he trails off, unsure what he’d seen, if anything at all.

“You thought you saw what?” Sherlock asks, and stares intently at his face.

John looks over his shoulder at Sarah, who is composing herself now, and then at the fire burning behind her, where there’s no trace of the strange glow he’d seen earlier.

“Nothing,” John tells Sherlock, “It was nothing, guess that blow to the head was a little harder than I first thought.”

Sherlock stares back at him for a moment, his eyes narrowed, then nods and says “Come on, let’s go home.”

After talking to the police that night, they’d delivered Sarah safely back to her own flat, then made their way back to 221B where they’d retired to their respective bedrooms and slept for hours. They called round the bank that next morning to recover the stolen item that had started the whole bloody business to begin with (9 million pounds for a hairpin? A hairpin?), and collected a five figure check as payment for solving the case. Now, two days later, all is back to normal at Baker Street (well, as normal as it gets, anyway).

Buttoning his cuff as he makes his way down the stairs, John slips his wallet into his back pocket and his keys into his front left, then calls out for his flatmate.

“Sherlock, have you seen my color key? I thought I left it on my…”

After talking to the police that night, they’d delivered Sarah safely back to her own flat, then made their way back to 221B where they’d retired to their respective bedrooms and slept for hours. They called round the bank that next morning to recover the stolen item that had started the whole bloody business to begin with (9 million pounds for a hairpin? A hairpin?), and collected a five figure check as payment for solving the case. Now, two days later, all is back to normal at Baker Street (well, as normal as it gets, anyway).

His voice trails off as he enters the sitting room, his eyes on the lanky man dressed in pajama pants, a t-shirt and a posh silk dressing gown who is currently stretched out on their couch examining two copies of Price’s Color Key, side by side, one in each hand.

“Is one of those mine?” he asks Sherlock crossly.

“Obviously.”

“Where did you get that from?” John asks him, “I didn’t leave it down here.”

“No, John,” Sherlock replies, “It was cleverly hidden on the corner of the dresser clearly visible from
your open bedroom door. It was challenging to find it, but somehow I managed.”

“Really, Sherlock? Sarcasm? That’s a lazy man’s weapon.”

“Touché.” Sherlock replies, with a small smile.

“Well, give it here,” John says, “I’m going out.”

“Where?” asks Sherlock, then turns and gives John a cursory glance before rolling his eyes and turning back to the books in his hand saying “Oh, I see. Another date.”

“Yes,” John confirms, “and I’m a little amazed she agreed to a second one at all, after the way the first date ended.”

“Well then, do have fun with Susan.”

“It’s Sarah,” John sighs, “and you know very well what her name is. Look, I know you don’t think much of her—”

“Inaccurate,” Sherlock interrupts. “I don’t think of her at all.”

“Then it’s a good thing you’re not the one dating her.” John snaps.

“Agreed,” Sherlock replies, not looking at him.

“Fine then,” John sighs. “Can I have my book please?”

“I need it tonight,” Sherlock insists, “for an experiment.”

John opens his mouth to protest, but a look at his watch tells him he’s already going to be late so instead he rolls his eyes, grabs his coat, and heads down the stairs.

-------------------

The restaurant is quite nice, John thinks, both the food and the wine have been delicious thus far. And the company, he admits, is quite nice as well. It turns out he and Sarah have quite a bit in common. They’re both the youngest child of two, both have lovely parents who encouraged them to achieve, and neither of them can stand even the sight of Brussels sprouts.

“Did you always want to be a doctor?” Sarah asks him.

“For as long as I can remember,” John nods, “My mum tells people that my medical career began with the first injured bird I found on the beach the summer I turned five. I doubt most parents would let a grumpy seagull with a broken wing take up residence in a box in the sitting room of their summer cottage, but both mum and dad helped me nurse it back to health until we could release it a few weeks later. Dad says I told them that very afternoon that one day I’d be a doctor. Never wanted to be anything else.”

Sarah smiles at him over the lip of her wine glass. “They sound lovely, your parents. Did they bond early?”

“They did,” John confirms. “Met the summer they turned seventeen, spent a day roaming the beach, talking and laughing, and both went color that very night.”

“That’s so sweet,” she coos.
“What about your parents?” John asks.

“Similar story. Met in uni, he was assigned as her tour guide on the first day on campus, showed her the sights and walked her to all her classes, and when they said goodbye she hugged him…and the colors came. Pity it isn’t always that easy for the rest of us,” she adds with a small nod.

*ping*

Sarah raises an eyebrow and looks at John. He smiles apologetically and says “Sorry. Ignore that, I’m sure it’s nothing.”

“That’s the third text that’s come in since we sat down, John.” she replies. “Go ahead and check it.”

“No,” John insists; sliding the phone, face down, away from his plate. “This night is about you. He can wait.”

Sarah smiles at him, takes a drink of her wine, then opens her mouth to speak, when—

*ping*

John closes his eyes for a moment, places his palms on the table, and takes a deep breath and says “I think I’ll just turn the damn thing off, give me minute–”, then stops when he feels the slide of warm fingers over the back of his hand. He looks down to see Sarah’s small hand covering his own, and then looks across to find her smiling.

“John,” she says, “really, it’s fine. Go ahead and check the texts. You never know, the madman may have gotten himself stuck up a tree or something.”

He huffs out a laugh, returns the smile and turns his hand beneath hers to twine their fingers together on the table. He reaches for his phone with his free hand, turns it over, and brings up the recent texts.

*Lestrade called, there’s been a murder. Come at once.–SH*

*Witnesses report seeing a nun fleeing the scene on foot. A murderous NUN, John! –SH*

*False alarm. Murderer was not a nun, merely a man dressed up in a long dark robe and claiming to be a wizard. What, exactly, is a “Hufflepuff”? –SH*

*I catch him a murderer in record time, and my brother’s insufferable husband is making me do paperwork. Tiresome. –SH*

*May kill Lestrade. Will call if I need bail. –SH*

John reads each text to himself, smiling more broadly after each one, until huffing out a laugh that progresses into a giggle at the last message.

“Nothing urgent, then?” Sarah asks, a smile creeping into her voice as well.

“No, apparently Sher–”John begins, then looks up from his phone across the table, and freezes.

“John,” Sarah says, her smile faltering, “are you all right?”

John nods once, his eyes fixed on the small vase in the middle of the table, and the single flower that protrudes from it. It’s a rose, he’d noticed it when they arrived, could even smell its sweet perfume when they sat down. Only then it had been grey, just like everything else in the restaurant—in the
world, for that matter. But it isn’t grey now. It's…well, other than “not grey”, John doesn’t know exactly what it is.

“Sarah,” he says, swallowing slowly, “I think—well, I think I am seeing…in color.”

“Are you sure?” she gasps, her fingers tightening around John’s where their hands are still joined.

“No,” he says honestly, examining the flower closely. “But that rose was grey when we sat down—and now it’s something else entirely. Do you see anything? Different, I mean?”

She looks down at the rose, eyebrows knitted in concentration, then looks disappointed. “No, I don’t. Sorry.”

“No, don’t be sorry,” John says excitedly, “it’s not always instant you know.”

“Right,” Sarah agrees. “Well, what color is it?”

John’s hand reaches immediately for his right front pocket, when he remembers that Sherlock has his copy of the color key. “Damn, I left my copy of Price’s at home.”

“Here,” Sarah says, releasing John’s hand and reaching down into her purse and retrieving her own copy of Price’s Color Key and handing it to him over the table. “Use mine!”

John takes it from her, opens the cover and begins paging through the seemingly endless series of small, grey named squares, until he reaches a page that doesn’t look grey at all. He holds the book up next to the flower, looks over to the rose, then back at the book, then again at the bloom. A slow smile spreads across his face, and he looks up at the woman across from him.

“Yellow,” John says softly, a note of wonder in his voice. “It’s yellow.”

Sarah lifts a hand to her face, pressing her fingertips over her lips and the smile she’s wearing there.

“John,” she begins, a note of wonder in her voice, “do you know what this means?”

“Yeah,” John replies, smiling back at her. “It means there will definitely be a third date.”

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They’d sat at the restaurant for another hour, John trying to explain ‘yellow’ to Sarah, and Sarah concentrating on the rose while clutching his hand, willing herself to see it as well. In the end, John had told her what his Mum had always told him: It isn’t always instant, that it happens differently for everyone, and sometimes the bond takes time to form, but that just means it will be all the stronger for it when it does.

He’d hailed a taxi for her, and as it pulled to a stop next to him, he leaned forward and pressed their lips together. He sent her home with a promise to see her at the clinic tomorrow, and a date to see a movie the night after that.

As he watches the cab drive away, he starts walking toward home and finds himself replaying the kiss he’s just shared with, well, with his soulmate he supposes. If he’s being honest, he’d half hoped the world would burst into full color when their lips met, and was slightly disappointed when it didn’t. But in truth it had been a very nice kiss. Not a scorching kiss, or the kind that sends tingles up your spine and sets bright bursts of light exploding behind your eyelids, but it was indeed nice. Quite nice. Fine, really. It was all fine. He’d been so lost in thought that he’s surprised to find himself standing on the stoop at 221B. He reaches into his pocket for his keys, then pulls out his
phone and composes a text to Sherlock.

*You’ll never believe the night I’ve had. Where are you?*

He lets himself into the building, throws his coat up on one of the hooks in the foyer, then takes the stairs two at a time before entering the sitting room, dimly lit by the light from the lamp on the desk. Scanning the flat, his eyes settle almost immediately on the spray-painted shape Sherlock had drawn on the wall over the couch a few days ago, claiming he needed to test the viscosity of the paint to see if it matched the graffiti left at the bank. Turns out that the hastily drawn smiley face on the wallpaper is *yellow*. He can’t wait to tell Sherlock.

Speaking of yellow, John wants to record this moment in his book, to write his own impressions next to where it says “warm like butter melting into toast” in his mother’s handwriting. He sees Price’s Color Key lying on the coffee table where Sherlock undoubtedly abandoned it when Lestrade called him in on the case earlier tonight. He scoops it up, grabs a pen from the desk, and sits down in his chair.

Opening the small volume, he flips through the pages to find the color he saw tonight and looks for the notation that should already be there…but it’s not. There’s nothing written under “YELLOW” at all. But a few boxes away, under a square marked “GOLDENROD” there’s a note scrawled in Sherlock’s flowing script that says “*John’s hair in the afternoon sun.*”

John reads it again. Then once more. Then one more time, just to be sure.

He flips through the pages until he comes across a swatch called “IVY”, under which Sherlock has written “*The jumper John wore the day he moved in*”. He slowly flips through each subsequent page, pausing when he sees a notation. There’s “BLUSH” (“John’s lips when he licks them too often) and “MINT” (“John’s horrible cheap shampoo bottle) “ECRU” (“John’s cable knit jumper, my favorite) and “BEIGE” (“Tea, perfectly made, by John). There are other notations, on other pages, and nearly all of them are about *him*.

*It doesn’t make sense*, John thinks. *Sherlock is grey. Just like John is. Or was, before tonight…Isn’t he?*

*ping*

The sudden sound in the quiet room startles John, who takes a deep breath, pulls his phone slowly from his pocket, and looks at the display.

*Finished at NSY, heading home. Lestrade remains alive. For now. –SH*

John re-reads the text, then looks harder at the screen. The background of the display is the same white it’s always been, the words themselves are white as well. But the frame around the message, the bubble that encloses his half of any text conversation—that doesn’t look grey to him anymore. He sets the phone down on his thigh. His fingers feel thick and stiff as he pages through the book, looking for a box with a hue that matches what he sees on his phone. When finds the right page, and the square he’s looking for, he knows that the color around the text message on his mobile phone screen is *blue*. And, according to Sherlock’s notation, so are “*John’s eyes*”.

John looks slowly around the flat, at the objects and textures and patterns that have become familiar to him over these last few weeks, at the hundreds of shades of grey he’s come to expect of the world around him…and suddenly the room shivers, goes strangely fuzzy at the edges, a fog closes in from all sides and then a bright flash of light pushes it away…and nothing is what it was just seconds ago. It’s the same wallpaper, the same rug, the same skull on the mantle, the same union jack pillow on
the couch…but more.

John may not be a genius, but he’s not a complete idiot either (no matter what his flatmate says), and when there’s a puzzle to be solved he might not fit the pieces together quite as quickly as Sherlock can, but he always gets there in the end.

Earlier tonight, he’d seen his first color holding the hand of a lovely woman who is exactly the kind of person he’d always imagined his soulmate to be…and she hadn’t seen the same thing. Sarah Sawyer, he realizes, isn’t the other half of his colorbond.

But he has gone color.

At long last, John Watson has found his soulmate.

His name is Sherlock Holmes.

************************************************

Sitting in the same third floor office where he solved his first case for Detective Inspector Gregory Lestrade nearly five years earlier, Sherlock eyes the thick stack of files that his brother-in-law sets down on the table beside him.

“Are you serious, Lestrade? I’ve just caught you a murderer—again—and you’re making me do paperwork?”

“Looks that way, doesn’t it?” the detective inspector replies with a grin. “You’re here in my office and that’s a stack of papers, so get to work. Here, I’ll even loan you a pen.”

The consulting detective adopts a scandalized look. “But I’m injured,” he whines, pushing up his sleeve to reveal a small puncture wound on his forearm surrounded by a rapidly darkening bruise. “The suspect tried to stab me with his wand!”

Lestrade rolls his eyes and sets the pen down on the stack of files waiting for Sherlock’s statements and signature. “However will you survive a wound like that? Lucky the daft bastard didn’t have time to send a curse your way before you tackled him, we’d have had to send you off for treatment at St. Mungo’s in a magical purple triple-decker bus.”

Sherlock tilts his head and looks back at him, a confused expression on his face.

“Oh, never mind,” Lestrade sighs, “You’re fine. Besides, you live with a physician. I’m sure Dr. Watson will be happy to inspect your boo-boo and cover it with a plaster—maybe even one with little cartoon cars on it. Might even give you a lolly, if you’re a very good boy.”

Huffing out a sigh, Sherlock picks up the pen and opens the first file. “Sarcasm, Lestrade? That’s a-”

“Lazy man’s weapon, yeah, I know.” his brother’s husband replies. “You’ve said. Many times. Might be time to try some new lines, you know.”

“Duly noted,” Sherlock says dryly, “Now, can’t you see I’m busy? Go away.”

“All right,” Lestrade says, raising his hands in acknowledgement of the dismissal. He’s got Sherlock seated, with a pen, apparently willing to actually use it. He’s not about to disrupt this rare series of circumstances. “Need anything before I go?”
“Yes,” Sherlock replies, gesturing one hand vaguely toward the DI’s desk. “Hand me the file underneath the newspaper.”

Lestrade walks over to the desk, lifts up the paper to reveal two files, picks up the one on top and hands it to him.

“No, not that one.” Sherlock says with a glance, “the yellow one.”

Lestrade rolls his eyes and turns back toward the desk, picks up the requested file from the desk, then freezes. He turns his head slowly toward Sherlock, who is frozen in place as well, pen poised above a sheet of paper.

“Sorry, did you say the ‘yellow’ file?” he asks, carefully.

After a short pause, Sherlock resumes writing without looking up. “Obviously. Weren’t you listening?”

“Yeah, but how did you know…”

“Oh for heaven’s sake,” Sherlock says, testily, looking up at him. “I observed that there were two files beneath the paper, the corners of which were clearly visible. I knew that one of those files was from the Morrison case, as you’d referred to it earlier when we arrived. I know that homicide files are placed in either tan or yellow folders, depending on which file clerk is assembling them—which, incidentally, seems like an unreliable system based solely on the whims of said clerks and not on any sound logical principle whatsoever—and as the two files were of very similar but slightly different hues on the grey scale, there was a fifty-fifty chance that at least one of them was yellow.”

“So,” Lestrade says skeptically, “you guessed?”

Sherlock presses his lips together into a grimace, then goes back to scrawling his signature where needed on the pile of papers in front of him. “Call it what you will,” he says, his tone bored.


“Quite,” Sherlock replies, exasperated. “Now you may notice, seeing as you’re the cause of it and all, that I’ve got a bit of work to do here. Perhaps you could go now and leave me to it?”

“Sure,” Lestrade says, after a moment. “Call if you need anything.”

“I won’t,” Sherlock says with a dismissive wave as Lestrade walks out the door. When he hears the policeman’s footsteps recede down the hall and turn the corner, he drops the pen and takes a breath, running the palms of his hands up the back of his neck and through his hair. It’s the first mistake he’s made in the two weeks since the night everything changed when he touched John’s hand. And the name of the color had slipped out so naturally that he hadn’t even realized what he’d said until Lestrade questioned him. He thinks he recovered admirably, but he likely won’t be able to do so indefinitely. He’ll need to be more careful.

Of course he wouldn’t have to be careful at all if John would simply catch up and start seeing in color as well. It’s not that he hasn’t tried to force the issue, it’s just that he doesn’t know how to hurry the process along. He’s presented John with a very colorful display of jelly candies, hoping the combination of hues might trigger something. He’d tried talking the color out of him, grasping the sides of his head and spinning him in the train yard a few nights ago, willing him to remember not only what symbols he saw painted on the wall, but what color they were. He’d even painted a giant smiling face on the sitting room wall (where the wallpaper is equally jarring in both greyscale and color, he’s observed) in the hopes that John might be shocked into commenting on how yellow it
is. Yet so far, nothing.

Reaching into his pocket for his phone, he checks to see if John has responded to his earlier texts. He hasn’t. Far too occupied with Sandra (or whatever her name is) to bother, he supposes. He’s almost certain John hasn’t turned off his mobile—he never does, even when he threatens it—and it’s unlikely he’ll be able to ignore the text alert sound all night. His thumbs rapidly tap out a message:

*I catch him a murderer in record time, and my brother’s insufferable husband is making me do paperwork. Tiresome. –SH*

Hitting send, he pauses before composing another text and sending it as well:

*May kill Lestrade. Will call if I need bail. –SH*

Satisfied for the moment, he slips his mobile back into his pocket and continues the tedious task before him.

Leaving New Scotland Yard ninety minutes later, Sherlock looks up from his phone and over the sea of lights before him. London is impressive in many respects. Filled with noise, light, and scent, the city is a sensory experience like none other even when viewed in black and white. Add color into the mix, and it bursts into life on a whole new level. There’s a brand new layer of data in play, another attribute to identify and define and assign to everything he thought he already understood. Even the things that still look grey seem new to his eyes, a whole spectrum of shades that are variations on the color grey, and not the absence of color that defined it before. Before he’d understood how much there still was to learn. Before he’d known what he was missing. Before John.

It’s overwhelming sometimes. Even before the colors came, the never ending stream of information that assaults his senses and demands to be categorized could be difficult to navigate, and it’s a constant struggle to wade through the data and identify what’s important and what can be forgotten. He’s slowly getting used to the world with color, but it can be frustrating as well as fascinating. There’s so much to explore, so much to say—he wishes he could talk about it.

*ping*

He looks down at his phone to find a message from John. Finally:

*You’ll never believe the night I’ve had. Where are you?*

Pulling off his gloves for a moment he taps out his reply:

*Finished at NSY, heading home. Lestrade remains alive. For now. –SH*

Eyes on his phone, he sees the application confirm that the message has been sent, then throws up his hand to signal for a taxi. Reaching for the door, he doesn’t immediately notice that it’s not a cab, but a sleek black sedan that’s answered his hail. Lifting the handle he pulls open the door, then bends to peer inside.

“Good evening, brother,” a voice says in greeting. “May I offer you a ride home?”

“Do I have a choice, Mycroft?” Sherlock asks.

“Of course,” the elder Holmes replies. “You can get in the car and let my driver take you home, or I
can stop by once you’ve arrived and we can have this conversation with Dr. Watson as well.”

Sherlock considers his options for a moment, then folds himself into the back of the car next to his brother.

“It would seem that congratulations are in order,” Mycroft begins.

Sherlock snaps his head toward him, eyes narrowing on his face. “Of course,” he says, then rolls his eyes and looks back out the window. “Did he text you immediately after leaving the room or did he wait three whole minutes?”

“Five, actually.” Mycroft replies smoothly. “Did you really think he wouldn’t puzzle it out? He is a detective, after all. And you can’t possibly think that I haven’t known long before tonight.”

“No,” Sherlock agrees. “As ever, you know everything.”

“And I’ve said nothing for the better part of two weeks, Sherlock. I think you’ll agree that I’ve shown admirable restraint.”

“Pity, then, that you should choose to break your silence now.” the younger Holmes replies.

“Circumstances have changed,” Mycroft explains, “therefore so must the tactics, as any able strategist knows. You should tell him, Sherlock.”

“And you,” Sherlock fires back, “should mind your own business.”

“Ah, but you are my business, brother dear,” he replies. “And as such, so is your Dr. Watson.”

“It appears to me,” Sherlock says looking his brother up and down, “That the main business you’re in is the consumption of cake, Mycroft. Why, you’ve put on nearly 3 pounds since I saw you last. Lestrade’s keeping you well fed, I see.”

“Changing the subject won’t work this time, brother.” Mycroft informs him. “You need to tell him. He deserves to know.”

“That you’re fat?” Sherlock asks. “I’m fairly certain John knows that already, Mycroft. He’s not blind.”

“Isn’t he?” Mycroft asks, meaningfully.

Sherlock considers this for a moment, then huffs out a sigh and turns his eyes back to the window and the colors of London passing by outside it.

“I am aware that the bond took you by surprise, Sherlock.” Mycroft says softly. “I know very well that it’s not something you ever expected for yourself, and that you have never deemed finding your soulmate as significant or necessary.”

“I wonder why that is, Mycroft,” challenges Sherlock. “Where on earth would I have ever gotten such an idea?” He watches a flash of something he is almost sure is regret flash across his older brother’s face before it is replaced by his customary cool smile.

“There are benefits to the colorbond arrangement, you know,” Mycroft begins, “I admit that I didn’t fully understand how gratifying finding one’s soulmate could be until I met Gre--”

“Oh for God’s sake!” Sherlock says, “If you say one word about your sex life I will throw myself from the car this instant!”
“Do give me some credit, brother,” Mycroft admonishes. “I would hardly discuss such a subject outside of my marriage, and certainly not with you. I am merely pointing out that the experience is far more complex than the visual addition of color. It’s deeper than that. There can be great comfort in knowing that there is someone else in the world who understands you, that you’re not alone.”

“I’m not lonely, Mycroft.”

“No,” his brother agrees, “It seems you’re not, anymore. Do think about why that is, won’t you?”

The car slows to a stop in front of Speedy’s Café, and Sherlock bounds out onto the sidewalk, slamming the door behind him. Before he walks up to the door of 221B, he turns back to the car door and taps the window. As it rolls down, he looks pointedly at his brother and says, “That tie is atrocious, by the way. The next time your husband wants to buy you a present, someone should tell him that avocado is definitely not your color.”

Mycroft tucks in his chin and looks down at his chest with a slight grimace. “Ghastly, isn’t it? Unfortunately the ability to see color isn’t synonymous with fashion sense.”

“The things people do for love,” Sherlock sneers.

“Exactly, brother.” Mycroft says with a smile, and drives away.

Climbing the steps up to their flat, Sherlock has already decided to delete the conversation he’s just had with Mycroft. Whether or not his brother has a point, he’s not willing to let the meddlesome chub have even one more inch of space in his mind palace. Stepping into the sitting room, he turns to take off his coat and sees John sitting in his favored chair by the fireplace.

“You’re home early,” Sherlock says, turning to both hang up his coat and hide the satisfied smile that betrays his feelings about that fact.

“And you’re late, I think,” John says tightly. His tone is less than genial, and Sherlock pauses in the middle taking off his scarf as John continues, “your text said you were on your way back, and that was nearly forty minutes ago.”

“Well, yes,” Sherlock answers, hanging his scarf over the neck of his coat and crossing the floor to sink down into the chair opposite his flatmate. “Mycroft showed up, and his driver always takes the least expedient route possible, I should have been here much faster.”

“How long?” John asks, his jaw tight, staring at the floor.

Sherlock looks at him, then down at his watch. “About twenty minutes, I’d guess, but it could have been less. The man does love to hear himself tal--”

“No.” John interrupts, his voice low and strained. He gives Sherlock a hard stare and lifts a hand from his lap, a familiar copy of Price’s Color Key clutched in it. “How long have you been seeing colors?”

The room is silent, both of them sitting perfectly still. Sherlock hadn’t been expecting this. Though now that he thinks about it, he probably should have seen it coming. It would take more than a text from his husband about something he already knew for Mycroft to set one of his perfectly timed street side abductions into motion.

“Who says that I am?” Sherlock asks.
“This does,” John says, waving the book in the air, then opening it up and beginning to read. “SABLE: ‘John’s hair when he’s just out of the shower’—sound familiar?”

Sherlock stays perfectly still, eyes never leaving John’s face.

“Ok, how about this one, then. CAMEL: ‘The hideous loafers John favors’,” John continues, flipping through the pages some more. “Oh, wait—this is a good one. PURPLE: ‘The bruise on John’s forehead—you know, the one he got when a crazed assassin knocked him out because he thought he was ME’!”

Sherlock looks confused for a moment, then says “I’m quite sure that last bit isn’t actually written there.”

“Oh YES! Because that’s the correct response at this point in the conversation. Not ‘Sorry I secretly catalogued your head injury as purple in my color key when instead I could have just as easily written: the ridiculously expensive shirt I’m wearing right now’!”

“Actually,” Sherlock says, looking down the length of his chest, “this shirt is more of an aubergine than a true purple.”

“Oh for Christ’s sake!” John throws up his hands. “HOW. LONG?”

“Two weeks,” he admits with a small shrug. “Since the night you shot the cabbie.”

“I see.” John huffs out a breath through his nose, taking a moment to regain his composure. “And when did it happen?”

Sherlock shifts slightly in his chair. “Outside of Ming’s, after dinner. When I shook your hand.”

John licks his lips, presses them together, then gives a tight nod. “Yes. You looked a bit ill, as I recall you chalked it up to exhaustion.” He rubs a hand over his face. “How the hell did I miss that?”

“Easily,” Sherlock says. “As ever you see, but you do not observe.”

Sherlock can’t help but think that the small smile that begins to spread on John’s face now looks downright dangerous.

“Thanks for that. Not only do you go color right before my eyes, then LIE to me about it, you insult my intelligence in the process of explaining yourself. Yes, that’s JUST PERFECT!”

“Oh GOOD!” John tosses the small volume he’s holding hard at Sherlock’s chest. “Write that down in your bloody book! CRIMSON: ‘John’s face just before he strangles his infuriating soulmate!’”

Sherlock pauses for a moment, then tips his head and raises his eyebrows before reaching over and grabbing the pen on the table next to him and beginning to flip through the book.

“Oh. My. GOD!” John says, standing to loom over him, “That was a joke!”

“Are you sure?” Sherlock asks, a look of confusion on his face. “It wasn’t very funny.”

John huffs out a breathy laugh, shakes his head, and points a finger down at him. “That’s where you’re wrong, Sherlock. Because this?” he says, gesturing between them, “this is hilarious. My whole life I’ve been looking for my soulmate, waiting to find the one person who understands me
better than anyone else in the world. And when I finally do, he doesn’t even bother to *TELL ME I’VE FOUND HIM!*"

And with that John throws up his hands, walks a few steps away from Sherlock, and stands with his back to him. Sherlock gets up from his chair slowly, and turns to where John is standing.

“What was I supposed to say?” he asks, his expression calm. “That night, John, in front of the restaurant—when you took my hand the whole world changed in *my* eyes—*nothing* happened for you. I could tell. And then the days passed and you never mentioned seeing anything strange, so I thought perhaps it was just on my end.”

“That’s not how it works, Sherlock,” John says, turning back toward him, his voice tired.

“How was I supposed to know that? I don’t know *how* it works.”

“You’re the cleverest man I’ve ever met,” John says, his voice softer but with steel in his eyes, “and this is the *one* subject you don’t understand?”

“I had to be *sure*, John.” Sherlock continues. “What if I *had* said something? What if I had declared myself the very moment I saw my first color in your eyes—and it turned out that I was wrong? What then?”

“Oh,” John snaps, “You mean the way I just did tonight with Sarah?”

As soon as the words are out, John’s mouth opens in a gasp and he clamps a hand over it as his eyes widen with horror.

“Oh my god, oh *MY GOD*! I told Sarah, I thought it was her. Jesus, what a mess…” John turns quickly, crosses to the door and reaches for his jacket.

“Where are you going?” Sherlock asks him.

“Out,” John replies, shrugging into his coat.

“But, shouldn’t we, I don’t know...*talk* about this?”

“Later! I need some air!” John calls out over his shoulder as he runs out of the flat, pulling the sitting room door closed behind him. Sherlock listens to his footsteps descend the stairs, then startles a bit when he hears the front door slam. He stands there for a long moment, looking at the empty space where John stood just a few moments ago.

After a few minutes he shrugs off his suit coat, drapes it carelessly over the coffee table, then sinks down to sit on the couch. He puts his palms up to his head, ruffling his fingers roughly through his hair, and closes his eyes. He’s so lost in thought that at first he doesn’t register the creak of the downstairs door opening, or notice the sound of footsteps quickly climbing the stairs. And when the flat door flies open, he’s surprised to see John standing in the doorway, breathing heavily, staring at him.

Sherlock stands and faces him, trying (and failing) to look nonchalant. “I thought you needed some air.”

“Yeah,” John says with a shrug. “Me too.”

Sherlock looks confused. "But...?"
"But I got two blocks away and I realized something." John takes a deep breath, then nods. "I've been waiting my whole life for this, you know. For the moment I finally met my soulmate. Turns out I don't want to wait even one minute more."

John Watson is not a large man, but when he's storming toward you with a purposeful gait, even the world’s only consulting detective can be intimidated by the sight. Sherlock’s eyes widen and he unconsciously takes a step backward until the backs of his knees hit the arm of the couch, and suddenly John is standing right in front of him.

When the shorter man reaches out and grabs a handful of silk shirt in each fist and pulls, Sherlock finds himself hauled down into a bruising kiss. John’s lips, warm and slightly chapped, grind roughly against his own, and when the hot slick touch of the other man’s tongue presses at the seam of his mouth, he closes his eyes and opens his lips to let him in. There’s a tingle of electricity that starts at his hips and shoots up his spine, and a burst of light behind his eyes, a shower of color that he can’t even begin to describe. John licks into his mouth, the kiss tipping from tentative to insistent, and for just a moment the endless rush of data that travels a never ending path around and through his head just…stops. There are no competing thoughts vying for his attention, there is only this moment, this kiss—just John.

After what feels like forever--and yet not long enough--John pulls back a bit dragging Sherlock’s bottom lip between his teeth before breaking the kiss. Sherlock falls forward, his eyes still closed, lips chasing the heat of John’s mouth, but the shorter man presses their foreheads together and holds tight to the front of his shirt.

They’re both out of breath, and as they stand there panting as though they’ve just run a mile, John whispers “I’m still really mad at you, you know.”

“Duly noted,” Sherlock says, pushing forward and nuzzling the side of his nose against John’s. At the contact, Sherlock feels John start to shake slightly against him, hears a bubble of laughter well up in his throat that erupts into the giggle that he can never quite stop from coming out. He opens his eyes, draws his head back and looks at John inquisitively.

“Sorry,” John huffs out between laughs. “I was just thinking about my mum.”

Sherlock raises an eyebrow at him. “Kissing me reminds you of your mother?”

John smiles, unclenching his fists from where they are still tangled in the front of Sherlock’s shirt, then softly presses his palms over his soulmate’s chest, smoothing the wrinkled fabric. “I was just thinking that she was really right about purple,” he explains, then lifts up on his toes and presses a gentle kiss to Sherlock’s mouth.

“John?”

“Yes, Sherlock?”

“Technically it’s aubergine.”

“Sherlock?” John says, laughing his way into another slow kiss.

“Yes, John?” asks Sherlock, dragging his lips along John’s.

“Shut up.”
Now that you’re all caught up, if you’re wondering what to do with the rest of your week, might I offer a totally unsolicited recommendation?

I admit that my obsession with Johnlock fic borders on the pathological (there’s a spreadsheet involved, for heaven’s sake) but every so often I find a fic so glorious that I can’t help but shout about it from the mountaintops, and OTP221B’s wonderful **MURDER IN THE FAMILY** is just such a fic.

A post series 3 fix-it project that’s deftly written and perfectly paced, the story is original, clever, heartbreaking, joyous, and smokin’ lava-hot all at the same time. Why it doesn’t have like 3 gajillion bookmarks and a quadrillion hits is beyond me. So if you’re looking for something to read, go forth and devour it. You won’t be sorry.

As always, thanks for stopping by and I hope you’ll keep coming back!
Attention passengers, this is your conductor speaking. I’ve been informed that there’s a giant, immovable civil war era cannon blocking the tracks directly ahead of us, so buckle up folks—because this is where the story goes off the rails. Destination: Sexville and Feelingstown (With a stop in case-ficlndia). All aboard!

My personal philosophy on smut is simple: It should be both hot and germane (which is not to be confused with ‘German’ because that’s a completely different kind of porn. Don’t google it. Seriously, don’t.) so that’s what I hope you’ll find in this chapter, FYI.

Much love to my consistently ruthless beta for the honest criticism and helpful advice. Even MORE love to each and every person who’s taken the time to read, subscribe, comment or leave kudos on this fic. I’m having a lot of fun writing it, and I’m so glad that you’re enjoying it as well. Hope you all have a fabulous week!

(PS: Special shout-out to 1butterfly_grl who left a comment on a previous chapter describing the color orange that she’s graciously allowed me to poach and use for my own purposes: Thank you! And a shout-out to her cat Fred, who inspired it: Meow!)

The sun slanting in through the window wakes him, pouring between the gap in the curtains he had forgotten to pull closed when he finally came upstairs to bed last night. He can sense the brightness of the room even before he opens his eyes, keeps them pressed shut as he stretches out his arms and opens his mouth in a yawn that morphs into a soft groan.

It can’t possibly be morning yet, he thinks.

He’d just gone to bed a few moments ago, hadn’t he? Cracking one eye slowly open, he turns his head and focuses on the clock next to his bed. Four minutes after six, the digital readout confirms, in bright red glowing numbers on the bedside table. Oh good, John thinks with a sigh, I don’t have to be at the surgery until noon so I’ve got a few mor…

His eyes snap open, and he pushes himself up onto his elbows and looks back at the clock. Yes, it definitely says 6:04—and the numbers are most definitely red. He’s had color for less than a day, but already his mind is making sense of many of the new hues around him. The duvet on his bed is green (like the sitting room wall between the front windows downstairs, and the head of romaine he’d optimistically bought the other day that’s now wilting in the fridge), the mug half-full of day old tea he’d meant to take to the kitchen last night is yellow (like the fire glowing in the tunnel before he’d known what he was seeing, and the rose on table last night after he finally caught on), and the sheets on his bed are covered with a pattern of small blue diamonds (which is in the same range of shades that he’d confirmed his own eyes are after spending ten minutes staring at them in the mirror before Sherlock had finally come home last night). Where there were only shades of grey before, there are now more colors than his brain has yet to associate with their counterparts in his copy of Price’s Color Key. But he knows with certainty that the numbers on his clock are red—just like the stripes on the Union Jack pillow downstairs, or the pattern on his chair by the fire and the rug over the floor where it sits—all of which he’d easily been able to identify last night as various shades of
the color his mother once told him felt ‘hot like a puff of breath or a kiss’.

He feels a slow smile spread on his lips as he runs a palm over his face, skin rough with his own morning stubble and still a bit chafed from Sherlock’s. After he’d run out of the flat last night, existential crisis in full swing, he’d shoved his hands into his pockets and started walking toward the park, intent on taking some time to clear his head—but he’d only gotten a few blocks away before he found himself sprinting back to 221B and throwing open the door. And when he saw Sherlock sitting there, saw the distress and confusion in his (soulmate’s?) eyes, the anger that had driven him from the flat in the first place seemed to dissipate, melted away by the warm heat of determination rising within him. So he’d shrugged off the uncertainty, stalked across the floor, grabbed the taller man by the shirt, and kissed him.

Modern medicine has made amazing leaps in the last century, discovering the causes and cures for countless diseases and conditions that were once so mysterious that it is common even for texts from less than a hundred years ago to attribute them to factors such as “weak character”, “thin blood”, or (John’s personal favorite) “demonic possession”. But for all the advances and expansion of knowledge that research can rightfully claim, there’s little more known about the physical mechanics of colorbonding than there has been since the first mentions of the phenomenon in ancient texts. In medical school they’d studied the differences between the same patient’s brain before and after meeting their soulmate, and though the digital images of synapse activity clearly showed previously dormant sections of the cerebral cortex as newly (and prodigiously) active, there still remains very little understanding of the physical process that initiates the change.

There’s much more anecdotal information available, the result of years of data collection via interview and observation by researchers across multiple disciplines. John knows that the vast majority of recently colorbonded pairs report that physical contact with one’s soulmate is a heightened sensory experience when compared with similar activity with an unbonded partner. There is some dissent within the medical community as to whether there may exist a measurable physical reason for this or if such experiences are merely perceived to be more satisfactory occurring within the context of the soulmate relationship. Many experts maintain that the scientific explanation for these reports is largely irrelevant, and that the preponderance of the evidence shows that, whatever the cause, there’s a physical reward to bonding that goes beyond the addition of color to the visual spectrum.

For his part, John Watson tends to agree.

He’d pulled Sherlock into that kiss last night with a simple goal in mind: If they were indeed soulmates, then kissing him should feel unlike any kiss that came before it. And so he’d steeled himself, twisted his fingers into the dark purple silk of that ridiculously posh shirt, and pressed their lips together. And when the kiss ended, all he could think—when in fact he could start thinking again at all—was that if he’d known what kissing his soulmate would feel like, he’d have realized immediately when he’d kissed Sarah Sawyer last night that she wasn’t his.

Oh God, John thinks falling back onto the bed with a groan, I’ve got to tell Sarah. He closes his eyes and throws the back of his forearm over them, dreading the conversation he’ll be having in, oh, six hours or so. He knows he can’t avoid it, and he wishes he could go back in time and stop himself from telling her what he’d seen in that rose on the table. If only he’d realized that Sherlock had gone color that first night, he could have avoided this entire mess. But noooo, John thinks angrily, the infuriating git had kept that little piece of information to himself and now here he was forced to break a rather lovely woman’s heart because his soulmate...his...soulmate...

Holy shit.
He’s found his soulmate.

And suddenly the angst that had been welling inside him just a moment ago slips away, a gentle feeling of wonder moving in to take its place. Sherlock is his soulmate. He’s seeing in color. This isn’t a day for regrets—it’s a day to celebrate, even if he’s had barely a few hours sleep to prepare for it. Life may not have been easy on John Watson before now, and considering who fate has chosen to pair him with, he doubts it will ever be easy, per se. But kissing Sherlock, it turns out, was very easy.

Trying to stop kissing him, however, had been harder than he’d expected.

They’d ended up a mess of tangled limbs on the couch, spending the next hour in a rather heated bit of snogging that had actually been relatively chaste in retrospect. No clothing was removed, but his mouth had become intimately familiar with every inch of Sherlock’s exposed skin, pressing soft kisses along the planes of those ridiculous cheekbones, tasting the long pale column of his neck, dragging the tip of his tongue around the edge of his soulmate’s ear while he whimpered and shivered beneath him…and feeling Sherlock returning the favor to a similar reaction from John himself.

When at long last they both came up for air, John had smiled and asked Sherlock where his copy of Price’s Color Key was, then went to retrieve it from the pocket of the Belstaff where the detective had slipped it when he’d mistakenly taken John’s copy instead of his own in his haste to get to Lestrade’s crime scene. He started choosing random objects about the flat and began paging through the book his mother had given him all those years ago in preparation for this exact moment until he found the name of the color he was seeing. Sherlock watched him from the couch, listening to his revelations and interjecting his own commentary on occasion, before declaring the process dull and crossing to pick up John’s laptop before flopping down on the couch and typing away furiously.

“Of course you think this is dull,” John had told him, “you’ve been seeing colors for two weeks. This is my first night—give me a bit of time to catch up.”

“Take all the time you need, John,” Sherlock had replied, eyes never leaving the screen, then lowered his voice a bit and continued “When you’re ready to do something interesting, do let me know.”

John had stopped in his tracks on his way to the kitchen, looked back toward Sherlock on the couch where the man was still typing on the laptop and focusing intently on the screen, a smug smile playing at the edges of his mouth. Had Sherlock just flirted with him? John smiled to himself then walked into the kitchen and started identifying the colors of things in their fridge (which, in retrospect, may not have been his best idea and is why he will likely always associate the color “MOSS” with whatever grows on human ears that have been enclosed in a plastic container full of water from the Thames for 10 days), thinking that he’d just look up a few more things before pulling his computer off of Sherlock’s lap and kissing that smug grin right off of his face. When he’d had enough of looking up the colors of the contents of their kitchen cabinets, he’d pocketed his color key and marched back into the sitting room with the intention of doing just that…and found Sherlock sound asleep on the couch.

He should have been a bit put out, he supposed, but standing there watching Sherlock sleep he couldn’t help but be charmed by the sight. Awake, the man was a whirling storm of sharp words and wild hand gestures, and even in the moments when he wasn’t moving there was an alert tenseness to him, like a coiled spring that could release at any second. Asleep, Sherlock Holmes was all limbs and soft breath huffing from between slightly parted lips and dark curls splayed out over the British flag on the pillow under his head, his angular features softened somehow by slumber. John
retrieved the blanket from the back of his chair (pewter grey with a maroon plaid stripe) and carefully covered the taller man where he lay. He looked down at him for a moment, this man who was suddenly so much more than merely his flatmate, and smiled at the crinkle of skin above his nose—the same one that forms there when he’s awake and thinking. *Even in sleep that great brain never stops,* John had thought while gently running the pad of his thumb over that patch of skin, then he leaned forward to lay a soft kiss on his soulmate’s forehead before climbing the stairs and going to bed.

Lying in bed now at just after six o’clock in the morning, John wonders if Sherlock is up yet. Maybe he’ll go downstairs and make them breakfast, kiss him awake for toast spread with honey (which is a lovely shade of gold) and a hot cup of tea. Then maybe tonight after work they’ll go out to dinner, spend a little time roaming the streets and seeing the colors of London that have been hidden from him until now. Or he could just stop and grab takeaway on his way home from the surgery, and perhaps spend a quiet evening in doing whatever *interesting* things Sherlock had in mind before he fell asleep last night.

*Or maybe,* he thinks with a smile at the sound of footsteps that are unmistakably Sherlock’s climbing the stairs two at a time toward John’s bedroom door, *they’ll just skip all that and start now.* He pushes himself back up onto his elbows, runs a hand over his hair to smooth it a bit, and waits for Sherlock to knock on the door.

Which he doesn’t, of course, opting instead to throw it wide open and then stand there in the doorway fully dressed, staring at the screen of his mobile phone, not even looking at John as he announces “Oh good, you’re awake. Get dressed—we’ve got a case!” before turning around and flying back down the stairs.

John stares at the empty doorway for a moment, then back down at the clock next to his bed. *Well,* he thinks, *it’s been over eight hours and already the honeymoon is over. Yep. Sounds about right.* He smiles, shakes his head, and climbs out of bed.

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Barely a quarter of an hour later, he’s showered and dressed (the RAMC trained him well) and standing at the sink brushing his teeth when Sherlock throws open the door to the loo and huffs out an impatient breath.

“What are you doing?” he demands.

“Brushing my teeth,” John replies, then swishes his mouth with water, spits neatly in the sink, and returns his toothbrush to its slot next to Sherlock’s.

“You’re wasting time!” Sherlock complains.

“I’m not. Good oral hygiene is important.”

“But there’s been a murder, John,” Sherlock protests. “Do you have to do it right now?”

“Yes, I do.” John says, wiping his mouth and hands on the towel by the sink. “And you’ll thank me for it in about 5 seconds.”

Sherlock scoffs and starts to say, “What are you talking about—” but that’s as far as he gets before John crosses from the sink to the door, wraps one hand around the back of the taller man’s neck, and pulls him forward into a scorching kiss. John runs the tip of his tongue along the edge of Sherlock’s (recently cleaned, he notes) teeth, pulls the detective’s bottom lip into his mouth and sucks lightly on
it, then presses their lips together one more time before pulling back and staring at Sherlock expectantly.

Sherlock looks a bit dazed, but composes himself quickly and returns the stare for a moment before raising a questioning eyebrow.

“It’s been nearly ten seconds now,” John prompts, “And I’m still waiting.”

“Oh fine.” Sherlock says, rolling his eyes. “Thank you.” Then he leaves the bathroom, the ghost of a smile on his lips visible as he turns, and starts out of the flat.

John whistles as he puts on his coat and follows him down the stairs and out onto Baker Street, where Sherlock manages to hail one of the cabs that John is convinced appear out of thin air whenever he raises his hand. He climbs into the car, Sherlock gives the cabbie the address Lestrade texted him earlier, and they sit back for what promises to be a relatively short ride. It’s barely six thirty, and while London is never silent, the traffic and noise won’t pick up to normal levels for another half an hour or so. John watches the once familiar sights of the city go by outside the window, noting how different it all looks in color.

“Are we going to do that in front of people?” Sherlock asks.

“Sorry,” John says, looking over at him. “Do what?”

“Kiss,” Sherlock answers, looking a bit uncomfortable. “Or hold hands, or look at each other all doe-eyed while discussing how amazing the world looks in color?”

“Oh Lord, I hope not.”

“Good.” Sherlock says quickly, then after a short pause quietly adds, “I like kissing you, of course.”

John smiles over at him, and slides his hand across the short expanse of upholstery between them to tangle their pinky fingers together on the seat. “I like kissing you too. And I don’t want to hide our bond, but I’ve never been big on public displays of affection, especially in a professional setting. I hardly think we need to burst into the crime scene and loudly announce our new status.”


“You told Lestrade before you told me?” asks John, a note of annoyance in his voice.

“Of course I didn’t tell him,” Sherlock assures him, “He guessed. Then Mycroft confirmed it.”

“Wait, Mycroft knew as well?” John says, the annoyance rapidly evolving into anger. “Did everyone know before I did?”

“No, John,” Sherlock answers quickly, “Mycroft knew because, well, because he’s Mycroft. I didn’t tell anyone.”

“That’s right, you didn’t. Not even me.”

John looks hard at Sherlock and feels the anger that, as he’d warned him after their first kiss, was still simmering under the surface and bound to come out occasionally. He sees a flash of what he thinks is fear play over Sherlock’s features, then watches it change to contrition.

“I am sorry, John.” Sherlock says quietly. “I’ve explained my reasoning, but I understand that you’re still upset.”
And all of a sudden, John isn’t anymore, the flash of anger receding as quickly as it had come upon him. He turns the hand touching Sherlock’s over on the seat, slides it beneath the other man’s, and twines their fingers together.

“It’s all right,” he tells his soulmate with grin. “I’ll get over it.”

Sherlock returns the smile, and tightens his grip on John’s hand. As he turns his head to face forward, the early morning sun slants through the car window and John is suddenly struck by the way the light plays in Sherlock’s eyes. He reaches into his pocket and pulls out his color key, looks up at Sherlock’s eyes again and flips through the pages. He finds a swatch called “SKY” that seems to fit the bill, then looks back at Sherlock to confirm, but finds that it doesn’t match at all. Studying the color again, he looks down and scans the boxes happening upon a likely candidate marked “TEAL”, but another look up at Sherlock and it’s not the tone he thought he’d seen. One more flip through the book nets him the possibility “NICKEL” but when he looks back up to confirm it, he finds that Sherlock is looking directly at him, his expression slightly puzzled, and this time he’s fairly certain that the color of his eyes is somewhere in the green family.

“Problem?” Sherlock asks.

“No,” John replies, closing his copy of Price’s Color Key and slipping it back into his pocket. “I was just trying to decide what color your eyes are, and I can’t seem to nail down a specific shade.”

“Ah,” Sherlock replies, with a smile. “Mycroft said the same thing. Apparently they defy classification. It seemed to annoy him greatly, come to think of it.”

John huffs out a laugh at Sherlock’s glee in confounding his older brother. “That figures, I guess. The great Sherlock Holmes would never have eyes so boring they could be described as merely blue.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, John.” Sherlock replies. “There’s nothing boring about your eyes. I’m quite partial to them, their blue was the first color I ever saw.”

John smiles in surprise, strangely touched by what he is almost certain was quite a high compliment from the world’s only consulting detective. “Ta, Sherlock.”

“There’s nothing boring about you at all,” he continues, and John feels his chest puff out a bit at the sentiment. “Well, aside from your taste in jumpers. And television programs. And books of course, I mean…”

“All right,” John interjects, “that’s quite enough qualification, thanks. Can we go back to the part where you get damn near mushy and tell me how boring I’m not? I was hoping that bit might last longer, to be honest.”

“John,” Sherlock asks after a brief pause. “Are people expected to change when they bond?”

“No, of course not,” John replies. “Not elementally, anyway. But I suppose going from unbonded to suddenly being half of a pair means that some things are bound to change, I guess.”

He looks over at Sherlock just then, sees a flash of fear cross his features—that now familiar crinkle over the bridge of his nose deepening to a furrow, and he thinks he understands what his soulmate is worried about.

“Sherlock, I don’t expect you to change, you know.” John tells him, looking him in the eye. “I don’t expect you to be anything but exactly who you are—because who we are is what this is all about, yeah? The bond means that we’re already perfect for each other.”
“Thank you,” Sherlock says simply, then frowns slightly. “I’m afraid I don’t know exactly how this is meant to progress, John. I dislike not knowing.”

“I know you do,” John says, with a smile. “And if it makes you feel any better I don’t know what the hell I’m doing either. The only difference is that I’ve spent my whole life waiting for this, so I embrace it. You’ve spent most of your life convinced you’d never find it, so you’re unsure of it. Between the two of us we should be able to muddle through, don’t you think?”

Sherlock nods, John smiles, and the cab comes to a stop.

The uniformed policeman at the front door of the building directs them to the fourth floor, and they make their way up the stairs where Detective Inspector Lestrade meets them on the landing outside of a closed flat door strung over with yellow caution tape.

“Thank you for coming. I know it’s early, hope I wasn’t interrupting anything,” he says, a small smirk playing at the edge of his mouth.

John purses his lips and looks at the ground, Sherlock rolls his eyes and huffs out a sigh.

“Yes, Lestrade. John is my soulmate. You’re very clever to have figured it out—gold star to you,” Sherlock replies, smoothly. “We have elected, however, not to advertise that fact in public just yet and would appreciate your discretion as you honor that choice. Now, who’s on forensics?”

Lestrade looks over at John, an eyebrow raised questioningly, and when the former army doctor simply nods to indicate that he agrees with Sherlock, the detective shrugs and answers, “Anderson. So behave yourself, Sherlock.”

“I will as long as he does the same,” Sherlock says petulantly, and moves to pass Lestrade and enter the flat, but his brother-in-law throws out an arm to block him.

“Before we go in,” Lestrade says, “do either of you have any pet allergies?”

John shakes his head, Sherlock huffs out an impatient sigh as if it’s the most ridiculous question he’s ever been asked. “No, Lestrade. Why does that matter?”

“You’ll see,” the detective inspector answers, then opens the door and ushers them through it and follows, shutting the door quickly behind them.

It’s a small flat, neatly appointed with furniture that’s obviously not new yet has been well maintained over the years. The tenant would appear to be an elderly woman, based on the delicate crocheted doilies hung over the backs of the sofa and armchairs, on the tops of tables and nearly every other flat surface. At least John is fairly certain they’re on every flat surface, but he can’t be sure because it appears that on nearly every one of those same surfaces there is also a cat. Or cats, to be more precise. Many, many cats. They lounge over the arms of furniture, underneath the tables, on the windowsills, one is even curled up in the basket of knitting next to the chair. John counts fourteen of them in this room alone. All of them various shades of orange, John notices, taking in the ginger striped tabbies, the mottled white and orange calicos, the pair of spotted marmalade kittens curled up together on the couch. He feels a pressure against his legs, and looks down. Make that fifteen, he thinks, as the long haired ginger cat at his feet extends his front paws up to press against John’s knees, looks at him with bright green eyes, and lets out a pitiful “Mraow”.

“Well, hello there,” John says, and bends to scoop up the beast which immediately goes limp in his arms and begins to purr. He looks up to remark on the abundance of cats to Sherlock, but finds
himself alone in the room. A familiar deep baritone voice carries from the adjacent room and John follows the sound. Stepping across the threshold of the flat’s now crowded kitchen, he sees the body of an elderly woman lying face down on the floor, a butcher knife protruding from side of her neck.

“Who found her?” Sherlock asks.

“Neighbor, around five this morning.” Lestrade begins. “Transit driver. Says the old gal was an early riser and he stops by on the way to work every other morning to take her rubbish downstairs for her and see if there’s anything else she needs. Got concerned when he knocked on the door and she didn’t answer. Let himself in with the key she’d given him and the missus for emergencies, but the chain on the door was locked from the inside. Busted his way in, found her just like this. Forensics says she’s been dead between ten and twelve hours.”

“Has anything been moved since the body was found?” Sherlock asks, scrutinizing several points on the body and the floor around it with his pocket magnifier.

“Of course not,” The thin forensic technician that John remembers from the first crime scene he’d been to with Sherlock says angrily, a sneer in his voice. “I’m not an idiot, you know.”

“Are you sure?” Sherlock asks, looking at the man who opens his mouth to protest the insinuation when the consulting detective cuts him off before he can even begin. “Not about whether you’re an idiot, Anderson, that fact is not in contention. Are you sure that nothing has been moved? Because this faint green stain on the floor beside the body looks to be the same size and shape as the bright green one on the cutting board propped there in the sink that’s covered in the same bits small of green leaf that are present here next to our victim.”

Anderson shifts a bit, looking slightly uncomfortable, and says “I may have moved it to the sink during my examination of the body, it was in the way.”

“Ah yes, and we all know it’s perfectly fine to break the cardinal rule of crime scene processing by disturbing the evidence before it’s been properly noted and cataloged as long as whatever you’re displacing is inconveniently in your way.” Sherlock drawls, then thrusts an open hand toward the man he’s just dressed down.

Anderson looks at the hand for a moment, then rolls his eyes and reaches into the sink for the cutting board and hands it to the man on the floor with a sigh. Sherlock holds the surface of it close to his face, then takes a deep sniff of the board, darting his tongue out to taste the residue there (to a series of gasps and small groans from the assembled onlookers) then bends forward to sniff (but not taste) the stain on the floor. He sits back up and looks at the board, then back at the floor, then turns the cutting board ninety degrees and lays it face down next to the body adjusting it slightly until he’s pleased with the placement. He stands, twirls around the room once, stopping for a moment when he gets to where John is standing and stares down at the cat he’s holding. He steps closer, bends down until he’s eye to eye with the animal, then snaps back up and turns to Lestrade.

“Anderson is correct about one thing, she did die between ten and twelve hours ago.” Sherlock tells him. “And the murderer was already in the flat at the time.”

“But the door was locked from the inside,” Lestrade says.

“True.” Sherlock nods.

“So then how did he get out?” the detective inspector asks.

“He could have gone out the window,” Anderson offers.
“Yes, Anderson,” Sherlock agrees patronizingly. “And he escaped out of the fourth floor window of a flat that has no balcony, how, exactly? Did he fly? Perhaps you’d be so good as to demonstrate for us how such a feat is accomplished?” Anderson opens his mouth to respond, but Lestrade cuts him off with a look.

“Then how did he get out, Sherlock?” asks the DI.

“He didn’t. The killer is still in the flat as we speak. In this very room, actually.” Sherlock spins slowly in place, then stops and raises a hand and points an accusing finger saying “And he’s right there.”

A chorus of gasps go up in the small room where Sherlock is pointing directly at John Watson.

“Me?” John exclaims, his eyes wide.

“No, not you,” Sherlock huffs impatiently, dropping his arm a few inches to point at the cat in John’s arms. “Him.”

“What, the cat?” John asks him.

“Exactly,” Sherlock answers, snapping off his nitrile gloves one at a time. “Behold, Lestrade. Your murderer has been apprehended.”

“That’s your brilliant deduction?” Anderson sputters, “The cat did it?”

“Well, you flatter me with the ‘brilliant’,,” Sherlock responds, “but I can see how it might seem so to you, Anderson. Once the evidence was returned to its original state the answer was obvious.”

“It’s not obvious to me, Sherlock,” John says, holding the animal in his arms a bit closer.

“Or to me,” adds Lestrade. “How did this cat murder her, exactly?”

“It’s quite simple really,” Sherlock begins. “There’s a large spoon in the sink, a thin residue of food dried onto it, marinara sauce judging by the color and texture, I’d say, and there happens to be a large pot of the same kind of sauce in the refrigerator. The smell and taste of the green residue on the cutting board indicate that a fairly large quantity of both garlic and basil were recently chopped on it and added to the sauce just as it finished simmering. Our victim added the fresh seasonings to the pot, likely sliding the wet green herbs and chopped garlic off of the cutting board with back edge of the knife judging by the small bits of vegetation that cling still clinging to it, before setting it aside next to the stove with the knife resting on the board. Unfortunately the row of canisters against the wall adjacent to the range wouldn’t allow her to slide the board fully onto the counter, thus leaving several inches of it hanging over the edge. She slid the warm pot of marinara into the refrigerator to cool, then as she turned back toward the stove one of her cats—this cat, in fact, jumped up on to the counter and stepped onto the board to sniff at the food that had recently been chopped there, and unintentionally acted as counterweight—sending himself and the cutting board crashing to the floor, and the knife sailing across the room and into our victim’s neck.”

“Ok,” Lestrade says slowly, trying to digest the admittedly absurd set of circumstances Sherlock has just outlined, then gestures toward the animal in John’s arms. “But how do you know it was this cat?”

“Simple observation, Lestrade. You might try practicing it yourself,” Sherlock replies, walking toward John, and reaching out to gently lift one of the cat’s paws. “There are traces of green still present on the fur around the pads of his front paws where he stepped in the fresh residue of the basil on the cutting board, see? Normally he’d have cleaned them off by now, but the combination of
basil and fresh garlic was a less than palatable combination to our feline friend so he’s only done a
cursory job of licking it off. And since the cutting board landed face down on the floor when it fell,
we know that he couldn’t have stained his paws after the fact. Therefore we can conclude that your
murderer has been found. Slap the cuffs on him, Lestrade. So happy to take yet another dangerous
criminal off the streets for you. We’ll be leaving now. Come on, John.”

“Wait,” Lestrade says, throwing out an arm to stop Sherlock from leaving. “You’ll need to come
down to the yard and write all that up. I want that explanation filed in your handwriting for
posterity. Come on, I’ll even give you a ride. Anderson—finish up here.”

As a crime scene tech reaches out and takes the cat from his arms, John feels a bit reluctant to let him
go. In the car on the way to NSY, he asks Lestrade, “What will happen to the cat?”

“We’ll process any evidence on him, then he’ll be sent to the SPCA where they will evaluate him for
possible adoption, I guess.” Lestrade replies.

“It’s more likely he’ll be euthanized,” Sherlock says. “It will be difficult to place a cat of his age that
is associated with the death of an owner.”

“But it was an accident!” John exclaims, “He didn’t mean to hurt anyone, it’s not like he’s a vicious
killer.”

“If it makes you feel better,” Lestrade assures him, “I’ll make sure to find out where he goes when
forensics is finished with him.”

“Yes. Fine.” John says tightly, staring out the window. “Please do.”

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It’s nearly ten o’clock by the time Sherlock has finished writing up his statement and they’re finally
ready to leave New Scotland Yard. As John is shrugging into his coat, Sherlock stops in front of a
wall in the open squad room and examines a photograph of two bodies tacked up on a case board.
Walking over to stand beside him, John sees the body of a young woman lying flat on her back in an
empty room, a bullet hole clearly visible at her temple. There’s a man about her age lying face down
across her, a matching wound in his temple, a small caliber gun clenched in his fist. Tacked on the
board are several clear plastic bags with items of clothing and a few other nondescript personal
affects inside them.

“Lestrade,” Sherlock calls, “Why wasn’t I brought in on this?”

The detective inspector walks over to where they’re standing, glances up at the board and says, “Not
your cup of tea, really. Pretty clear cut murder/suicide that came in yesterday. Bodies were found in
an abandoned building, no I.D. on them, we’re waiting on identification so we can notify the next of
kin. Why, you see something new?”

“Perhaps,” Sherlock says, sliding a pair of nitrile gloves from his pockets and over his hands. He
takes down a bag marked ‘John Doe: Pockets’ and pushes aside a handkerchief, a ring full of
generic looking keys, then withdraws a copy of Price’s Color Key and begins to page through it.
After a few minutes he turns to Lestrade. “Search missing persons reports for a recently colorbonded
couple, the state of their clothes and personal grooming suggests they aren’t transient, and in fact are
likely local and will undoubtedly be missed before long. Their bond was fairly new, not more than
a couple of weeks old, and someone they were close to may have information about why young
Sasha and Paul came to such a tragic end.”
“Wait, how do you know their names?” Lestrade asks, “Or that they’re bonded? Are you just making this up?”

“Really, Lestrade. It’s a wonder you ever solve a case without my help,” Sherlock admonishes, then directs his attention to the book still in his hand. “This copy of the color key is relatively new, the date for the particular publishing run it’s from is listed as just six months ago on the title page. Therefore, it was purchased recently. There are notations written in two separate hands on multiple pages through the book, and additionally both the top right and bottom right page corners show bending and wear as well the faint stain of oil from repeated contact with fingertips. People tend to be rather predictable in how they turn the pages of a book, either doing so from the top right or bottom right edge, but rarely switching between the two—hence this book has been recently and regularly used by two separate people. Add in the very suggestive fact that on the blank placeholder page at the end of the book someone has written ‘Sasha + Paul’ inside of a heart, and I think it’s safe to assume that our victims are a recently bonded pair named Paul and Sasha, and you should direct your inquiries into their identities with that information in mind.”

“Fantastic,” John says, “that was truly amazing.”

Sherlock lifts a shoulder nonchalantly, but John sees the smile he tries to hide with a press of his tongue against the inside of his cheek.

“Now, if there’s nothing else,” Sherlock says, “we’ll be going.”

“Fine, off you go then. And I’ll try not to bother you for a bit, unless it’s absolutely necessary,” Lestrade says, then winks and walks away.

Walking up the stairs and into their flat, they’re taking off their coats when Sherlock turns to John and asks, “You were very quiet on the ride home. Did Lestrade’s parting comment upset you? I can ask Mycroft to--”

“No,” John sighs, reaching up and sliding a hand over the taller man’s shoulder. “It’s not Greg. Or you. I’ve got a shift at the surgery in, oh, an hour or so now—where I’m going to have a very uncomfortable conversation with Sarah.”

“Yes,” Sherlock sighs, “And that’s my fault, I know.”

“No,” John starts to argue, but when Sherlock raises an eyebrow at him he smiles. “Well, yeah, maybe a bit. But it’s got to be done, I’m just not looking forward to it.”

“Is there anything I can do to, I don’t know, help?” Sherlock asks hesitantly. John bites back a laugh at the look of discomfort on his face, fairly certain that offering to be helpful isn’t something the taller man is particularly practiced at.

“Well,” John says carefully, “You could help me take my mind off of it. Distract me a bit.”

“Distract you?” Sherlock asks, his forehead wrinkling in confusion. “How?”

John reaches out and slips his hands over Sherlock’s waist and slides them down to cup a sharp hip in each palm. “You’re a clever bloke, I’m sure you’ll come up with something.”

Sherlock looks confused for a short moment longer, then his eyes widen with realization before narrowing back down slowly as a predatory grin snakes across his full lips.
“There you go. Knew you’d get there in the end,” John says, just before Sherlock presses his mouth closed with a kiss. For a moment it’s slow and tender, this gentle prying apart of his lips to allow Sherlock’s tongue entrance. But a split second later he finds his back slammed against the wall, the kiss slipping into filthy territory alarmingly quickly. Not that he’s complaining, mind you. Yesterday, kissing Sherlock had been the furthest thing from his mind, now just twenty four hours later it’s nearly the only thing he can think about. Well, not the only thing. Sherlock’s lips slip away from his mouth and across his cheek to suck gently at the tender skin just under his jaw. John tightens his fingers around Sherlock’s hips and pulls him closer, seeking the payoff of friction even through several layers of clothes. Sherlock shifts slightly to press a long thigh between his legs, and John gasps at the pressure against his burgeoning erection.

Sherlock licks a stripe down John’s neck and closes his teeth around a bit of flesh where his shoulder begins. John moans and slides one hand up Sherlock’s chest, then over his shoulder and up the back of his neck to tangle his fingers in the taller man’s curls. He feels Sherlock’s long fingers deftly unbutton his jeans, then find the pull on his zip and drag it down. Warm fingers trail up over the bulge beneath it and scratch through the patch of soft hair above the waistband of his pants. John grabs the hair on the back of the other man’s head and pulls his teeth off his neck, then pushes a hand against his chest to make room to dislodge himself from his position against the wall. He looks at the momentary flash of confusion in Sherlock’s eyes before rising up and kissing the look right off of his face.

“Bed.” John growls, then drags him by the hand toward Sherlock’s room.

Once inside, John slides a foot behind him and kicks the door closed, then pulls Sherlock toward him by the lapels of his suit jacket into another crushing kiss. He’s so focused on the feel of those full lips against his, the slow slide of that clever tongue as it licks into his mouth, that he can’t be sure exactly how he ended up splayed out on his back, his head sinking into one of the pillows, the scent of Sherlock surrounding him as the man himself slides down his chest and works his already unfastened jeans and pants down his thighs. He feels his shirt and jumper pushed up his torso, then the hot wet slide of a mouth against the soft skin of his stomach. Looking down the plane of his own chest to see Sherlock’s indescribable eyes staring at him through a fringe of curls, he feels a warm tongue lap at the trail of hair that starts just below his belly button and leads down to his…

“Wait!” John cries, sliding a hand gently into the curls on the side of Sherlock’s head. “Condom. Do you have any?”

“We don’t need them,” Sherlock replies, nosing down to place an open mouthed kiss into the coarse hair at the base of John’s cock.

“Yes,” John insists. “We do. We haven’t gone to get tested yet, and…”

“John,” Sherlock says impatiently, propping himself up on his elbows to look him in the eye. “As a condition of my sobriety, I am tested for drug use every three months. That sample is also tested for a wide range of diseases, sexually transmitted and otherwise. As I have not engaged in sexual activity of any kind since I completed rehab, this is somewhat unnecessary but Mycroft is nothing if not thorough. You were tested regularly in the army, and several times since due to your injury and the subsequent treatment thereof and were pronounced clean every time. And as you haven’t engaged in sexual activity of any sort with a partner since you were shot I think we can safely assume that neither of us is a danger to the other and get on with it already, wouldn’t you agree?”

John looks down at the man staring up at him from inches above his erect, leaking prick, shakes his head and says, “I don’t even want to know how you know all of that.”

“Simple, deduction, really,” Sherlock begins, but stops when John clamps his fingers over his mouth.
“What did I just say, Sherlock?” John asks him, “I don’t want to know. So quit talking, and let’s see if you can’t find something else to do with that mouth of yours, yeah?”

He feels Sherlock smile beneath his fingers, then the sharp nip of teeth against the inside of his palm. With a laugh, he pulls his hand away from the other man’s mouth, and settles it back on the side of his head, gently running his fingers through the dark curls. Dark, he thinks but not black. I’ll have to pull out my color key later and see wh….

And that’s as far he gets before the sensation of Sherlock’s lips sliding over the head of his cock drives all other thought from his mind.

It’s hardly his first blowjob. It’s not even his first from a man. Being unbonded until well into his thirties had given him plenty of time to earn a nickname like “Three Continents Watson”, after all. But lying here in Sherlock’s bed, with his hands tangled in Sherlock’s hair, and his dick slowly sliding in and out of Sherlock’s very talented mouth, John can’t help but think that all those other experiences were simply practice for this moment—just a series of black and white stick-figure illustrations meant to prepare him for the full color impressionist painting that is sex with Sherlock Holmes.

When he slips out from between those wet, swollen lips with an obscene pop, feels the other man mouth gently along the shaft while expertly massaging his testicles with the palm of one long fingered hand, John knows that he isn’t going to last much longer—and he knows that Sherlock knows it too, and he’s giving him a chance to catch his breath. He inhales deeply a few times, presses up on his elbows so he can watch, then braces himself as Sherlock licks a wet stripe from base to tip, swirls his tongue under the retracted furl of foreskin once, flicks lightly over the frenulum, then pushes his lips over the head and slides his mouth down to the root of John’s cock—and swallows. John doesn’t even have time to warn him before he comes with a shout, followed by a series of syllables that may or may not be actual words that spill from his mouth with every pulse of semen that spills down Sherlock’s throat. He closes his eyes against the sudden flash of sparks that obscure his vision, bright bursts of colors he can’t even begin to separate and define.

He lays panting, staring at the ceiling while he feels the soft lap of a tongue licking him clean, then pats his hands blindly near where he thinks Sherlock’s shoulders ought to be until his fingers find purchase and tangle into the fabric to pull him up his body for a kiss. It’s a languid slide of tongues and breath, John can taste traces of himself, and he smiles against the friction-swollen lips of the man who just gave him the most marvelous blowjob he’s ever experienced.

“Jesus, Sherlock,” he says, still panting slightly. “That was…well, I don’t know what the hell it was. Not sure they’ve got words for how that felt.”

Sherlock smiles against his mouth, and when John opens his eyes it’s to Sherlock’s blue/grey/green/silver irises staring back at him, a pleased expression crinkling the skin at the corners of his eyes, a small smile on his cupid’s bow of a mouth.

“The pleasure was all mine, John,” He responds, swooping down to lay a gentle kiss on the breathless man’s lips.

“Well, it certainly will be.” John replies, a wicked grin spreading on his face. “Give me a minute to catch my breath and I’ll return the favor, ok?”

The smile on Sherlock’s face fades suddenly, and the mischievous joy that lit his eyes just moments before disappears. He shrugs and looks away from John, begins pushing himself up and off of him and says “No reciprocation necessary, John.”

“What are you talking about, Sherlock? Of course I’m going to reciprocate. And I’ve been told I’m pretty good at it, too.” he says as he grabs the lapels of his jacket and leans up to press a kiss to
Sherlock’s lips, which the taller man avoids, ducking his head away and sitting up.

“I’ve no doubt you are,” Sherlock responds, not looking at him. “But you really needn’t bother, John. I’m fine with things staying just like this.”

“This?” John asks, confused. “You’re fine with getting me off and then refusing to let me touch you in return?”

“Well,” Sherlock says, “yes, I suppose that’s one way of putting it.”

“One way? What are the other ways one might put it?” John asks with a frown, reaching down to pull up his jeans and then tucking himself back into his pants and fastening the button and zip.

“You’re upset,” Sherlock says, looking confused.

“Yeah, I am,” says John tersely, throwing his legs over the side of the bed and standing to tuck in his shirt and straighten his jumper. “Good deduction, that.”

“But, why?” Sherlock asks.

John spins around intending to raise his voice and tell him exactly why he’s upset, hurt even, that his own soulmate doesn’t even want to be touched by him, but one glance at the genuine confusion in Sherlock’s eyes makes him pause before he loses his temper. He takes a deep breath, squares his shoulders and asks “Are you not attracted to me? Because the hard bulge in your trousers that nearly left a bruise against my hip in the sitting room earlier led me to believe that you were.”

“Of course I’m attracted to you, John,” Sherlock says with a dismissive wave. “Surely the last 15 minutes could leave you in no doubt of that fact.”

“Then exactly what is going on here?” John asks with a frustrated sigh. “One of the people participating in this conversation isn’t a genius, Sherlock, so you’re going to have to try and spell it out for me.”

“It has nothing to do with you, John.”

“Excuse me, but I think it has everything to do with me!” John nearly shouts.

“Why?” Sherlock inquires. “I can obviously give you what you need, as I’ve just made abundantly clear, why should it matter to you if I don’t need it?”

“It matters because I need for you to want it too!” John says, then takes a breath and tries to compose himself. “What you just did for me, Sherlock—it was brilliant. But sex isn’t about just getting off for me, it’s about give and take, for me it’s about making you feel every bit as good. Do you understand?”

“John, I am happy to do anything you like, anything at all to give you pleasure,” Sherlock says, looking strangely stricken. “Isn’t that enough?”

“No, Sherlock,” John says softly. “It’s not.” He rubs a palm over his face and through his hair, then huffs out a tired sigh, glancing over at the clock on the nightstand. Sherlock sits on the edge of the bed, hands folded in his lap, staring at the floor, looking smaller than someone of his height has any right to. John wants to walk over and put his arms around him, shake his shoulders and demand to know what this is all about—but it’s nearly noon and he’s expected at the surgery.

He walks to stand directly in front of Sherlock, in front of the man who brought color to his world,
who just moments ago had made him feel so amazing that he’d seen *stars*. He reaches out a hand and brushes his fingers gently through the same curls he’d roughly mused earlier, then slides a fingertip over the line of his jaw and under his chin, tipping it up to look at him. Sherlock’s eyes slide from the floor, up the length of John’s body, and finally meet his eyes—and John feels a stab of grief for the uncertainty he sees in them.

“I’ve got to go to work,” he says gently. “I wish I didn’t, but it can’t be helped. I’m not angry with you, ok? I just don’t know what’s going on here, and I need you to trust me enough to help me understand. We’ll talk when I get home, yeah?”

Sherlock looks up at him, gives a small nod, then looks back down at the floor. John presses the palm of his hand against his soulmate’s cheek, bends down and plants a soft kiss on the corner of his mouth, then walks out of the bedroom, then out of the flat.

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Long after he’d counted John’s footsteps as they descended the stairs, well after the soft thud of the front door closing behind him, and hours after the clatter of plates and cups from the lunch rush at Speedy’s had stopped drifting up from below the sitting room windows, Sherlock still sits at the edge of his bed, elbows propped on knees, staring at the floor.

As his brain slowly comes back on-line after the protracted time he’s spent lost in his own head, his first thought is that he’s thirsty—but a slow swipe of his tongue over his teeth and the slick surface of his gums returns the faint, salty tang of John that still lingers there, and he finds he’s unwilling to rinse that away just yet no matter how parched he might feel. He remembers a flash of blue eyes widening in surprise, the press of teeth into a slightly chapped bottom lip, the sharp intake of breath that came just before the broken shout from John’s mouth as the first hot rush of liquid spattered against the back of his throat—those are the images and sounds that play back in his head now, the memories he’d taken care to preserve in the safety of his mind palace.

What came after them—well, that he’d rather forget.

He’s not sure exactly what he’d thought would happen, how the scenario would play out. If he’s honest, he hadn’t been thinking much at all. From the moment John’s hands slid over his hips, short fingers pressing insistently into the skin at the top swell of his arse, all Sherlock could think about was getting his mouth onto John; onto his lips, his cheeks, his neck, everywhere. And once he’d tasted him, felt John respond to his kiss and arch into his touch, he found that the only thing he wanted was *more*. John’s arousal fed his own, pushing him onward until John came apart beneath him, shaking and panting and smiling and *his*. It hadn’t occurred to him that he’d be expected to let John reciprocate, a fact which seems ridiculous in hindsight. Of course John would want to do that, that’s *exactly* what he’d want. Sherlock simply hadn’t thought things through properly.

And that’s the trouble, really. He doesn’t *think* clearly around John. Although that’s not entirely accurate either, since he’s found that John actually *helps* him focus in some venues—his presence a steady beacon that Sherlock can cling to when the rush of information gets overwhelming, a calming force that grounds him, allows him to see the patterns he’d overlook otherwise. But then the very next moment he’s the *only* thing Sherlock can cling to when the rush of information gets overwhelming, a calming force that grounds him, allows him to see the patterns he’d overlook otherwise. But then the very next moment he’s the *only* thing Sherlock can see at all, the single ray of light in a dark world, all sound and fury and *color*...so many colors that he’d had to start writing them down to try and make sense of them. John Watson is utterly ordinary in so many respects, and yet he is like absolutely no one else that Sherlock has ever come into contact with.

Which makes sense, of course. John is his soulmate, after all. That he should be uniquely fascinating on every level to Sherlock is perfectly natural. Or so he’s given to understand, at least. This whole business of colorbonding and soulmates is much more complicated than he’d suspected it
would be. Or would have suspected, had he ever given it much thought before two weeks ago. He’s not sure exactly how things should be proceeding between them, but he’s fairly certain their first sexual encounter shouldn’t have ended with John looking at him the way he had just before he left.

What he knows with certainty is that he’d disappointed John today, hurt him even. And that tonight, when John comes home, he’ll be expected to explain himself. A swell of panic begins to rise within him, deep in his stomach and fluttering upward. He takes a ragged breath, cradles his head in his hands and slowly exhales—then repeats the motion until he’s calm again.

“Yoo-hoo!” a gentle voice rings out from the entrance to the flat, and Sherlock hears the familiar click of sensible kitten heels over the floor and a slight rattle of china as his landlady sets what is certainly her favorite Wedgewood rosebud tea-service on the coffee table. “Sherlock, dear? Where are you?”

He exhales a last long breath, runs a hand through his curls to tame them, then stands and saunters out into the sitting room to meet her.

“I’m here,” He answers, crossing to her and grasping her slender shoulders warmly and pressing a dry kiss to her cheek. He steps back, looks her up and down, then asks “Good heavens, Mrs. Hudson. Is every item of clothing you own some shade of purple?”

“Well, I suppose it does make it a a bit easier to get dressed in the morning,” she begins, running the palm of her hand over the delicate pleats of the plum blouse she’s wearing down to where its tucked neatly into a skirt that’s a perfect match for the shade, then her sharp eyes narrow and she raises a hand and points a finger at him. “Sherlock Holmes, you’ve gone color!”

He smiles at her, silently confirming her suspicions, and she steps forward to fold him into a motherly embrace, her arms still around his waist when she pulls back and looks up at him, a twinkle in her eye.

“I had a good feeling about that handsome doctor of yours, young man,” She says, beaming at him. “Is John here as well?”

“No, he had a shift at the surgery this afternoon,” Sherlock tells her, then without intending to adds, “We had a bit of a row, actually. Just before he left.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that, love,” she says calmly, waving a hand absently in his direction as she pours a cup of tea, adding milk and sugar and giving it a stir. “Happens to all new couples. It’s a bit of a shock when you’ve suddenly got someone else’s feelings to consider, there’s always an adjustment period. Don’t you worry, when John gets home it will all sort itself out.”

“Do you think so?” Sherlock asks, voice sounding more unsure than he’d meant it to.

“Of course I do, dear.” Mrs. Hudson assures him, patting his arm and handing him his tea. “You just sit down and have a nice cuppa and relax.”

Sherlock takes the tea and sits down in his arm chair, and Mrs. Hudson fusses with the tea set a bit then walks over to stand beside him.

“When John comes home tonight you’ll apologize for what you need to be sorry for, then you’ll listen to what he has to say. You’ve waited a long time to find each other, I’m sure you’ll come through this first quarrel better for it,” she tells him, then pats him fondly on the head before turning toward the door to leave saying, “I baked your favorite raspberry jam biscuits this morning I’ll bring
It’s possible, he thinks, that Mrs. Hudson may be a genius. He finishes his tea, sets the cup aside, then crosses to the window and picks up his bow. He slides the block of rosin across the hairs, adjusts the tension a bit, then lifts his violin to his chin and considers his options. Brahms, he decides. He’s always been partial to the composer’s work, more so since John moved in. Beautiful to the ear for their apparent simplicity, the melodies are revealed to be much more complex in the execution. Fitting, he thinks, as he sets his bow and begins to play.

Sherlock is at the desk, an array of small swatches of fabric each stained with a combination of minced garlic and basil while he notes the absorbency and wicking pattern that each different type of cloth exhibits at fifteen minute intervals, when he hears John’s footsteps on the stairs. Taking them singly instead of his customary habit of two at a time, Sherlock thinks, looking up at the door just as John crests the top of the stairs, a large bag of what smells like takeaway curry dangling in one hand.

“I brought dinner,” he says, with a smile that doesn’t quite extend to his eyes. “Figured you hadn’t eaten all day, and I was famished.” He looks at Sherlock for a moment longer, then gives a nod and walks toward the kitchen with the food.

Sherlock watches him walk, sees he’s favoring his right leg slightly. Barely noticeable, really, but Sherlock can definitely tell. He gets up and slowly crosses to the kitchen where John is standing at the counter pulling containers from the bag. Sensing Sherlock behind him, he turns and gives him that same smile—the one that doesn’t quite sit correctly on his face.

“Grab some plates, would you? And get us something to drink.” He asks brightly.

“John--” Sherlock begins, but the other man keeps talking.

“There’s some pinot grigio in the fridge, you could uncork that. Or unscrew it, really, it’s not a very good bottle.”

Sherlock closes the distance between them, and carefully reaches out a hand toward John.

“I don’t even know if it goes with Indian food, but--” he stops in midsentence, falling silent as Sherlock’s fingers slide over his shoulder blade and come to rest softly above it. Still facing away, his head falls forward and his shoulders slump slightly under Sherlock’s light touch, then suddenly he turns, takes two steps forward, snakes his arms around the taller man’s waist and presses his face against his chest.

Sherlock is stunned for a moment, unsure of what to do with his hands. He folds one arm tentatively around John’s back, his palm coming to rest between the shorter man’s shoulder blades. “John,” he says softly, “Are you all--”

“Shhhh,” John says against his chest burrowing a bit closer. “Sherlock, just—hush, please.”

“Okay,” Sherlock whispers, lifting his other arm and wrapping it underneath the one that is already around John. With that simple touch, he feels the man in his arms melt against him and suddenly he isn’t unsure at all. Closing his arms more tightly around his soulmate seems like the most natural thing in the world, as though they’ve been empty his whole life, waiting, and an armful of John is exactly what’s been missing all along. John is solid, and warm, and real—and if this is what he needs, then Sherlock will give it to him.

They stand there for what feels like a very long time, but in reality can’t really have been more than a
minute or two. The containers of food are still steaming on the counter, and as the moments tick by Sherlock feels John relax slowly in his arms. The former army doctor huffs out a long sigh against Sherlock’s chest, then leans back slightly and looks up at him, arms still clasped around his waist.

“I’m sorry about earlier,” John says.

“You’ve nothing to apologize for. It was my fault, and I should hav—” Sherlock begins, but is cut off at the gentle pressure of John’s mouth against his own, just a chaste press of lips lasting only a few seconds.

“I do want to talk about it,” John tells him. “And I promise we will. But it’s been a very long day, so would it be ok with you if we have dinner and watch crap telly for a bit first?”

At Sherlock’s nod of agreement, John smiles and slides his hands from around him, and turns back to the takeaway feast he’s brought home. Sherlock crosses to the fridge and pulls out the wine, opens it and pours two glasses while John heaps two plates with vegetable curry, butter chicken, saffron rice and an obscene amount of naan, drops a fork on each one, then walks into the living room and sets them down on the coffee table. Sherlock follows with the wine, puts it down next to the food then points the remote control at the television until the familiar opening notes of the Doctor Who theme ring through the flat. He sits down next to John and they eat, side by side.

An hour later, The Doctor and Rose have saved the world (again) and John reaches over toward Sherlock’s barely half-finished dinner and steals a bit of naan, using it to soak up the last dregs of spicy sauce on his empty plate.

“I don’t understand what you see in this idiotic show,” Sherlock says.

“It’s a classic!” John insists. “Doctor Who is your heritage, Sherlock. It’s your duty as an Englishman to watch and learn from it. The very future of the British nation may depend on it.”

“The future of the country depends on my watching a floppy haired nine hundred year old man in a time traveling police box take a pretty girl all over the galaxy only to find that every species they encounter is inexplicably also English?”

“Yes,” John replies with a nod.

“Ridiculous,” huffs Sherlock.

“True,” John agrees, “But after the day I’ve had, a little ‘ridiculous’ was exactly what I needed.”

“So,” Sherlock begins, pushing bits of chicken and rice around his plate with a fork, “how did it go with Sarah?”

“Terrible,” John answers with a sigh, rubbing a hand over his forehead. “She was so pleased to see me when I arrived, was practically waiting at the door. She wasn’t pleased for long, of course.”

“She was upset, I take it.”

“Very,” John confirms, “I mean, of course she was. She’d already called her parents, told her best friend. I tried to explain why I’d been confused, how each glimpse of color came when she was there—but that you’d been there each time as well, in a manner of speaking. In the tunnel, I could feel your fingers on my wrists, and before I saw the rose I’d been laughing at your texts. I just didn’t realize…”

“I’m sorry, John,” Sherlock says softly. “I should have told you sooner.”
“Yeah, you should have,” John agrees, with a tired sigh but no anger in his voice. “But what’s done is done, Sherlock. It’s just, well, she asked me if I was sure—and I told her I was, but she just kept asking. I didn’t have the heart to tell her that even if I hadn’t been sure at first, one kiss was all it had taken to convince me beyond a shadow of a doubt.” He pauses for a moment, smiling a bit at the memory, before continuing. “I’ve still got a job, so there’s that. All things considered, it went as well as could be expected, especially since I was hardly in the right frame of mind to be consoling anyone else this morning.”

“I am sorry,” Sherlock repeats.

“I know. You’ve said,” John tells him, reaching out to twine their fingers together. “Apology accepted.”

“I want to explain,” Sherlock says, hesitantly.

“And I want to listen,” John tells him, squeezing his hand. “But I’ve got dried tears all over my shirt, a patient threw up on me—twice—and there’s not enough hand sanitizer in the world to make me feel clean after what I had to do to a seventy year old man with infected piles. Why don’t you clear these plates, I’ll have a shower, and then you can tell me all about it? Yeah?”

Sherlock nods, and when John leans forward he meets him half way, accepts the soft press of lips for the peace offering it is, then watches John walk off toward the bathroom. After a minute he hears the squeal of the taps, the rush of water as John lets it run for a bit to warm up. He busies himself collecting the remnants of their dinner, taking the plates and dishes to the kitchen sink. When he hears the break in the steady beat of the water against the floor of the tub as John gets into the shower, he slides open the drawer to his right and pulls out a small, sharp knife. Making his way down the hall to his bedroom, Sherlock walks purposefully to his dresser, lays the knife on top of it, then bends his knees and braces his shoulder against the smooth side of the chest of drawers. He pushes the piece of furniture half a meter to the left, picks up the knife, and drops to his knees. Sliding the thin blade between two floorboards, he levers the knife away from him until one of the planks pulls free of the floor with a creak. He slides a finger under the unfinished edge, lifts it away, and reaches down into the hole he’s created to remove the dark enamel box hidden there.

He carries it to the living room, sets it at the center of the cleared coffee table, then sits down on the couch. Running a finger over the smooth surface, he remembers the first time he saw it—the tight pressure of the tourniquet, the sharp sting of the needle, the rush of his pulse in his ears…and the perfect silence that followed. He recalls Victor’s smile, the feel of his fingers and the slide of his lips and finally understanding what all the fuss was about.

He remembers the day Victor had left it with him as well, and he can’t help but think that his final remark to Sherlock had been wrong. This box and what was in it wasn’t what he loved about Victor, it was what made Victor love him, what made him able to give what Victor needed, made him normal. He’d wanted to be normal for Victor. And the cocaine made that possible…until he’d found someone truly normal, of course.

John deserves someone normal. John is solid, and warm, and real…and Sherlock wants to give him what he needs.

He cocks an ear toward the hall, hears the shower still running. Setting the fingers of both hands on the top of the box, he slides his thumbs over the front edge, and opens the lid.

“Well, that’s much better. Amazing what a little soap and water can do.” John says when he
emerges from the bathroom ten minutes later, dressed in his sensible terry robe and rubbing a towel over his head. He walks over to the couch, follows the line of Sherlock’s unblinking stare to the small rectangular box on the table. “What’ve you got there?”

“It’s strange,” Sherlock says, not looking at him. “I always assumed it was black.”

John pauses for a moment, looking back down at the box. “Isn’t it?”

“No. It’s actually a very deep blue—‘MIDNIGHT’, according to Price.”

“Okay,” John says, then sinks down next to Sherlock on the couch.

“It was a gift,” Sherlock continues softly. “From someone I once…knew.”

“What’s in it?”

Sherlock reaches out one elegant hand and slides the box over the table until it’s squarely in front of John, then gestures toward it in invitation.

John scoots forward onto the edge of the couch, then reaches out and grasps the top of the box and lifts the lid. The glass barrel of the syringe gleams up from the velvet lining, light glints off the metal plunger and fittings. John freezes as he takes in the sight, his eyes traveling slowly over the vials tucked snugly into the spaces tailor made for them in the lid, all empty except for one.

“Is that…” He asks, his voice trailing off.

“Cocaine,” Sherlock confirms.

John coughs, eyes sliding from the box, to the table, to the floor between them. “And, did you…?”

“No, I didn’t,” Sherlock sighs, a resigned look on his face as he quickly unbuttons his cuffs and begins to push his sleeves up for John’s inspection, but the shorter man stops him, slides his fingers up his long forearms and presses his palms into the hollows at his elbows.

“I believe you, Sherlock,” He says, squeezing his arms lightly.

“You shouldn’t,” Sherlock replies. “I’m a junkie. We lie.”

“You’re an addict in recovery,” John corrects. “There’s a difference.”

“Perhaps,” Sherlock acquiesces. “I haven’t used since the night before I left for rehab. But I considered doing so, tonight.”

“Why?” John asks, his mouth a tight line, his eyes stricken.

“His name was Victor,” Sherlock begins, his voice low and resigned. “That there was no bond between us was clear from the outset. But he was clever and interesting, and he convinced me that the lack of a colorbond didn’t mean that we couldn’t be friends. Or more.”

He pauses to look over at John, sees open curiosity with no hint of judgment clouding his blue eyes. He takes a deep breath, then continues.

“This,” he says, pointing a finger at his temple “is my hard drive. It’s the biological equivalent of a mass of wires and chips and connections, a vast network of electrical impulses that is capable of handling very large amounts of data—and it never stops. Even the most advanced computer can be powered down as necessary, given a moment of rest from the endless flow of information, but I
could never manage to do the same. It made things...difficult. I couldn't enjoy being intimate. I could give Victor what he needed, I liked doing so, but I wasn't able to slow my thoughts down enough to concentrate on the sensations when he attempted to reciprocate. I explained that to Victor...and he found a solution. A seven percent solution, to be exact.

John is silent for a long moment, then slides his fingers resting at the crook of Sherlock’s elbows slowly down his forearms to grasp both of his hands. “So you’d never...before the drugs...”

“No,” Sherlock admits. “And never after them, either.”

“Thank you for telling me,” John says, squeezing Sherlock’s fingers in his.

“So you see,” says Sherlock softly, “I can’t be what you need to me to be, John.”

“Hey,” John says seriously, “I told you this morning: I don’t need you to be anything other than exactly who you are.”

“But I can’t...without the cocaine.”

“We don’t know that.”

“Don’t we?” Sherlock asks, shaking his head in disbelief. “It’s never worked before, John. What makes you think it will be any different between us?”

“Everything is already different with us, Sherlock.” John says, and lifts a hand up to cup his cheek. “We’re soulmates. Of course it will be different.”

“I’ll disappoint you,” Sherlock states.

“No. You won’t. And you don’t need this,” John says, turning back toward the coffee table and snapping the lid closed. He turns back to Sherlock, whose eyes are fixed on the box, cups his face in both hands. “Look at me. We’ll figure this out, Ok? When you’re ready. We’ll find a way to calm that big brain of yours down, yeah? Trust me.”

And with that John leans forward, and presses a kiss to his soulmate’s mouth. Sherlock sighs at the contact, his pulse picking up a beat to pound rhythmically in his ears. He tastes a hint of saffron as he licks inside John’s lips, then the flavor morphs into the sweet smoky taste that he’s learning to identify as uniquely John’s. At the soft slide of a warm tongue against his own, he closes his eyes and for a moment there’s no angst, no tension, no constant hum from the worry he’s been nurturing all day. There’s just John.

After a few moments John pulls away, begins to speak in soft tones about there being no timeline, that there’s no rush, that they’ll find their own way through this--or something to that effect, Sherlock thinks, but he isn’t actually listening because he’s too busy not listening, still floating a bit from the kiss they just shared, too distracted by the lack of distraction to concentrate on, well, anything really. And then his brain rushes back on-line, his eyes open wide and he lets out a small gasp of understanding.

“Sherlock,” John asks, looking a bit alarmed. “Are you all right?”

“Perfectly fine,” he says quickly, then lunges forward and captures John’s mouth again. The smaller man stiffens slightly in surprise, but quickly melts against him, easing into the kiss. Sherlock feels a slow tingle of sparks that slide down his spine, tastes the slick skin inside of John’s lower lip, feels the soft terry of his dressing gown against his fingers, hears the sweet gasp he huffs out as Sherlock presses his shoulders into the couch. Every breath, every touch, every sound, every taste, everything
is John. He pushes himself up onto his hands, and gazes down at the dazed, breathless man beneath him.

“I’m ready.” He says. Then sits up, puts his feet on the floor, stands and starts across the floor unbuttoning his shirt as he goes.

“What?” John says, his damp hair mussed and his expression confused. “Now?”

“Yes,” Sherlock replies, pulling off his shirt and throwing it over John’s chair. He turns back to John, the muscles of his slim chest well-defined by the lamplight, toes off his shoes then deftly unbuttons his trousers and pushes them to the floor. He steps out of them, standing in the sitting room in dark grey boxer briefs, then reaches down to quickly remove one sock, then the other.

He watches as John sits up on the couch, robe pushed down over one bare shoulder. Sees his eyebrows knit together as his brain attempts to process the sudden turn of events.

“You’re ready?” He asks carefully, his voice a bit strained. “You’re sure?”

“I’ve just said so, John. Weren’t you listening?” Sherlock replies impatiently, stepping out of the pile of clothing at his feet and crossing to stand before the couch, one long arm extended in invitation. “Are you coming or not?”

“Yeah,” John says, reaching up to take his hand, a slow smile spreading on his face. “Definitely.”

Laid out on his back, dark curls clinging to the thin film of sweat on his forehead and one long leg bent up over the strong arm hooked behind his knee, Sherlock watches John’s eyes. They seemed so simple that first night, so easy to match to the corresponding square that put a name to the first color he ever saw. But set aglow by the light that spills in from the hall through the open bedroom door, the blue that stares back at him is rich and dark, a deep well he could stare into for hours. And as John’s hips push forward insistently, breaching the tight entrance to his body, Sherlock has the sudden thought that if he opened his eyes tomorrow and the rest of the world was grey once more, he wouldn’t mind—as long as he could keep blue.

He breathes through the burn as John presses against him, gasping slightly when the head slips fully inside. He reaches up to grasp the back of the doctor’s neck as he continues the slow slide, holding his breath until John’s hips rest snugly against his thighs and he’s fully seated within him. Slipping his hand up the curve of John’s neck and pushing his long fingers through the short hair on the back of his head, Sherlock stretches up to meet his lips. John catches his lower lip between his teeth, tugs playfully, then reaches down to find Sherlock’s free hand and drags it up over his own hip and presses it over the swell of his arse.

“Hang on tight,” John tells him, putting his own hand down flat on the sheets next to Sherlock’s ribs, elbow braced as he slowly pulls back until just the tip of his cock remains inside—then with a soft touch of their lips snaps his hips forward and quickly fills him again.

Sherlock gasps in surprise, feels John smile against his lips and bend his elbow to rest his weight on his forearm, his other arm hitching the taller man’s leg a bit higher as he lays flat against him—Sherlock’s leaking cock pressed tightly between their stomachs. John sets a steady pace, focused and relentless, each stroke rubbing Sherlock’s erection against his abdomen through the slick pre-cum smeared over their skin.

Sherlock wants to watch John’s face, to see the lines of concentration that crease his forehead, watch
his neck muscles tense when he clenches his jaw—but as the tip of John’s erection nudges against his prostate with each firm stroke, the shock of pleasure that erupts at the base his spine sends sparks across his field of vision, bursts of color that are brighter and more vivid if he closes his eyes.

John feathers soft kisses across his collar bones (red), drags his tongue up the side of his neck (orange), nips at the soft skin under his jaw (yellow), sucks the lobe of his ear into to his mouth and worries it between his teeth (green), whispers sweet words against his hair (blue), slides his mouth wetly over one sharp cheekbone (indigo), then claims his lips in a bruising kiss (violet).

The shower of colors that John’s every touch brings takes his breath way, makes him shiver, and with a gasp of surprise Sherlock realizes that he’s moments away from coming completely undone. He tightens the fingers already digging into the skin of John’s hip, then opens his eyes—locks them on John’s, rooting himself in the calm determination he sees there, the affection that radiates from them, seeking the comfort and wonder of blue.

He comes with a shout, his head thrown back into the pillow and hoarse cries that he doesn’t immediately identify as his own erupting from his mouth. He gasps at the shower of light that fills the room, the chaotic blend of colors that swirl in the air around him, pulsing with each hot stream of semen that spills between their bodies and is smeared into their skin as John continues to drive into him deeper, faster, until Sherlock feels the vibration of a strangled cry where John’s face is pressed to his throat. There’s a warm rush inside him as John tenses, then a series of sweet moans that buzz against his skin, matching the tempo of John’s hips, slowing at the same speed until they both lie still, breathing in unison.

Sherlock doesn’t realize at first that his muscles have tensed, that he’s clinging desperately to John and breathing so fast that the other man is trying to soothe him, peppering tender kisses over his lips, sliding gentle fingers over his cheek, whispering soothing words in his ear. He concentrates on the low murmur of John’s voice, the soft susurrus of breathy words he recognizes as affectionate even if he can’t decipher their meaning at the moment. Slowly the storm of color that surrounds him recedes, and he opens his eyes to see the lovely blue of John’s smiling down at him.

“There you are,” John says softly, his lips turned up at the corners, smoothing the hair back from Sherlock’s forehead and planting a gentle kiss on the skin there. “Lost you for a moment, glad you’re back.” He starts to sit up, and Sherlock feels a wave of panic rise and tightens his arms around him.

“Hey,” John whispers, laying his lips against Sherlock’s curls. “It’s ok, I’m just going to get something to clean us up a bit. I’ll be right back, I promise. Ok?”

Sherlock nods and loosens his grip, feels John’s weight leave the mattress. He presses his eyes closed, listens to John’s footsteps on the bathroom tile, hears him turn on the tap and let the water run for a bit. He keeps them shut when the mattress dips as John gets back onto the bed, when the soft slide of a warm, wet flannel travels over his skin and wipes him clean. Only when John lies down beside him, when he’s able to turn to his side to face him, does he open his eyes. And when he does, John’s blue eyes meet his with a smile.

“That,” John tells him, “was….amazing.”

“You think so?” Sherlock asks with smirk.


“You do know you’re saying that out loud, right?” Sherlock teases.
“Oh please,” John says with a giggle. “I was hardly the loud one tonight.”

“I suppose I was a bit more vocal than I’d intended.” Sherlock replies, looking slightly sheepish.

“A bit? We’ll be lucky if the neighbors don’t file a noise complaint.” John chides. “So, it was ok, then? Without the drugs?”

“Better.”

“Hmm.” John hums, sliding a hand over Sherlock’s hip and pulling him closer. “So what you’re saying is that sex with me is better than drugs?”

“Yes,” says Sherlock.

“But just so I’m clear,” John continues, “If you had a choice between a fix of a seven percent cocaine solution and an injection of one-hundred percent pure Watson, you’d choose…?”

Sherlock scoffs and rolls his eyes. “You’re ridiculous,” he huffs, then rolls away from John and gets to his feet.

“Ridiculously sexy,” John agrees.

“Don’t be smug,” says Sherlock, one side of his mouth tipping up in a wry grin. “It’s unattractive.”

“Oh come on, humor me. Which would you choose?”

“I’d choose to take a shower instead of answering such a ludicrous question.” Sherlock says, then walks into the bathroom and turns on the taps. After a moment he pops his head back through the door and looks at John expectantly.

“Are you coming or not?” Sherlock asks, then turns back toward the shower, smiling as he hears John’s footsteps behind him.

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Slipping on a pair of pajama pants, Sherlock lifts the duvet off the bed and folds it neatly along the bottom of the mattress. He pulls back the covers and slips between the sheets, his head hitting the pillow just as he hears John’s footsteps coming down the stairs from his bedroom. He turns his head when John enters the room dressed in a clean pair of boxers and soft threadbare t-shirt and looking down at his copy of Price’s Color Key.

“Sherlock, why is there a ‘lime green’ litter tray full of cat sand in my bedroom?” he asks, looking up from the page and then freezing in place.

“Ah,” Sherlock says, following John’s gaze to the long haired ginger cat draped lazily on the duvet at the foot of the bed. “You remember Basil. John, Basil. Basil, John.”

“Is that…”

“Obviously,” Sherlock answers. “You were the one cuddling the creature this morning, surely you recognize him.”

“Of course,” John says, walking over to the bed and extending a hand for the green eyed cat to inspect. After a quick sniff, he nudges his head against John’s fingers. “How did he get here?”

“Lestrade brought him by this afternoon,” Sherlock explains. “He’s been hiding under the bed for
“This bed?” John says, looking slightly alarmed. “He was underneath it earlier? When we...?”

“Oh for God’s sake John, he’s a cat,” Sherlock scolds. “He clearly hasn’t been traumatized by the experience.”

“You got me a cat,” John says slowly, scratching the animal behind the ears and smiling.

“I got you a murderous cat, John. That’s much more exciting.” Sherlock replies, then shrugs. “You seemed worried about his fate, so I asked Lestrade if we could keep him.”

“And now I have to share my bedroom with the litter tray?”

“Of course not, John. Don’t be ridiculous.” Sherlock says dismissively. “You’ll share your bedroom with me. This bedroom.”

John looks up at him in surprise, then a slow smile melts over his features. He reaches down and gives the cat a long stroke from nose to tail, then asks “Basil, huh?”

“Seemed appropriate,” Sherlock says with a shrug. “Now, as I am given to understand that oral hygiene is quite important to you, might I suggest you go and brush your teeth and then come to bed?”

By the time John finishes brushing and flossing then makes the rounds to turn off the lights, Sherlock is fast asleep. As he climbs into bed, the unconscious man rolls toward him immediately, throwing an arm over his thighs and tucking his head against John’s hip. He sits back against the headboard and runs a hand softly through Sherlock’s curls, watching him sleep. He feels a slight shift on the bed and looks up to see Basil walking gracefully over the tangle of legs under the covers until he reaches John’s side where he sits daintily and stares at him with his emerald eyes. John reaches out a hand and strokes under his chin, and after a few moments the cat settles down and curls up against his leg and begins to purr.

John reaches onto the night stand and retrieves his color key, flipping through the pages of shades until he finds the range of colors he’s looking for. He holds the book out next to the cat, then looks back and forth between Basil and the page. He grabs a pen from the drawer, then underneath the square marked ‘APRICOT’ he writes “feels like soft downy fur with the deep rumble of a purr”.

Looking down at Sherlock’s head pressed against him, he runs his fingers through the dark curls one more time and then begins paging through the book again. When he’s satisfied he’s found the right swatch, he makes a note in the book, then sets it next to him on the nightstand. He switches off the lamp, then slides down beneath the covers and closes his eyes.

If by some set of mysterious circumstances there happened to be a secret government-installed camera hidden in the downstairs bedroom of 221B Baker Street, anyone watching at that moment would see the world’s only consulting detective, a former army doctor, and their homicidal cat all sleeping soundly. And if by chance the camera were to zoom in on page 49 of the copy of Price’s Color Key open on the night stand, underneath the square marked ‘MAHOGANY’ they would see a note in John Watson’s handwriting that reads “feels like home”.

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Thanks for reading, comments and feedback 100% welcomed and appreciated!

And in this week’s installment of Fic Recs Nobody Asked Me For, may I humbly suggest that if you’re looking for 3500 words of classic Johnlock perfection, look no further than [His Favourite Four-Letter F-Words](#) by the incomparable cathedral_carver.

A lifetime together spelled out in sparse, poetic vignettes each inspired by a different four letter word beginning with the letter “F”, this fic was one of my Johnlock first loves —and one I’ve returned to multiple times.

Clever, touching, artfully structured and damn near perfect--give it a few minutes of your life. You’ll be glad you did.

See you next week!
John Watson has spent the majority of his life imagining what the world might be like when it was no longer grey. His earliest childhood memories are an endless series of vaguely recalled moments where he remembers lifting a small object aloft or pointing to a larger one nearby and asking “What color is it?”

His mother had done her best to help him understand, to explain what his own sight was incapable of revealing to him by tying the concept of color to his other senses, describing each unfamiliar shade by how it might feel to him, or smell, or taste. He’d committed each explanation to memory, carefully written them down and studied them over the years. And when color became his reality just a few nights ago, John marveled at the new world that unfolded before his eyes, the sight of each new hue nestling itself perfectly against the feeling he’d already come to associate with it. All those years spent waiting, wondering about the colors he couldn’t see. He can see them now, and the world looks even more amazing than he’d ever imagined.

What he hadn’t expected, however—what he couldn’t even have known to prepare himself for—is how having color would change what he sees when he closes his eyes. The sunlight that seeps through his eyelids in the mornings isn’t the murky silver he remembers, it’s a deep pink tinged with a buttery yellow. The regular post-mortem review of his day that he engages in each night when his head hits the pillow is no longer a grey retelling of events, but a colorized movie reel for his mind to examine and reconcile before sleep takes him. And his dreams? They’re not grey anymore either. Even the one’s he’s had countless times before, the scenes that his waking eyes saw only in greyscale (the chaos and confusion of gunfire and shouting and falling through the air) are suddenly full of color, his sleeping brain filling in the missing hues: the blue of the sky, the brown of the mountains, the tan of the sand rushing up to meet him, the bright red spread of his blood as it seeps into the ground below…

He wakes with a gasp, choking on a strangled cry in his throat that he’s sure is filled with sand as he
sits up, tries to run but finds his legs tangled in…something…pushes hard with his hands until his back slams against a solid barrier, his head colliding against the (rock?) behind him, dragging in ragged breaths and trying to get enough air into his lungs to scream, when suddenly there’s a bright light and there are hands, large hands grasping at his shoulders and he can’t let go of the ropes binding him to try and free himself from his captor, this person who knows his name—who keeps saying his name—John, John…

"JOHN!"

His eyes snap open on the sharp intake of breath that precedes a scream but the sound catches in his throat at the sight of the green/blue/grey/silver eyes that stare back at him. He chokes down the shout, concentrating on the sharp planes of the face in front of him, the wild mess of curls that surrounds it, the concern and fear it radiates. He struggles to slow his breathing, unclenches his fists from what he realizes aren’t bindings but bed sheets, and drags his shaking hands up to grasp the forearms of the man who is holding him tightly by the shoulders and repeating his name, more gently now. He listens to the voice, deep and slightly rough from sleep, concentrates on the sound of the rich baritone, matching his breaths to the slow rhythm of the words.

“It was just a dream…It’s over now…I’m right here, John…You’re safe.”

Sherlock repeats the words softly, rubs his hands slowly over John’s shoulders until the tension begins to dissipate, then rests their foreheads together and gently slides his arms out from where John’s tight grasp is surely leaving bruises on the pale skin. He cradles John’s face in his hands, brushes his cheeks clear of tears with the pads of his thumbs, then rests a soft kiss at his temple before assuring him that he’ll be right back—then returns in moments with a glass of water and a cool flannel, the latter of which he presses to the back of John’s neck as he encourages him to drink the former.

John does as he’s told, the cold water helping to soothe his dry throat, and when Sherlock takes the glass from him and sets it aside, he slides back down beneath the sheet and turns away from him and presses his head back down into the pillow. When the lamp switches off and the room is dark again, John takes a deep breath and slowly reaches one hand back behind him to find Sherlock’s hip and gives it a faint squeeze.

“Thank you,” John whispers, a hitch in his breath. “I’m sorry, I just…”

“Shhh,” Sherlock replies, slipping an arm forward and over John’s waist, sliding towards the shorter man and pulling him gently back against his chest, his chin tucked over his shoulder and lips pressed next to his ear. “Sleep, John.”

And John does.

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The next time he wakes, it’s again to a sound from his own throat—though this particular utterance is less of a shout than a moan. There are gentle sparks firing behind his closed eyes, a soft shower of blues and greens and yellows that play across his eyelids in time with the steady rhythm of the hand inside his boxers stroking his morning erection. He can feel warm breath on his shoulder, the soft nip of teeth through the fabric of his shirt, and he slides his own fingers from where they’re gripping the forearm slowly working his cock, up over his shoulder and into the riot of soft, sleep-tangled curls he finds there.

He feels the hard outline of another erection where it’s pressed against his arse, pushes his own hips back against it then forward again, lazily fucking Sherlock’s fist. The hand wrapped around his
prick loosens for a moment, the pads of two fingers sliding up over the tip to collect the pre-cum gathering there, then sliding back down to pull his retracted foreskin up and over the silky head once before a thumb presses lightly on the top of his shaft, and the two slickened fingertips settle just underneath the glans and glide over his frenulum in small circles, a constant friction broken only to quickly gather more lubrication from his weeping slit.

John tightens the fingers tangled in Sherlock’s hair as the pressure inside his groin crests, his breath quickening and a soft cry escaping his throat when Sherlock turns his mouth toward his neck and bites down, pulling the patch of skin between his teeth and sucking hard as John bucks up into his fist, come spilling over those clever fingers in short, hot bursts. John’s not even caught his breath before he spins in the taller man’s embrace, presses a hard kiss to his lips, pushes him down on his back then throws off the covers and tugs Sherlock’s flannel trousers down over slim hips to reveal his eager erection lying flush against his stomach. The detective pushes himself up onto his elbows to watch, and John looks up the length of him and smiles, licks his lips, then wraps his right hand around the base of his cock and slips his mouth over the head.

It’s been some time since he’s done this, but it would seem that giving head is a lot like riding a bike. Once you’ve learned how, a few moments back in the saddle is all it takes before the skill is second nature again. John takes his cues from Sherlock; which strokes of his tongue make him gasp, when the occasional gentle scrape of teeth makes him whimper, how he seems to prefer the simultaneous upstroke of his hand and downstroke of his mouth, the way a gentle press of his fingertips just behind his bollocks earns him a small burst of pre-cum against his tongue—so that by the time John slides a finger next to the cock in his mouth, then pushes that same finger slowly inside Sherlock where he’s still slightly slick from the night before, he needs only to brush his fingertip softly against the prostate before he’s swallowing down a thick, hot mouthful of Sherlock’s come while the man himself clutches the sheets and moans his name. John sucks him gently through the aftershocks, pulls off and slides the back of his hand over his mouth, then pulls Sherlock’s pajamas back up to his waist and sits up.

“Good morning,” He says, smiling down at Sherlock panting against the pillows.

“Mraoaw” comes a response to his right, and he and Sherlock both look over to see Basil sitting primly on the night stand furthest from the door, staring at them.

“Been there this whole time, has he?” John asks.

“Yes,” Sherlock affirms, puffing out a breath slowly through pursed lips.

“Well,” John says. “Bet he never saw that living with his last owner.” And when Sherlock laughs, he crawls up the bed and plants a kiss on that ridiculously perfect mouth. It’s a sweet, slow press of lips and tongues and morning breath, and after a moment John sits back with a sigh. “Tea?”

“Please,” Sherlock says, sitting up and getting to his feet, stopping briefly to scratch Basil between the ears. “I’ll have some when I’m done with my shower.”

“Oh really? I’m the one whose pants are stuck to him, but you’re taking the first shower?”

“Obviously,” Sherlock says from the bathroom, as he turns the taps. “Toast as well, I think.”

John looks over as the ginger cat jumps from the nightstand onto the mattress and begins walking across the tangle of sheets toward him.

“I suppose you expect me to feed you as well?” John says to him, running the palm of his hand over the cat’s soft head and down its long back for which he’s rewarded with a soft meow and a deep
“Don’t get used to it,” he tells his new pet. “I’ll stop at the shops after my shift and buy you some proper cat food today.”

He leaves Basil to his breakfast, then fills the kettle and pulls down mugs and teabags. When the water boils he prepares one cup of tea, leaving the other mug empty for the moment so it won’t go cold. Looking at the clock, he knows that he’s got some time before Sherlock emerges from the bathroom. The man may be less than fastidious about everything from police procedure to dangerous chemical storage, but his personal appearance is one thing he’s never careless about. *Vain git*, John thinks, with a smile and a small shake of his head. It’s just as well, really. Now he has time to place the phone call he’s decided he’s finally ready to make.

Taking his mug and his mobile over to his armchair, John sits down and thumbs through his contacts until he finds his parents’ home number and taps the call button. After three rings, a woman’s voice answers on the other end of the line.

“Hi Mum,” John says in greeting.

“John!” His mother says, her usual tone of genuine surprise and affection as welcome to his ears as it always is. “How are you, love?”

“I’m good, how are you and Dad?”

“We’re all fine here, as usual,” Lynette Watson replies. “You’re dad’s been a bit under the weather this last week, I’ve told him to see the doctor but he just tells me that it’s been a long week at work and he’s not as young as he used to be. You know how he is.”

John smiles. “I do. I’ll talk to him about it if you like. Tell him to listen to his wife, doctor’s orders and all.”

“Would you, love? If you and I combine forces he’s bound to listen to one of us eventually.”

John guffs out a small chuckle. “I’ll do my best.”

“How’s London?” she asks, changing the subject. “Settling into your new flat? The new job’s going well, I hope?”

“The flat’s good,” John says, looking around the room and smiling when he hears the steady beat of the shower down the hall. “The job too. It’s all *very* good, really. In fact, I’ve got some news.”

“How’s London?” she asks, changing the subject. “Settling into your new flat? The new job’s going well, I hope?”

“The flat’s good,” John says, looking around the room and smiling when he hears the steady beat of the shower down the hall. “The job too. It’s all *very* good, really. In fact, I’ve got some news.”

“Do you? The good kind, I hope.”

“The best kind,” John confirms, and then takes a deep breath, choosing his words carefully. “I wanted to call and tell you that I’ve given it a bit of thought over the last few days, and I think I’ve decided that my favorite color is purple.”

There’s a small moment of silence, then John breaks out into a broad smile when he hears the gasp on the other end of the line.
“Johnny!” his mother exclaims, the pitch and volume of her voice rising so quickly that John has to pull the phone a few inches from his ear. “Oh my god! Who? When? Oh! Is it the doctor from the surgery—Sarah, was it? Oh, hang on a minute, love…” John hears the familiar sound of his mother’s palm covering the mouthpiece of the phone which never dampens the shout of “Jack! Pick up the phone!” that follows it.

“Jack Watson,” John hears his father’s voice say as he picks up the extension per his wife’s instructions.

“Hi Dad,” John says, “I was just tell--”

“He was just telling me that he’s gone color!” Lynette Watson interrupts, her voice gone more than a bit shrill with excitement.

“NO!” Jack Watson’s voice booms over the line. “Oh son, that’s wonderful! Was it the other doctor then, the one you had a date with, oh what was her name…”

“Her name was Sarah,” Lynette supplies helpfully, he voice brimming with enthusiasm. “Is it her, John?”

“Well, no. Actually it wasn’t Sara.” John pauses for a moment then clears his throat. “Turns out it’s my flatmate. His name is Sherlock. Sherlock Holmes.”

“Oh Johnny,” his mother says, a catch in her voice. “How wonderful—he was right under your nose for weeks and you didn’t even know. When did it happen?”

“Well, for him—the night we met,” John says. “Took me a bit longer, but I finally got there two nights ago.”

“Happens that way for a lot of people,” Jack Watson interjects reassuringly. “So? What’s he like, this bloke of yours?”

John smiles at the question, at the very idea that Sherlock is his—which, he supposes, he is. “He’s brilliant, really. Cleverest man I’ve ever met. And god, he’s really tall, Dad. He’s like a well-dressed giraffe.”

Jack Watson’s booming laugh in his ear is contagious, and John can’t help but bark out one of his own.

“What does he do, John?” Lynette asks when her husband and son’s laughter has died down a bit.

“He’s a detective, Mum,” John says, a note of pride in his voice. “A consulting detective, actually. Works with the police, but isn’t on the force. It’s a bit difficult to explain, really. But he’s amazing at it, I’ve got great stories to tell. I’m thinking of writing them down, finally putting that damn blog my therapist made me start to use.”

“Can’t wait to hear all about it,” Jack Watson tells his son. “When do we get to meet him?”

“Soon, I hope,” John says. “I was thinking maybe we’d come down to the cottage next month after you get settled in. I’ll talk with him about it and let you know.”

“Sounds great,” his dad says. “Give you a chance to get your feet underneath you, let the bond set in before your mum clucks over him and gets him tucked under her wing like the mother hen she is.”

“You watch yourself, Jack Watson,” Lynette’s voice says over the line. “I’ve been waiting a long
time to welcome Johnny’s soulmate into the family, and I’ll not have you scaring him off before I even get the chance.”

“I wouldn’t worry about scaring him off,” John says with a laugh. “I’m more worried he’ll frighten you. He’s…quite something.”

“Well he’d have to be, wouldn’t he?” Jack Watson replies, “I always knew the person who brought my son color would be someone special.”

“And it sounds as though he really is, John,” his mother interjects. “And you’re happy?”

John feels his grip tighten a bit on the phone, then swallows thickly through the rush of emotion that swells in his chest. “I am happy, Mum,” he says, and he realizes suddenly that he means it. “I really am.”

“Well, that’s what matters to us,” Lynette says with a slight choke in her voice. “Oh dear, I’ve got a cake in the oven and I don’t want it to burn. Talk to your Dad for a bit, love.”

John hears the line his mother was on go silent, then clears his throat. “Well Dad, sounds like you’re in for a treat. What kind of cake is she baking?”

“I suspect it’s the imaginary kind, Johnny,” His father replies, a smile in his voice. “I think your mum just needed a moment to collect herself, I’m sure she’s off searching for tissues as we speak.”

“Oh no,” John says, a bit distressed, “I didn’t mean to upset her.”

“Upset her? Good Lord, no. Your mum’s been waiting for years to get this call. They’re happy tears, I promise. So now that it’s just us—how are you holding up? Got over the shock yet?”

“Hard to say,” John says honestly. “It’s still so new. And honestly I suppose Sherlock isn’t what I’d pictured in a soulmate, but once I knew it was him it’s difficult to picture anyone else, I guess. He was quite a surprise, but also not surprising at all. I’m not making much sense, am I?”

“You’re making perfect sense, lad,” his dad assures him. “It’s a strange thing, the bond. Comes out of nowhere, smacks you between the eyes, and all of a sudden this virtual stranger is the most important person you’ll ever know. The colors are just the beginning, really.”

“How was it for you and Mum?” John asks. “Love at first sight?”

“At first sight? No, John,” he says, with a slight chuckle. “The bond is instant, the attraction wasn’t in question—but the real work comes after that. Love isn’t the colors you first see, it’s what you build with the bond that gave them to you. Love is what you and your soulmate become together.”

“Wow, Dad,” John says quietly. “That’s really lovely.”

“But those first few days and weeks after the bond forms—well, that’s a time I’d like to go back and relive again, if you catch my meaning.” Jack Watson says, and John can almost hear the wink in his father’s voice.

“Dad…” John begins, but his father’s voice cuts him off before he can beg him to stop.

“It was different with your Mum and me, we were just kids. Didn’t know what the bloody hell we were doing really, had to learn as we went along. But you and your young man, well—you’re both of an age where you’ve done some living, seen a bit of the world, have a good idea of what you already like and what you’d still like to try, so you two can—”
“DAD!” John says, with a bit more volume than he’d perhaps meant to, and then continues awkwardly, “Thanks, um, really—I appreciate the perspective, but, well, we’re doing just fine there. So…yeah.”

John hears his Dad chuckle on the other end of the phone line. “All right then, I’ll keep that talk on the back burner just in case you change your mind.”

“Thanks,” John says with a chuckle of his own. “I’m dealing with it all pretty well, just so you know. Most of the time I’m amazed it’s happening at all.”

“I always knew it would, John. Your mum did too. I know I can speak for her when I say we’re very chuffed, son,” Jack tells his son, his voice thicker than it was just a moment ago. “And she was right, you know—all that matters to us is that you’re happy.”

John replies, John swallows against the thickness in his own throat. “Ta, Dad.”

“So,” Jack Watson says after a moment’s pause, clearing his throat. “How about that match last week? The boys looked good on the pitch, didn’t they?”

When Sherlock had eventually emerged from the bathroom that morning, a cloud of fragrant steam following him out the door, John had stripped off his sticky pants and sleep shirt before he realized that the shower water he was planning to get into was completely cold. He’d switched off the taps and thrown on his dressing gown, intending to march into the bedroom and give Sherlock a lecture about there being two people living in this flat and not using all the hot water himself—but when he’d stepped up and grabbed him by the lapels of his ridiculous silk dressing gown, his planned tirade dissolved rather quickly into a heated bit of snogging up against the closet door. After ten minutes of breathless kissing, as he’d turned around and marched back into the bathroom he’d at least had the presence of mind to look over his shoulder and say “Don’t use all the hot water next time!” before slamming the door. And in that same ten minutes the water was warm enough again that he could take a quick, efficient shower then shave and brush his teeth before heading upstairs to get dressed for the day. Win-win, really.

He’d come back downstairs to find Sherlock fully dressed and hunched over his microscope at the kitchen table, examining the basil and garlic soaked fibers he’d stained yesterday. He busied himself toasting several slices of bread, eating his own with raspberry jam (deep red) and spreading honey (dark gold) over the two pieces he set near Sherlock’s elbow with an order to actually eat them, to which he received a noncommittal ‘hmm’ in response. With a look at the clock, he’d downed the remaining dregs of his second cup of tea, pressed a quick kiss onto the top of Sherlock’s head, then headed down the stairs and out onto Baker Street.

The second day working with Sarah wasn’t nearly as strained as the first, and aside from the uncomfortable moment when he’d realized she was staring at the purpling love bite Sherlock had left just above his collar line this morning their interactions had been cordial. Pleasant, even. He was fairly certain that a nurse or two was still giving him the stink-eye every time he turned around, but he had the good sense to ignore it, believing that the shared mantle of outrage would lessen eventually.

He greeted the cases of strep throat, tonsillitis, thrush and pink eye rather cheerfully if he did say so himself, and by the time his last patient was leaving, prescription in hand, he felt as though the day had gone much better than expected.

When he climbs the stairs at 221B an hour later, he is only marginally surprised to find Sherlock
exactly where he’d left him that morning.

“Have you moved at all?” John asks him, pleased to note that at least the plate he’d put the toast on that morning was now empty but for a smattering of crumbs.

“Of course,” Sherlock replies. “I used the loo around one, and Mrs. Hudson shooed me into the sitting room while she swept the floor a bit after that.”

Heaving a large shopping bag up onto the table by the handles, John says “Good. I don’t have to worry that your arse has melded with the chair then.” Reaching down into the bag, he lifts out a small furry toy mouse, a long string tail dangling from the body with a few brightly colored feathers tied at the end of it.

“I hope that’s not for me,” Sherlock says, an eyebrow raised at the fuzzy, feathered cat toy in John’s hand.

“Of course it isn’t.” John replies smugly, reaching back into the bag and pulling out a small wire cage by the handle woven into the top of it, the two live white mice inside standing on their hind legs to inspect their new surroundings. “These are for you.”

Sherlock’s eyes light up and he reaches for the cage, but John pulls it back out of his reach. “Experiment all you want, but there’s one condition: Nothing lethal. Or painful. Or disgusting. So, really three conditions, I guess. Ok?”

“Agreed.” Sherlock says immediately, but when John brings the mice back toward him he doesn’t reach for the cage, but instead wraps his fingers around the back of John’s neck and tugs him forward into a gentle kiss. “Thank you, John.”

“My pleasure,” John says, smiling. “You didn’t think I’d buy Basil a toy and not bring one for you too, did you? I picked up some kibble and food and water bowls for him as well. Speaking of which, where is he?”

“He wandered down to Mrs. Hudson’s flat earlier today—drawn by the scent of rosewater and doilies, I assume. She’s been cooing over him for hours.” Sherlock says with a roll of his eyes.

“Do you think she’s quite safe with him, given his track record with sweet old ladies?” John asks, only half-joking.

“It’s unlikely he’s a serial killer, John.” Sherlock replies, nonplussed, “But we should probably warn her not to leave any cutlery lying around.”

“I’ll just run down and make sure he’s not causing any trouble, shall I?” John says, slipping the toy mouse into his pocket and watching Sherlock examine his new live ones. With a fond shake of his head he descends the stairs and knocks on the partially open door of 221A.

“Mrs. Hudson?” He calls out. “It’s John! May I come in?”

“Heard it, dear,” she calls back. “We’re just watching a bit of telly.”

John walks into the small sitting room and finds his landlady seated on her floral couch and Basil stretched out on the cushion next to her. They both look up at him, Mrs. Hudson saying “Hello” and Basil saying “Mraow” at the same time.

“Well,” John says with a smile. “Isn’t this a cozy scene? Hope our new flatmate here hasn’t been too much of a bother.”
“Oh he’s no bother at all, dear.” Mrs. Hudson replies, reaching over and scratching Basil between the ears. “He’s been a perfect gentleman all afternoon.”

“Well good,” John says, sitting down on the opposite end of the couch. “Look, I know we should have asked you if it was all right to keep him, but it was all very last minute and I didn’t kno—”

“Don’t worry, John. Sherlock explained the whole thing to me this afternoon,” Mrs. Hudson tells him, running a hand through the fur of the perfectly content cat stretched out next to her. “Of course he couldn’t let them put the sweet thing down. It’s not as if he meant to kill that poor woman. Did you, Basil, love? No, of course you didn’t.”

John cocks an eyebrow in amusement at the sight of his elderly landlady cooing in sympathy at his at his accidentally murderous cat. She’s right of course, John thinks, Basil hadn’t meant to hurt anyone. But even in full acknowledgement of this fact he still surreptitiously slips one foot over the silver handled sewing scissors on the floor next to Mrs. Hudson’s knitting and nudges them underneath the pleated skirting around the bottom of the couch.

“He’s quite a lovely animal, isn’t he dear?” Mrs. Hudson asks him. “Most ginger cats have fur that leans more toward orange, but I’d call his coloring much closer to peach, wouldn’t you?”

“I thought it was a pretty good match for apricot, actually.” John says, then pauses for a moment looking at his landlady with a puzzled expression.

“Are you quite all right, John?” the older woman asks him after a moment.

“Oh, yeah,” John says, slightly embarrassed that he’d been caught out staring. “It’s just, well I thought Sherlock said that your husband had passed away.”

“Oh yes,” she confirms, “Got himself into a bit of trouble in the states where they still practice capital punishment. That’s how I met Sherlock, you know.”

“He said.” John replies. “But, well, I suppose I was just surprised that you’ve still got color, that’s all.”

“Oh, my late husband wasn’t my soulmate, dear.”

“I see,” John says, his confusion still apparent.

“Do you?” Mrs. Hudson asks, a small smile on her lips.

“No,” John admits with a sheepish grin. “Not in the least.”

She lets out a small chuckle that ends in a sigh. “It was during the war, you know, and I was so young and eager to support our boys as they prepared to go off and fight. My girlfriends and I went down to the mixers the British Forces Foundation put on for the troops who’d be shipping out soon. You may not believe me, but I used to be quite a dish in those days.”

“I absolutely believe you, Mrs. H.” John tells her with a wink. “You’re quite the dish now.”

“Oh, stop it you.” Mrs. Hudson scolds, then gives her hair a pat as her cheeks pink up a bit. “The young men all looked so handsome in their uniforms, we’d have a dance with them, tell them how brave they were. Send them off with a kiss and best wishes knowing that most of them we’d never see again. And then one night I met a young soldier named Bill. He was bright and charming and one dance turned into two, and then three, and then we sat on a bench outside the BFF hall and talked and laughed until nearly dawn. He held my hand as the sun came up that morning, and when
it was time for him to go he leaned over and kissed me. Promised me that if he made it back home, he’d look me up. Then he straightened his uniform and walked away. I walked home and went to bed, and when I woke up—the whole world looked different. I’d gone color for a handsome soldier named Bill who’d gone off to war that very day, and I didn’t even know his last name.”

“Did he never try to find you?” John asks, listening raptly to her tale.

“Oh yes, he did,” she confirms, “but I didn’t find that out until much later. Things were so different in those days—there was no internet back then, and the aftermath of the war made everything more difficult. I asked around the hall after that, but Bill is a very common name—and I didn’t even have a photograph of him. I’d go to bed each night and say a prayer that when I woke up the world would still be full of color, because then at least I’d know he was safe. After the war ended, I hoped that we’d find each other somehow, but it never happened. And by that time I’d met my Alfred. He was a widower who’d already lost his own soulmate to illness some years before, so I accepted his proposal of marriage and built a life with him.”

“But Bill found you eventually, didn’t he?” John inquires, “I mean, he was looking for you, right?”

“Some months after my husband died, I received a letter in the post. It was from a man named William Martinson, a war veteran living in Dublin who’d seen the news coverage of my husband’s trial and wondered if I might be the same Emma who’d danced and talked with him until the sun came up the day before he shipped out to serve in Her Majesty’s Navy. I wrote back to him, told him that indeed I had once been the young woman he remembered, and that I was so pleased he’d gotten in touch. I’d spent decades wondering if he was well, the colors he gave me the only souvenir I had of the single evening we spent together. He wrote back just a few days later, said that he’d looked for me when he returned from duty. That he’d never forgotten me. I learned that eventually he’d married the widow of one of the men he’d served with, that they had three lovely children who’ve given them seven wonderful grandchildren. We still exchange letters, sometimes,” she finishes, a melancholy smile on her face.

“I’m sorry,” John tells her, clearing his throat.

“Oh don’t be, love.” She says with a smile, then reaches over the cat they’re both stroking to pat his hand. “Things may not always work out the way think they should, but that doesn’t mean we can’t be happy with the life we’ve been given. I had one perfect night and over fifty years of the color it brought me—and lots of other adventures along the way. Knowing my Bill’s had a good life too, well, it’s enough.”

“You’re a remarkable woman, Mrs. Hudson.” John tells her.

“And you’re not so bad yourself, Dr. Watson.” She replies, eyeing him shrewdly. “I always knew there was someone extraordinary out there for my Sherlock. I’m so pleased you’ve found each other.”

“Thank you, Mrs. H.” John says thickly.

“Oh, that reminds me,” Mrs. Hudson says, standing up from the couch and walking into the kitchen. After a moment she returns and hands him a plate covered in cello wrap. “I baked a batch of Sherlock’s favorite raspberry jam biscuits yesterday and meant to bring you up a plate last night…but it did sound as though you were otherwise engaged, so I thought I’d wait until today,” she tells him, with a wink.

“Yes. Well, thank you.” John stammers, his cheeks heating under her gaze. “I’ll just take these then—and the cat of course—and get out of your hair.”
“Of course, dear,” She says with a smile, reaching out to scratch Basil under the chin as John scoops him up and holds him close to his body. “He’s welcome to drop by any time, of course. And so are you, John.”

“Ta, Mrs. Hudson,” John says, then exits through the front door of 221A and climbs the stairs back to his flat. He hears the mournful strain of the violin wafting out of the open sitting room door, and sees Sherlock silhouetted against the window, lost in the piece he’s playing, his eyes closed against the late afternoon light that slants through the glass.

John watches him for a long moment, looking away only when Basil squirms in his arms and meows to be let down. John sets the cat gently on the couch, then walks into the kitchen to set the plate of biscuits on the table. He collects the mugs and plates sitting about and washes them in the sink, then tidies up a bit to the soundtrack of Sherlock’s violin. When he’s done, he wipes his hands on a towel and walks over to the other window in the sitting room and looks out over Baker Street. When Sherlock drags his bow over the strings to produce the last long note of the piece, he listens as the other man carefully lays his violin in the case on the desk, then walks across the floor and stands behind him. When he feels Sherlock’s long arms slip around waist, John closes his eyes and leans back to rest his head on his soulmate’s shoulder.

“The tragic tale of young Bill Martinson, I presume?” Sherlock says, his lips against the shorter man’s hair as he feels John nod against his chest. They stand there for a few moments, content to let the silence surround them. Sherlock slides his hands down to rest at John’s hips, then cocks his head and looks down his nose at the man in his arms. “John, is that a furry mouse in your pocket, or are you just pleased to see me?”

John laughs against him, reaches down and pulls out the toy and tosses it behind them toward the general vicinity of the couch, smiling when he hears the soft thud of paws and the contented purr of a cat that’s discovered a new plaything.

“I’m glad we found each other.” John says, covering Sherlock’s hands with his own.

“As am I, John.”

“Good,” the former army doctor says with a nod, then steps forward and turns to look up at the taller man. “You can prove it by taking me out to dinner.”

“All right,” Sherlock agrees. “Where are we going?”

“Angelo’s,” John says, walking toward the door. “I’d like to actually finish my meal this time, though, if it’s all right with you. And Angelo can cover the whole damn table with candles if he likes.”

“As I recall,” Sherlock says, following John down the stairs “you didn’t appreciate the candle the other night.”

“True,” John agrees, pushing open the front door and stepping out onto Baker Street. “But that time I wasn’t your date.”

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Through the gap in the curtains, the ray of morning light that cuts across the floor illuminates the swirl of dust disturbed by the breeze coming in through the bedroom window. Sherlock amuses himself by watching the patterns as they change, trying to anticipate the direction the column of matter will move next, imagining he can identify exactly which of the microscopic particles are his
own skin cells, and which are John’s. He mentally constructs an experiment protocol to do exactly that; collect the dust that’s settled on various surfaces in the flat over the last few weeks and examine them in an effort to trace their origin. Determining just how many skin cells the average person might be expected to shed in a known period of time might be useful information to have when studying the collected particulate data from a crime scene. Which is the reason he’s considering the experiment in the first place, of course, and not because the idea that his cells are comingling with John’s on every surface and at any given moment is a thought that is inexplicably comforting to him.

Scientific curiosity, that’s all it is. Nothing else.

With a scowl, Sherlock shakes his head slightly in an attempt to clear his head. *Sentiment*, he reminds himself, *is a chemical defect found on the losing side*… then cringes a bit when he realizes with some distaste that his internal voice sounds suspiciously like his older brother. Still, it’s not like him, this bout of lazy navel gazing. He’s still in *bed* for God’s sake—and therein lies the problem: He’s getting *entirely too much sleep*. He’s slept more in the last few days than in the several weeks that preceded them. Even now, he’s been awake since dawn and he can think of several ways his time might be better spent (*eleven of them, to be exact, and that’s in just the last minute alone*), and yet here he lies, contemplating the possible scientific merits of *dust collection*, but still making no effort to get up and do something productive. What on earth has gotten into him?

As if on cue there’s a soft sigh, followed by the rustle of mussed bed sheets, as the man next to him stirs and shifts his warm weight against his chest, then snuffles his face deeper into the space where his neck and shoulder meet. Sherlock turns his head slightly to brush his lips over the crown of sandy blond hair pressed against his jaw.

There are so many things he could be doing. That he *should* be doing, really. And yet he chooses to stay in bed with John. Which is ridiculous, of course. John’s not even awake, it’s not as though his presence is necessary at the moment. He’s observed that John is a relatively sound sleeper, with the exception of the occasional nightmare (*three in the two weeks since he’d moved in, including the one he’d had in this very bed two nights ago*), and he’s never been awoken by Sherlock moving about the flat or even playing his violin while he slept. It is therefore unlikely that he would even notice Sherlock’s absence if he decided to get up, to go into the kitchen and begin construction on the maze he’d designed in his head after John fell asleep last night, the one that he’ll use to test what effect color might have on how quickly his mice make their way through it to get to the treat that awaits them at the end, in fact, he…

“Hush, Sherlock,” John mutters sleepily against his neck, the arm thrown over his chest tightening briefly.

“I didn’t say anything,” Sherlock replies, confused.

“I know,” John tells him, with a yawn. “But you were thinking. Really loudly, I might add.”

“That’s ridiculous. No one *thinks* loudly.”

“You do,” John insists, his voice rough with sleep. “Damn near screaming, that big brain of yours. Woke me up—and I was having a good dream too.”

“I’m sorry, John,” Sherlock whispers, “go back to sleep.”

“I’m going to. I don’t have to work today, and I fancy a bit of a lie in,” John says, pulling back to look up at his face. “But you don’t have to stay, you know.”
“I know, but…”

John looks at him with a wrinkled brow. “But what?”

“I’ve observed that you sleep better when I’m with you,” Sherlock says with a small shrug.

John smiles up at him, presses forward and plants a sleepy kiss on the warm skin just under Sherlock’s jaw, then rolls away from him and onto his stomach. “Go on,” he says, snuggling his head into the pillow. “And feed the cat, will you?”

A smile tugs at the corners of Sherlock’s lips, and he turns his head toward John to find that he’s already fallen back to sleep. He watches him for a bit, golden lashes fanned over his cheeks as he snores softly. His eyes glide over the deep caramel tan at the back of John’s neck, the creamy peach of the skin below his collar, the sprinkle of milk chocolate freckles over his shoulder, the soft honey colored hair under his arms. There’s an entire world of color waiting to be observed, yet this unassuming man is a palette of hues he finds endlessly fascinating. He reaches out and runs his fingers gently through John’s sandy hair, then gets out of bed.

Two hours later he’s showered and dressed and his mice have each completed their first two runs through the second version of the maze he’s constructed on the kitchen table, and while it’s too early to declare any definitive results he notes that both subjects recorded better times navigating the maze with blue walls than they did with the red walled version.

John, who’d emerged from the bedroom freshly showered twenty minutes ago, is now dressed and stirring sugar into a mug of tea that he sets down next to Sherlock before grabbing his own and settling into his chair to read the morning paper. Sherlock returns the mice to their cage and sets about constructing a new maze with yellow walls for the next phase of his experiment. He’s cradling Subject A in his hand, preparing to set him at the mouth of the maze for his first timed run, when his mobile vibrates in his pocket against his thigh.

Retrieving his phone and reading the text, he raises his head to see John looking over his shoulder at him from his chair.

“What, like the one on the board at the yard the other day?” John asks.

“Lestrade,” Sherlock says. “They’ve found a pair of bodies, appears to be a murder-suicide.”

“What, like the one on the board at the yard the other day?”

Apparently, yes,” Sherlock replies, an excited gleam in his eye. “Exactly like that.”

When the taxi lets them out in front of the abandoned school building, Sherlock leaps out the door and bounds up the steps leaving John to pay the cabbie and rush to catch up with him. He follows the flap of coattails through the large front doors being held open for them by a pair of uniformed police officers who examine John with interested silence. He nods his thanks to them and nearly runs into Sherlock who is standing just inside the doors, engaged in rather loud conversation with a caramel skinned young woman in street clothes wearing a police department identification badge.

“What are you doing here, Freak?” she demands.

“I was invited, Sally,” Sherlock responds. “By someone well above your pay grade, I might add.”
“Yeah, well you can be sure it wasn’t me that wanted you here,” Sally tells him, then turns her head and looks John up and down with a smirk. “Brought your little friend again, I see.”

“John is a doctor, Sally,” Sherlock says. “His assistance is crucial to my work, he’s my colleague. And partner.”

“Partner?” Sergeant Donovan sneers. “What exactly does that mean?”

“It means--” Sherlock begins, but is cut off when John steps up next to him and presses a hand to the small of the taller man’s back.

“It means that I’m his soulmate, Sergeant,” John says, keeping his face impassive as he feels the dual stares aimed at him—one skeptical, the other surprised.

“What?” Sally says, looking incredulously at Sherlock. “You’ve gone color?”

“Yes, it would seem so. Impressive bit of police work deducing that, by the way. How nice to see my tax dollars at work,” Sherlock replies, and then cuts her off as she opens her mouth to speak again. “Oh don’t worry, Sally. If you keep up your dogged search I’m sure you’ll find your own soulmate eventually, though I’m not convinced you’re looking in the right places at present.”

Sally glares at him angrily. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Just that it’s unlikely that the other half of your colorbond is lurking in some dark corner of the floor or underneath the furniture at Anderson’s flat—which is where it would appear you’ve recently been searching, going by the state of your knees,” Sherlock says, then pushes past her and ascends the stairs toward the sounds of activity on the next floor. He smirks at the offended huff she lets out and the sound of John’s footsteps as they keep pace with him.

“Well,” John tells him as they walk down the second floor hall toward the commotion coming from an open abandoned classroom door, “I’d say that was a bit harsh, but I can’t say she didn’t deserve it.”

Sherlock stops suddenly, then turns to look down at John with a furrowed brow. “You told her I’m your soulmate.”

“Yeah,” John says, with a small shrug. “Because, well, you are.”

“True, but I thought you didn’t want to tell anyone.”

“I said I didn’t want to advertise it, Sherlock,” John clarifies. “I don’t want us to walk around flaunting our status like a pair of insufferable colorstruck teenagers, but that doesn’t mean I don’t want people to know. Besides, you don’t think I’d let a twat like Donovan talk to my soulmate like that, do you?”

“No,” Sherlock says softly, a slight smile on his lips.

“Good.” John reaches out and twines their fingers together and returns the smile. Then he huffs out a small laugh and holds their joined hands up between them and says, “See this? This is exactly the kind of thing I said we probably shouldn’t do, at least not at crime scenes.”

“Agreed,” Sherlock says with a grin, then gives John’s fingers a squeeze before letting go of his hand as they continue walking down the hall.

The salt and pepper head of Detective Inspector Greg Lestrade pops out of the doorway they’re
heading toward and calls to them down the hall. “There you two are. Finally. Come and have a look.”

The room itself is empty—meaning only that it’s devoid of furniture, not people, of which there are several—the long blackboard set into one wall the only indication that this was once a classroom when the building was in use years ago. Police personnel including Lestrade, a sergeant Sherlock doesn’t recognize, and a few crime scene technicians are standing around two bodies on the floor in the middle of the room. A woman (in her forties, recently married, not a natural blond, at least two dogs at home) lies on her back, arms stretched out at her sides, open eyes staring at the ceiling with a small caliber gunshot wound at her temple. A man (similar age, also recently married—likely to the dead woman given the matching bands, spends a fair amount of time looking at internet porn, hair from the same two dogs on his trousers) is draped over her, a matching wound in his temple presumably made by the small, unremarkable revolver still clutched in his hand. Anderson kneels next to the deceased, a digital thermometer in his gloved hands.

“Judging by their core temperature and the ambient temp in the room I put the time of death at approximately 10 hours ago,” the forensic technician tells those assembled.

“Yes,” Sherlock says to him dismissively. “Thank you for your input. Cause of death for each of them a single shot to the head, it would appear?”

“Oh, well spotted,” Anderson sneers. “We’d have never puzzled that out without the help of the great Sherlock Holmes. This is a clear case of murder-suicide, anyone can see that. So what are you doing here?”

“Anderson kindly refrain from speaking from here on out, it’s time for the grownups to talk now,” Sherlock tells him, then turns back to Lestrade. “What am I doing here, exactly?”

“It’s a bit complicated,” Lestrade begins. “A couple of kids from the neighborhood who were skiving off class found them this morning, no I.D. on the bodies but it turns out these two are local celebrities of a sort, the kids recognized them. Caroline and Michael Pritchett. Seems they went both went to secondary school right here in the building, graduated the same year but ran in different crowds and never knew each other at the time. Twenty fifth reunion rolls around last spring, they run into each other at the event and get to talking—and go color right there in the middle of the party in front of all their old classmates. Local press covered their wedding just a few weeks ago, told their story on one of the chat shows even.”

“All semi-relevant facts, I grant you,” Sherlock replies, “but you still haven’t answered my question.”

“I’m getting to it,” Lestrade says, cocking an eyebrow impatiently at his brother-in-law. “Seems news travels fast, and despite asking our young witnesses not to say anything the whole neighborhood already knows what they found. Phone’s been ringing off the hook down at the yard with people saying that these two were crazy in love, that there must be more to the story. Brought you in to look things over, see if there’s anything we’ve missed. The Chief Superintendent himself asked for you, you know.”

“Well,” Sherlock says, doing his best not to look too pleased with himself, “I’ll have a look then, seeing as I’m already here.”

“Thanks,” Lestrade says, then watches as Sherlock pulls out his pocket magnifier and begins to examine the bodies. After a few moments Sherlock hears him walk over to where John is standing and the two men begin to converse in low tones. After a few minutes spent examining different places on each body he realizes that he’s so focused on the conversation he can’t hear behind him that he isn’t concentrating properly on the body in front of him. Very inconvenient, he thinks, this
level of distraction that is uniquely tied to John. How do normal people deal with this all the time? He closes his eyes and tries not to sigh audibly.

“John,” he calls over his shoulder, “would you come take a look at this?”

“Sure,” John answers immediately, then walks to the opposite side of the bodies and crouches down across from Sherlock while pulling on a pair of nitrile gloves. “Anything in particular you’d like me to examine?”

“The wounds,” Sherlock says quietly, gesturing toward the bodies and pointing to the small bullet hole at each of their temples. “Are they consistent with the firearm in his hand?”

John leans over the bodies and presses his fingers gently to the woman’s temple, then uses his other gloved hand to palpate the area around the man’s matching injury. “Seem to be, at first glance. There are close contact powder burns around each entrance wound, and the fact that there’s no exit wound supports the idea that a small caliber bullet was used. The man is still holding the gun, obviously, and there are powder burns on his fingers, but…” his voice trails off as he lifts the woman’s right hand and bends to examine her fingers visually and then lowers his nose and sniffs.

“But?” Sherlock inquires.

“There are powder burns on her hand too,” he says and holds up her fingers for Sherlock to inspect. “Look here, around the cuticle of her index finger and all along the inside edge of her palm and thumb.”

“Yes,” Sherlock agrees, not looking at the proffered hand. “I noticed the same thing as well.”

“Might not mean much, of course. I suppose she could have, I don’t know, been reaching up toward the gun as he shot her, maybe?” John says with a shrug.

“Perhaps. But one would expect to see a much broader spread of residue then.” Sherlock replies, taking the woman’s hand from John and running a finger in a line between the visible residue burns. “This pattern, however, would seem to indicate that she fired the fatal shot herself.”

“Wait,” John says, looking across at him. “So you’re saying it’s not a murder-suicide scenario, but a double suicide instead?”

“Unclear,” Sherlock says, his lips pressed together and brows furrowed.

“Well, it’s awful either way,” John says, looking down at the woman’s lifeless stare. “They’d waited all that time, and once they found each other something goes so wrong that they both think this is the best solu--”

Sherlock continues to examine the powder burns with his pocket magnifier, waiting for John to finish his thought. When he doesn’t, the detective looks up at the doctor and sees that he’s bent forward a bit and is staring at the woman’s face. “John?” he prompts.

“Look at this, Sherlock.” John says, pointing toward the open eyes of the female victim, turning his head from side to side and narrowing his gaze. “Look around the edges of her eyelids, and here at the corner. When the light catches it just right, it looks a bit—purple, I think? That’s not normal.”

“No, it certainly isn’t.” Sherlock agrees, and then changes the angle of his own head until the morning sunlight coming through the open window glints off the surface of the woman’s eyes and the faint tinge of lavender is suddenly quite apparent. “You’re right, John. There’s definitely a film of some kind there.”
He sees John puff up just a bit at the praise as he reaches forward to turn the dead man’s head toward the window, gently lifting his eyelids with the pad of his thumb and examining the eyes. “Nope, his eyes look normal to me.”

Sherlock examines the man’s eyes himself and nods in agreement. “Anderson!” he calls to the blessedly silent forensic technician as he slips a cotton swab out of a small envelope in his pocket and runs it carefully over the bottom edge of the woman’s open eyelid, closes and seals the envelope and then repeats the process on the man’s eyes with a second swab and seals it as well. “Take samples of any residue on or around each victim’s eyes.”

“That’s not standard protocol,” Anderson protests.

“Neither is failing to notice pertinent evidence upon your initial examination and preserving it for analysis, yet that seems to be quite a consistent theme in your work.” Sherlock replies dryly, pocketing his samples as he stands.

“I’ll have you know that I--” Anderson begins, but Lestrade cuts him off with a wave.

“Do as he says, Anderson,” Lestrade orders, then turns back to Sherlock. “What did you find?”

“No idea.” He tells the detective inspector. “I’ll need to run some tests. The other couple, did you identify the bodies yet?”

“What other couple?” Lestrade asks.

“The couple on the board the other day at the yard,” Sherlock says impatiently at the blank look on his brother-in-law’s face. “The murder-suicide you informed me wasn’t my cup of tea?”

“Their names were Sasha and Paul, he said?” John supplies helpfully.

“Oh, them.” Lestrade says, catching on. “Yeah, couple of kids from Cardiff—recently bonded, just like you said. Just informed the families this morning, actually. Sad work, that.”

“I need to see the bodies.” Sherlock says immediately. “Make a call right now and tell the morgue not to release them until I’ve had a chance to examine them.”

“Well, all right,” Lestrade agrees with a confused look, “But what have they got to do with this pair?”

“Maybe nothing. Possibly everything. I don’t know yet. I’ll let you know when I do.” He says quickly, snapping up his coat collar and heading for the door. The assembled group watches him walk out of the room, the expressions on their faces ranging from impressed to confused. There’s a moment of silence, eventually broken by Sherlock’s voice calling out from down the hall.

“John!”

John turns to Greg Lestrade, shrugs, and follows the voice.

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Following him into the back of yet another cab, John listens as Sherlock gives the driver the address for St. Bartholomew’s Hospital and then settles back against the seat beside him.

“So,” Sherlock says after a moment. “What were you and Lestrade discussing back there?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t call it ‘discussing,’” John says with a smile. “More like ‘commiserating’, really. He
mentioned that colorbonding with one of the Holmes brothers is an experience that might be difficult for anyone else to understand. Asked if I wanted to go out for a pint sometime."

"I see," Sherlock replies. "And will you? Go out for pint with him?"

"Yeah, I think so. Greg’s a good guy, and it might be nice to have someone to talk to about all this," John says, gesturing between them. At the look of alarm on the detective’s face, he huffs out a small laugh and reaches over and cups a hand over Sherlock’s knee. "Don’t worry, I don’t kiss and tell. But it’ll be good to grab a pint and watch a match with a friend again. It’s been a long time since I’ve done that."

"I could watch sporting events," Sherlock says carefully, "if it’s important to you."

"I appreciate the gesture," John tells him, giving his knee a squeeze. "But I’ve already told you: you don’t have to be anything other than exactly who you are—that’s what’s important to me. You’ve already given me color and crime scenes and a homicidal house pet. That’s quite enough for me at the moment."

Sherlock gives him a small smile before he turns and looks out the window, then slides his hand over John’s at his knee and keeps it there for the rest of the ride.

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Walking into the morgue at St. Bart’s, they’re greeted by the same timid young woman who was briefly in the room during their first meeting in the lab upstairs.

"Hello," She says, patting down her long brown hair and smiling brightly at Sherlock. "I didn’t know I’d be seeing you today."

"We’re here to examine two bodies." Sherlock says abruptly.

"Well, you’ve come to the right place then," the young woman replies, with a slight giggle. "Specific bodies, or will any two do?"

"Two young people, a man and a woman, would have been brought in two days ago, named…" he trails off, looking at John.

"Paul and Sasha" John supplies, "Not sure about their last names."

"Oh! Ok." The woman says, startling slightly at the sound of John’s voice, then looking at him as though she just noticed he’s in the room. "And, you are?"

"This is John Watson," Sherlock says sounding slightly impatient, gesturing between the woman and the man at his side. "John this is Dr. Molly Hooper, chief morgue attendant, Molly this is Dr. John Watson, my soulmate."

"Oh." Molly Hooper says, or squeaks, really, her face falling slightly before she quickly recovers and smiles at John. "It’s, um…nice to meet you."

"Likewise," John replies, with a smile.

"Wonderful," Sherlock says with a sigh and a roll of his eyes. "Everyone knows each other and we’re all the best of friends. May we see the bodies now?"

Ten minutes later they’re watching as Molly smoothly slides the second body from a gurney onto the
autopsy table next to the one where the first body is already laid out beneath a white sheet. She carefully folds back the fabric over each of their faces, then steps back as Sherlock moves to examine the young man first.

“It’s too bad about them,” Molly says. “They were so young. Don’t you think?”

She watches Sherlock eagerly as she speaks; wringing her hands a bit and looking as though she hopes he’ll answer her, but the detective is intently studying the fingers of the man laid out on the table and doesn’t respond.

“Such a lovely story too,” She adds, a sad note in her voice.

“Sorry,” John asks, clearing his throat. “Did you know them?”

“Oh no, of course not.” Molly replies. “Not personally, anyway. But when we received the paperwork identifying them yesterday I recognized their names.

“You did?” says John with a note of surprise. “From where?”

“Oh, it’s nothing really. Just something I read a while back,” the young woman says, brushing an errant hair back behind her ear. “It’s not important.”

“Yes, it is.” Sherlock interjects, suddenly interested in the conversation. “Where did you recognize the names from?”

“It’s silly,” Molly says, her cheeks a bit pink now.

“Probably,” Sherlock agrees, peeling back the dead man’s eyelids and scrutinizing them.

“I’m sure it isn’t, Molly.” John says, shooting a baleful glance in Sherlock’s direction. “Where did you read about them?”

“There’s a blog I read. ‘Color Stories’, it’s called. Each week they write about a newly bonded couple; how they met, when the colors came, what their plans are. Sasha Morris here was leaving work late one night when she was attacked just a few blocks from her home. She fought off her attacker, screamed for help, and Paul Robinson heard her and came to her rescue. Knocked the mugger out cold, and tried to comfort Sasha as she cried—and they both went color, right there on the street. It was all very romantic.” Molly tells them with a smile, and then her face falls when she looks at the two bodies laid out before them. “I wonder what went wrong.”

“That’s what we’re trying to find out,” John assures her.

It seems Sherlock hasn’t found anything remarkable on Paul’s body, so he moves over to Sasha’s and gently lifts one of her eyelids, then the other. “John,” he says, beckoning him closer and pointing at her eyes. “Look.”

John steps over next to him and looks over his shoulder, turns his head side to side and then lets out a small gasp. “There it is, the same faint purple hue. But it wasn’t on his eyes?” he asks, gesturing toward the second body.

“No,” Sherlock confirms. “Molly, would you please bring me a clean swab and a slide?”

“Of course,” she tells him, gathering the requested supplies from the nearby cabinet and bringing them over. “Have you found something?”
“Yes,” Sherlock says, pulling down the dead woman’s lower eyelid and pointing underneath it. “There’s a residue here, a light coating of something over her eyes.”

“I didn’t notice that,” Molly says, a note of disappointment in her voice.

“It’s practically transparent, just a very faint lilac hue,” Sherlock tells her as he swabs the substance out from under Sasha’s eyelids and rubs it across a slide, then drops the swab into the open envelope in Molly’s hand. “It’s unlikely it would register at all in greyscale, it would have been very difficult to see.”

“But you saw it, of course,” Molly says, the admiration in her tone unmistakable.

“Actually, no. I didn’t.” Sherlock says, looking up and finding his soulmate’s eyes. “John did.” He smiles, then John returns the expression and for a moment they stand there looking at each other.

“I’ll just log this in as evidence, shall I?” a small voice says, cracking a bit at the end, and then Molly clears her throat with a small cough. “Be right back.”

They watch her leave, and John heaves a sigh and shakes his head.

“I feel like quite a dick right about now.” He says, then laughs at Sherlock as he cocks an eyebrow in confusion. “Well, it’s obvious she fancies you, Sherlock. And here we are playing all moony-eyed over a couple of corpses.”

“I suppose she is a bit obvious about it,” Sherlock sighs. “Though less so than she used to be. She found countless reasons to ‘accidentally’ touch me at first. It’s become easier to ignore.” He holds the prepared slide up to the light, and John comes closer to look at it with him.

“Any idea what it is?” John asks.

“Three, actually.” Sherlock tells him. “But I’ll know more after I’ve run some tests, and compared it to the sample from Caroline Pritchett’s eyes.”

“So you think they’re connected somehow?”

“The evidence would seem to suggest they are,” Sherlock says. “A substance of unknown origin found on two separate bodies both discovered in similar circumstances. Add in the fact that both of the supposed initial victims of two murder-suicide scenarios have gunshot residue patterns on their hands that are more consistent with holding a gun than defending against assault with one, and it all seems a bit too coincidental to in fact be a coincidence.”

“Wait, so you don’t think they were murder-suicides at all, but rather four separate suicides?”

“Yes.” Sherlock says. “And no.”

“So which was it? Murder or suicide?”

“An excellent question, John,” Sherlock replies, ushering John toward the door that leads upstairs to the labs. “Let’s find out, shall we?”

Chapter End Notes
In this week’s issue of “Read This Or Don’t: But Really Do, Because It’s Awesome”, I present for your reading pleasure the 1,800 words of gorgeousness that is The Water Where I’m Wading by the terribly talented DoubleNegative.

Poetic and sexy and downright lovely, this little beauty enchanted me so much that I want to dive through the screen and live in it—you know, just kind of loiter in the corner of the bedroom watching. Like a total creep.

If you share my appreciation for Johnlock smut that manages to be as breathtakingly beautiful as it is scorching hot, give it a whirl. I did. Not a regret in sight!
Happy not-quite-Thursday!

We’re well over the half-way point in this little adventure now, so hang on folks because this train is both off the rails and heading down the hill toward our final destination. Eventually. Best buckle up anyway, better safe than sorry.

Muchas gracias to my incomparable beta, whose critical skills have increased in confidence at a somewhat alarming rate, but I suppose it’s ok if I end up in a puddle of tears on the floor as long as the fic is better for it in the end. I can take it. Me strong like ox.

A thousand kisses to each and every one of you who comes back each week to read, who stops by for the first time, or takes a few moments out of your day to comment, bookmark, subscribe or leave kudos on this little project of mine. I am in love with our boys in this world and am so happy that people are coming along on for the ride. Put your cheek up to the screen of whatever device you’re on so I can kiss it. *smooch*

As always, comments and feedback welcomed, appreciated, and greeted with an inhuman screech of glee.

Have a wonderful week, y’all!

Sitting on a stool at the high bench in a lab on the third floor of St. Bartholomew’s hospital, John Watson rests his chin on a clenched fist and watches Sherlock where he’s bent over the powerful microscope on the table in front of him. The lamp radiating up through the condenser throws his features into relief, shadows honing the sharp edges of his cheekbones and the light playing over the multiple colors in the eyes that stare intently into the dual ocular stems of the apparatus. His long fingers nimbly tune the focus knobs as he studies the sample of the mysterious substance they’ve found in the eyes of two of the four bodies they’ve examined this morning.

When they left the morgue nearly two hours earlier, it was on the heels of Sherlock’s excited pronouncement that while he wasn’t yet sure if the deaths they were investigating were suicides, murders, or some combination thereof, they were going upstairs to the laboratory to find out. Looking back on that moment, John admits that he hadn’t envisioned his participation in that process as purely observational, but he also admits that he isn’t altogether sure what his contribution could be at this point anyway. He’s a more than able physician, a damn good surgeon, a trained soldier and a crack shot from nearly any reasonable distance—but a chemist, he’s not.

Sherlock Holmes, however, is a chemist. A brilliant one, even. And as the only physical evidence linking the two sets of bodies found in suspiciously similar circumstances appears to be a substance of unknown chemical composition and origin, it’s Sherlock’s skills that are in demand at the moment, not his. Watching the lanky consulting detective prepare and examine slides, dilute samples for analysis, hover at the screen of the mass spectrometer that’s currently analyzing said samples, and pace from the microscope to the computer terminal and back again has been surprisingly less boring that it should be by any right. Or it was, for the first hour anyway. As fascinating as the man whom he’s recently discovered to be his soulmate is to him in any number of mundane circumstances, John
finds that watching him silently perform lab work is only interesting for so long before he finds his idle mind starting to wander.

The soft scrape of the lab door opening distracts him from his thoughts, and he turns to see Molly Hooper slip through the doorway and into the lab, her quiet footsteps barely audible over the hum of various pieces of machinery. She walks up to where John is sitting and stands beside him watching Sherlock work.

“Has he found anything, yet?” she asks, her eyes on the head of dark mahogany curls gazing into the microscope eyepiece.

“No idea,” John says, with a shrug. “He hasn’t said a word in over an hour. I figure he’ll look up eventually and notice I’m here when there’s something important to say.”

“I was going to go and get a coffee,” Molly says, “Is there anything you’d like me to get for you—or him—while I’m going?”

“Actually, I could use a coffee myself,” John says, getting to his feet. “I’ll go with you, if you don’t mind? Sherlock—do you want anything? Coffee? Tea?”

When Sherlock doesn’t respond, John rolls his eyes and follows Molly through the door letting it fall softly closed behind them.

“I’ll get him a cup of tea while we’re going,” John tells her as they walk. “I’ve found if I set it next to him he’ll usually drink it eventually. Pretty sure he thinks tea appears magically out of the air while he’s working.”

“Yeah, that sounds about right. When there’s a mystery to be solved, he’s in his own world. It’s like no one else even exists.” Molly clears her throat and looks a bit embarrassed. “I mean, that’s just the way he is. Of course you know how he is, you don’t need me to tell you that.”

“Actually, you’ve known him a lot longer than I have.”

“Right, but you’re…never mind, sorry.”

“No, it’s fine,” John says with a friendly smile. “Go ahead, you were saying?”

“Well, it’s just that—you’re his soulmate. You know everything about each other.”

“Hardly,” John says with a small laugh. “I wish it worked that way. It would make things easier, sometimes. We only just met a few weeks ago. Half the time I have no idea what’s going on in that big brain of his.”

“I’ve known him for years and I never know what he’s thinking either,” Molly says quietly. “But I’ve never seen him look at anyone the way he looks at you. Not ever.”

“Yeah, about that—I’m sorry about earlier, in the morgue. I’m afraid this whole colorbond business is still pretty new to us, and I apologize if we were acting a bit—”

Molly cuts him off with a shake of her head. “You’ve nothing to apologize for. I was just—surprised, is all. Besides, it doesn’t matter what I think.”

“Of course it does,” John replies. “You’re Sherlock’s friend, and he obviously trusts you. I would hate it if something I did made you uncomfortable. I hope we can be friends too.”
Molly Hooper regards him for a moment before her mouth turns up in a small smile. “I’d like that. You’re very lucky, you know.”

“I do,” John says, then pauses before he adds, “I always hoped I’d find my soulmate, you know. My whole life. I’d nearly given up hope it would ever happen, to be honest. And then it did. I’m glad I never stopped looking.”

“That’s nice to know,” Molly tells him with a nod as they turn the corner and find themselves at the cafeteria doors.

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Juggling two full paper cups of hot caffeinated liquid, John nudges his foot against the lab door and twists the knob with his wrist. Pushing it open he’s barely in the room before he hears Sherlock saying his name.

“John, I asked to borrow your phone.”

“When?” John asks, crossing the room and setting one cup down on the counter next to Sherlock and then reaching into his pocket for his mobile.

“A few minutes ago,” Sherlock answers.

“I was getting you a cup of tea,” John says, handing him his phone. “You’ve really got to start looking to see if I’m in the room before you talk to me.”

“Why?” Sherlock asks, quickly typing out a text message. “You always come back eventually.”

“Of course I do,” John sighs, good naturedly. “Does your phone never work up here? Or did you just want to use mine for old time’s sake? Getting a bit sentimental about the day we met, are you?”

“Don’t be ridiculous, John,” Sherlock says, but his exasperated tone is belied by the small grin that quirks at the corner of his lips. “My reception in the labs is spotty at best, and I know from experience that yours is fine. I need to text Lestrade.”

“You’ve found something, then?” John asks, interested.

“Not yet,” Sherlock says with a small frown. “But I want to see the files of every similar case the yard has. If these two sets of bodies are connected, there may be more that fit the same pattern.”

“Ok, but even if there are, it’s not likely that you’d be able to link them back to these current cases, right? I mean, the bodies will be long gone and buried.”

“True,” Sherlock concedes, as he finishes typing and hits send. “But photographs and autopsy records may be useful in that regard. It’s a place to start, anyway. If there are any similar cases we might be lucky enough to find that a moderately observant medical examiner happened to notice something that we—”

*ping*

Sherlock looks down at the mobile in his hands, reads the text then says to John as he begins to type a response “Well, that was fast. I’ll ask him for anything from, say, the last 10 years, that should give us enough infor—”

*RING*
Sherlock looks down at the phone in his hand, an expression of mild surprise on his face. “What’s this? I was in the middle of a text.”

“That’s my ringtone, you git. These machines actually receive calls on them too, you know.” John says, reaching out and taking his mobile from Sherlock’s hands. He looks down at the screen where it reads ‘Harry Watson’ above bright red and green circles that give him the choice to either decline or accept the call. He looks at the phone in his hand as it rings again, then up at Sherlock who is gazing at him with one eyebrow raised.

“It’s my sister,” John tells him as the third ring begins to sound. Looking around the room he gives a resigned shrug and says, “I’ll, just…take this out in the hall, I think.”

Pushing open the lab door, he cuts off the fourth ring by pressing the green ‘accept’ circle on his phone’s touchscreen, and puts the mobile up to his ear.

“Hello,” he says.

“Hello, Johnny.” Harry says in greeting. “Long time no chat.”

“It has been a while, hasn’t it?” John agrees. “Since the day you gave me this very phone, I think. First time you’ve ever rung it, that I can recall.”

“That’s true, little brother,” she says, and John can hear the familiar faint drag on the ‘s’ and watery slur in the final ‘r’ of her words. “But I don’t remember ever seeing your name pop up on my phone in that time either, come to think of it.”

“Right.” John replies. Because, well, she is. Even during the extended periods of time when they happen to have lived in the same city over the years, they’ve rarely ever spent much time seeking out each other’s company. When he’d first moved to London Clara had seen to it that John joined them for dinner once a month, a ritual that his uni student budget was grateful for. But as Harry’s wine to food ratio become increasingly more uneven, John found that the hours he normally spent at his sister’s home were suddenly spoken for, the need to study or a surprise rugby practice seeming to require his attention each time his sister-in-law extended an invitation. Clara accepted his excuses with understanding and grace, but it wasn’t long before she realized that ‘Operation Watson Sibling Unity’ was a lost cause.

“Talked to Clara lately?” Harry asks him, not quite managing to cover the slight hiccup at the end of the question.

“Not in a few weeks,” John replies, with a sigh. This is also true, though he doesn’t expect her to believe him. While he and his sister may not be close, he’s always liked his sister-in-law. Since the night he met her, when she and her parents had come to dinner at the cottage that first summer after she and Harry colorbonded, he’s been quite fond of Clara. Her easy manner and friendly smile, the way she laughed at his Dad’s ridiculous jokes and gleefully accepted a second slice of his Mum’s blueberry pie were all points in her favor. The way she handled Harry’s more bristly moments that night, how her very presence seemed to smooth his sister’s rough edges, and the way the two of them looked at each other with such obvious affection had won the rest of the Watsons over completely by the end of the meal.

“Thought maybe you might know how she’s doing, is all.” Harry says.

“If you’d like to know how she is,” John replies tersely, “perhaps you should give her a call yourself. She is your wife, after all.”
“Not for much longer, she isn’t.” Harry says bitterly. “Turns out only one of us meant that ‘for better or for worse’ rubbish.”

“I could be wrong, but I think the better and the worse are meant to balance each other out,” John says, trying (and failing) not to rise to the bait. “I’m fairly certain that bit of the ceremony wasn’t meant as a challenge.”

“It must be easy to criticize those vows when you’ve never said them yourself,” Harry spits back.

“True enough,” John says with a tired sigh. “Is there anything else you needed, Harry, or was getting that little jibe in the reason you called?”

“I called because I talked to Mum yesterday,” Harry says. “I think this is the part where I’m supposed to tell you how happy I am for you.”

“Oh, well, cheers then.” John says, rolling his eyes.

“A bloke, huh?” Harry asks, and John hears the all too familiar clink of ice against a glass while she pauses to take a drink. “That’s quite a surprise.”

“This from a woman whose bathroom towels are embroidered Hers & Hers.”

“No offense meant, little brother. Just didn’t figure you for a shirt lifter, that’s all. Doesn’t seem like the Johnny Watson I know.”

“I haven’t been ‘Johnny Watson’ to anyone but our parents in nearly twenty years, Harry.” John says, trying to keep his temper in check. “Seems fair to say you don’t know me much at all.”

“What’s he like, then?” Harry asks, either not hearing or simply ignoring his last comment. “This, Sherlock, is it?”

"He’s great.”

“I bet he is.” Harry says, and John imagines he can smell the booze on her breath through the phone. “I bet he’s bloody perfect, really. Must be, hadn’t he, to be the soulmate of Golden Boy Watson. Mum’s damn near over the moon about her little boy going color, you know. Dad too, of course. And why wouldn’t they be? Finally got the chance to see one of their children happy. Who cares if the other one’s life is falling apart, huh?”

“Don’t blame Dad and Mum for what’s happening in your marriage, Harry.”

“Why shouldn’t I?” Harry slurs. “For years they told us how finding our soulmate would change everything—how going color was the best thing that ever happened to them. That we’d fall in love and get married and have summers at the beach and life would just be one big rainbow. What a load of tosh.”

“The colorbond isn’t a guarantee of happiness, you know. The colors are the beginning. Love is what you build with them.”

“Oh, Dad’s given you that little speech already?” Harry says, a bit of a sneer in her voice. “I didn’t get that lecture until things started going to hell. Doesn’t bode well for you there, brother.”

“Good to know. Is that all, then?” John asks through his clenched jaw.

“It’s not all it’s cracked up to be, you know.” Harry continues, taking another sip from her glass.
“Just figured that while everyone else is patting you on the back and telling you how lucky you are, someone ought to tell you the truth as well.”

“Message received. Thanks so much for calling, now do us all a favor and go sleep it off.” John presses the red ‘end call’ button without waiting for a response, then inhales deeply through his nose.

He stands there seething for a bit, then wonders briefly why his hand hurts until he realizes he’s clenching it so tightly that his knuckles are white where they’re wrapped around his phone. He transfers his mobile to his other hand, opening and closing his fingers while taking a few deep breaths, trying to calm himself. He knows he shouldn’t let his sister get to him, that Harry is confrontational even in her sober moments, but truthfully it’s been so long since he’s dealt with her in one of those he’s not even sure what she’s like without the alcohol induced bravado that’s become her trademark.

After a minute or two more of brooding he shakes his head to clear it, rolls his shoulders a few times, then pushes open the lab door and walks back in.

Sherlock is sitting at the computer terminal, hands in his lap, looking over the monitor toward the door as John enters the room. He opens his mouth to speak, but is interrupted by the mobile in John’s hand.

*ping*

“Lestrade says he’ll have the files sent over to Baker Street by tomorrow morning,” John tells him, looking up from the screen.

“Fine,” Sherlock responds, still looking at him. “And Harry?”

“Good Lord, he’d better not send her over to Baker Street or we’re moving.”

A low, soft laugh rumbles in Sherlock’s throat, and the tension in John’s shoulders eases a bit just to hear it. “Calling to offer her congratulations about your big news, I take it?”

“Yeah, something like that.” John walks over to stand next to Sherlock at the computer. “Discover anything new while I was out?”

“Not yet,” Sherlock says, with a sigh. “We’ll know more when the mass spec analysis of the first sample is complete.”

As if on cue, there’s a series of sharp tones from the large machine behind them, and Sherlock spins on his stool and leans forward to scrutinize the output image on the screen. John watches his clever eyes dart along the sharp peaks and valleys of the glowing red jagged line on the monitor, finding the tallest point on the graph and gesturing to it.

“See there, it’s not an ester—I thought it might be, but there was no damage to the cornea or eye tissue, nor the eyelids themselves. Organic, then, I think…the molecular makeup is nothing terribly striking, but this combination in these proportions—it’s quite an elegant little molecule, really. Someone worked very hard to create it.” Sherlock says, an impressed smile tilting the side of his lips.

“But what does it do?” John asks.

“No idea,” Sherlock says, his tone almost gleeful, rolling his stool to his left and pulling open the glass door covering a now stationary centrifuge and removing a small vial. Using a small pipette he
carefully transfers a precise measurement of the substance into the machine and his fingers fly over the mass spectrometer's dedicated keyboard. “I need to confirm that the second sample is identical and then I may be able to synthesize it myself right here in the lab—there doesn’t seem to be anything terribly rare about it.”

“How long will it be before you know if there’s a match?” John inquires, watching him work.

“About an hour,” Sherlock replies.

“Really?” John teases. “Doesn’t take that long on the telly.”

“Unfortunately we aren’t living in a critically acclaimed yet scientifically improbable crime drama, John. In the real world, these things take time.” Sherlock says, then presses one last key at the machine with a flourish. “And now, we wait.”

“No,” John tells him. “Now, we eat.”

Shwelock waves a hand dismissively. “Not hungry.”

“Well I am,” John insists, shrugging on his jacket. “There’s nothing else to be done here for at least an hour, I know for a fact that you haven’t eaten at all today—and no, tea doesn’t count. Besides, the fresh air will be good for you. You’ve always got yourself stuck up here in the lab, or bent over something questionably hygienic back at the flat. No wonder you’re so bloody pale.”

“I don’t like to eat while I’m on a case, John,” Sherlock complains, while the shorter man wrestles him into his coat. “Digestion diverts the blood flow away from the brain, it’s an inefficient use of resources.”

“Fascinating theory. How about you buy me a sandwich and tell me all about it?”

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A quarter of an hour later John’s waiting to pick up two sandwiches (the one he ordered gleefully and the one he had to bully Sherlock into agreeing to consider taking a few bites of. Possibly.) at the counter of a café a few blocks away from St. Bart’s while Sherlock is off adding far too much milk and sugar to his cup of tea than anyone who thinks extra calories impede his brain function has any right to. Thanking the young man behind the counter, John walks out the door and toward the cluster of tables on the sidewalk, hoping to get to one that’s just being vacated before any of the other patrons of the shop stake their claim. He’s nearly there when he hears a voice call his name.

“John? John Watson?”

John turns toward the sound, and sees the raised hand of a lovely woman waving in his direction. She’s about his age, strawberry tinged blond locks falling in soft curls over her shoulders, a slow smile spreading over her lips. In the end, it’s the eyes that he recognizes. He’d never known what color they really were, but the sparkle in them looks the same as it did when they were a soft grey flecked with bits of charcoal staring playfully at him over the rim of a wine glass many years ago.

“Lucy Chaplain? Good heavens, is that you?” John says, his smile broadening as the woman nods her head and rises from her chair.

“Lucy Chaplain-Wallace now, of course. John Watson, this is my husband Peter.”
“Very pleased to meet you,” John says, tucking one wrapped sandwich under his arm to free up a hand to shake the one Peter Wallace has extended in his direction before looking back at Lucy. “You’ve not changed a bit, you know. I’d recognize those eyes anywhere. Though I’d no idea they were so green.”

“I’d no trouble recognizing you either, John. It’s the smile that gives you away.”

“Well, I hope it’s not because my teeth are green. Brushed them just this morning, I promise.” John jokes.

“Of course not,” Lucy says, her soft laugh striking a familiar chord in John’s memory. “A lot has changed since we last saw each other, obviously. Who’s the lucky girl?”

“That would be me,” A deep baritone voice replies from just behind him.

“Oh,” Lucy says, her eyebrows raised in surprise as she looks over at Sherlock. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have assumed—”

“No,” John tells her with a laugh, “don’t worry about it. Believe me, no one was more surprised than I was. Sherlock Holmes, Lucy Chaplain-Wallace and her husband Peter. Lucy and I came through Bart’s together. Though with the way she ruined the curve in bio-chem it’s a wonder any of us made it through with a passing grade at all.”

“Don’t let him fool you,” Lucy says to Sherlock, shaking his offered hand. “John was an excellent student. We were all forever running to catch up to him.”

“Hardly,” John says, eschewing the praise, but smiles at the compliment nonetheless. “Where did you end up practicing?”

“After my residency, I went back to my first love—research. It’s a long game, but the work is gratifying. How about you?”

“Spent several years on the battlefield—literally. Joined the RAMC. Been home less than a year now,” John tells her, a note of pride in his voice. “Still do some locum work, though.”

*ping*

“Was that mine?” John says, as he reaches for his mobile, but sees that Sherlock’s already got his out and is scanning the screen, his eyes narrowed. “Urgent?”

“Molly,” Sherlock says with a small shake of his head. “Paul and Sasha’s bodies are being processed for release, wanted to make sure we’d finished examining them.”

“Bodies?” Lucy interjects, a look of surprised alarm on her face.

“Oh, don’t worry,” John tells her, patting her arm reassuringly, surprised to see Sherlock’s eyes following the movement from the corner of his own. “Sherlock’s a detective, we’re working on a case. Young couple died under suspicious circumstances.”

“That’s awful,” Lucy says, her expression softening. “What happened?”

“Unfortunately, we can’t discuss the particulars. Ongoing investigation and all. Lovely to meet you both. John, shall we?” Sherlock says, then turns and begins walking away from the café.

John sighs, a slight grin quirking at the corner of his mouth. “Got to run, apparently. But it was nice
to see you.”

“Yes, it was,” Lucy agrees, then reaches into her pocket and pulls out a biro. She leans forward and
grabs his hand and writes something in bright red ink on the paper wrapping of the sandwich he’s
clutching. “My mobile, in case you’d like to catch up sometime.”

“Thanks,” John says, then takes the pen from her and leans over the table and writes his own number
on the paper wrapper spread out below her sandwich and then nods toward the man sitting at the
table. “Nice to meet you as well, Peter. Take care.” And with a nod, he turns and rushes to catch up
with Sherlock who is already half way down the block.

“Slow down, will you?” John calls after him, “You’re like a bloody ostrich with those long legs.”

Sherlock stops at the arched gateway that marks the entrance to the park where Mike Stamford called
John’s name just a few weeks ago, and waits for him to catch up before turning and walking down
the path for several meters and sitting down on an empty bench.

John stands there for a moment, then sits down next to him and hands him a sandwich. Sherlock
unwraps the paper it’s folded in and then lays it on his lap. John tears the end of the wrapper off his
own lunch and takes a large bite. They sit in silence for a bit, John eating and Sherlock picking at
the crust, until John asks, “So. Fancied a bit of a picnic, did you?”

“You’re the one who said I needed to get out and enjoy the fresh air,” Sherlock points out.

“True. It’s a nice day for it, anyway,” John says before taking another bite.

“You said I was a surprise.”

“That’s true,” John says around a mouthful of sandwich, then chews and swallows it down before
continuing. “Though I might not have been quite so blindsided had you bothered to tell me you’d
gone color, of course.”

“I’m not what you expected,” Sherlock says quietly. “In a soulmate.”

“Also true,” John says, tilting his head thoughtfully. “The bond did take me a bit by surprise,
regardless of the timing. I suppose I always thought that one day I’d meet a nice girl, go color, buy a
little house in the suburbs and have a couple of kids just like my folks did. Funny how things work
out, yeah?”

“It’s not a contract, you know.” Sherlock says, sitting up straight and turning to look at him. “You’re
not obligated to enter into a relationship with me.”

“A bit late for that, don’t you think?” John says with a wink.

“I’m just pointing out that you needn’t feel as though simply because we are soulmates that you’ve
got to sacrifice the things you’ve always wanted. You could choose a different life, regardless of the
bond.” He pauses for a moment, then adds, “One with someone like Lucy.”

John coughs at that, choking on a mouthful of bread. “You think I want to shag Lucy Chaplain?”

“Lucy Chaplain-Wallace, John,” Sherlock corrects. “And it obviously wouldn’t be the first time.”

“Oh for god’s sake, is that what this is about?” John asks, huffing out a small laugh. “It was years
ago, Sherlock. And she’s married!”
“Peter Wallace isn’t her soulmate.”

“What?” John says. “How do you know that?”

Sherlock sighs heavily. “Blind.”

“Oh, come off it,” John says, raising his voice a bit. “Look, I may not be a genius, but I’m not blind Sherlock. You know, you could just tell me what I’ve missed for a change without being a dick about it.”

Sherlock rolls his eyes. “Not you, John. Peter Wallace.”

“What about him?” asks John, clearly confused.

“He’s blind!” Sherlock declares. “Dark glasses, stayed seated at the table, kept his hand on Lucy’s elbow the entire time, his face tracking the flow of conversation but clearly doing so by the sound of the voices and not visual cues as he turned his head toward the person speaking regardless of the reaction of the other participants.”

“But I shook his hand,” John says, a puzzled look on his face.

“Of course you did,” Sherlock continues. “He extended it in your direction upon being introduced to you and you stepped forward and shook it. He did the same for me, but made no effort to move his hand toward me even when it was clear that I’d have to bend over quite far in order to take it. Which could mean that he’s just rude, of course, but while you were busy chatting up his wife I noticed that the five pound note on the table had been recently been folded in a fairly distinctive pattern, in quarters with one edge creased in a triangle, a common method employed by the visually impaired to distinguish between denominations of currency. And given that Lucy herself is still grey, a blind man would be the ideal partner for someone who’d grown tired of waiting to find their soulmate.”

“Lucy’s still grey?” asks John, perplexed. “How do you know?”

“She was wearing two different colors of socks,” Sherlock says with a shrug. “Very close to each other in hue, I grant you, but this is a woman wearing lipstick and nail varnish that are a perfect match for each other, as well as to the blouse peeking out from beneath the neckline of her jumper. A woman that fastidious and careful about her appearance would never leave the house with mismatched socks on purpose. And given her choice of mate it wasn’t a difficult conclusion to reach.”

“It’s amazing, what you do,” John says, his eyes softening with affection and perhaps just a bit of awe. “A bit scary, sometimes, but absolutely amazing.”

“Simple deduction,” Sherlock tells him, with a shrug.

“Poor Lucy,” John says, taking another bite of his sandwich and shaking his head. “She wanted so badly to find her soulmate.”

“Staying grey is hardly a death sentence, John. Many people never go color and yet still manage to live productive lives.”

“I know that, but…” John begins, pausing to think for a moment before continuing. “Well, I guess I grew up watching my Mum and Dad and wanting what they had—the kind of life they built from their bond.”

“My parents weren’t soulmates, but still chose to build a life together. Mrs. Hudson hasn’t laid eyes
on her soulmate in over fifty years. Your old girlfriend married a blind man rather than be alone.” Sherlock stares off into the distance and shrugs. “People choose relationships independent of their colorbond for a variety of reasons. If you chose to do the same, no one would blame you.”

“I suppose that’s true,” John agrees, nodding his head. “But I have something none of those people had. I’ve got you. I’ve found my soulmate. Took me damn near forty years and the truth is that you’re right—you’re not at all what I expected. But it turns out you’re exactly what I needed. And exactly who I want. That’s the best surprise of all.”

He watches Sherlock’s gaze fall to the ground, then sees him look at him out of the corner of his eye as he slides one hand across the bench and over John’s where it rests between them.

“So you don’t want a house in the suburbs full of children?” Sherlock asks lightly.

“You love London,” John says with a shrug. “And so do I. As for children, let’s see if we can keep Basil alive for a bit before we discuss parenthood, shall we? Besides, unless someone shows up at our door with a baby accidentally cloned from your DNA, I’m fairly certain it’s not a decision we need to make just yet.”

“Less probable things have happened,” Sherlock says with a tilt of his head, looking at John.

“Oh yeah?” John asks, turning to face him. “Name one.”

“Finding you,” Sherlock replies softly, a smile spreading over his lips just before John kisses them.

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The heel of one foot hooked over the bottom rung of the stool he’s perched on, his other knee bouncing rapidly while long fingers drum out a repetitive tattoo on the stone surface of the lab bench, Sherlock Holmes holds a small vial of slightly viscous lavender liquid between the pads of his thumb and index fingers. He turns it slowly in his hand, watching it cling to the interior of the glass tube, careful not to introduce air bubbles as he forces the substance to flow back and forth in the small cylinder that encases it. Every three rotations or so he turns his head to the monitor at his left elbow and narrows his eyes at the display, willing it to whir back into life and deliver the confirmation he’s certain it will return.

“Would it kill you to be still for one damn second?” John asks, looking across the table at him over the edge of the computer monitor he’s been seated in front of for the last hour. “You’re making the floor vibrate, you’re so twitchy. And you know they say a watched pot never boils.”

“Inaccurate,” Sherlock says, eyes still fixed on the small rotating icon on the screen of the mass spectrometer analyzing the sample of the liquid he’d spent the better part of the afternoon synthesizing. “The rapid vaporization of liquid, assuming said pot is at roughly sea level and no other inhibiting environmental factors are present, will occur at the temperature at which the vapor pressure of the liquid is equal to the pressure exerted on the liquid itself by the surrounding atmosphere, usually one hundred degrees Celsius. The presence, or lack of, an observer has no effect on the process whatsoever.”

“Figure of speech, Sherlock.”

“An idiom, to be precise. The meaning of the expression itself can’t be reasonably predicted by the meanings of its constituent parts, but instead has a culturally unique interpretation independent of the words that comprise it.” Sherlock says, eyes still on the screen. “Commonly attributed to the French: ‘idiome’, though that word is originally from the ancient Greek word ‘idioma’.”
“Well, it’s all Greek to me.” John says playfully, and when Sherlock doesn’t respond he simply sighs and returns his gaze to the screen in front of him.

Standing suddenly, Sherlock takes a few steps away from the stool he’s been sitting on then begins to pace in front of the still softly whirring machine. It’s been nearly ninety minutes since he’d completed the process of replicating the chemical confirmed to have been present in the eyes of two separate bodies in two separate crime scenes—and nearly an hour since he’d then prepared the sample of that substance that’s being analyzed by the mass spectrometer at the moment. As soon as he’s confirmed that the chemical makeup is identical, he’ll be able to find out exactly what purpose it serves. The particular combination of proteins present along with the distinctive, though faint, purple hue has led him consider a number of hypothetical reactions the human eye might have when it’s introduced to the substance, but until he’s certain that the liquid in the vial he’s holding is the same one found on the two dead women his theory can’t be tested.

“Poor Paul and Sasha,” John says, and Sherlock halts his pacing for a moment to look over at where he’s pointing to the computer screen in front of him. “Molly was right, though. Their story is exciting. And romantic, for that matter.”

“Oh for heaven’s sake, John. Are you still reading that gossip site?”

“Color Stories isn’t a gossip site, Sherlock,” John scoffs at him with mock offense, then looks down at the screen and reads the tagline under the website’s multi-hued logo, “it’s ‘a celebration of the many colors of love and how they often reveal themselves when we least expect it.’ So there.”

“Sounds riveting,” Sherlock says, and resumes pacing.

“It actually is, a bit,” John tells him. “I had no idea how many people found their soulmate through strange or extreme circumstances. This bloke named Damian went color for the bicyclist he nearly ran over with his car. Got out to see if the man needed first aid, reached down to help him to his feet, and now he and Marvin just celebrated their fourth wedding anniversary. What are the odds?”

Sherlock tilts his head to the side and thinks for a moment, then opens his mouth to speak when John cuts him off with a wave.

“Rhetorical question, Sherlock.” John clicks the mouse and begins typing, talking aloud as his fingers slowly strike the keys. “Dear Color Stories; Three weeks ago, I met a madman in a lab, got kidnapped by his brother, chased a taxicab all over central London, then shot a serial killer to save his ridiculously overdressed hide. He went color that very night. Course he didn’t tell me that, because really, why would he? I realized two weeks later that we were soulmates, and to celebrate he got me an accidentally homicidal cat. Please put this on your website. Sincerely, John H. Watson.”

When John looks up at him expectantly, Sherlock wants to roll his eyes and pronounce the shorter man ridiculous, but instead finds himself smiling back—and when John’s eyes crinkle at the edges as a grin spreads over his face, the consulting detective feels a jolt of emotion deep within that still surprises him though it’s not the first time he’s felt it. It’s unfamiliar, this slow spread of warmth that John’s very presence inspires in him at the strangest moments, and yet at the same time feels like remembering something he’s always known. It’s an odd mixture of excitement and calm, uncertainty and comfort. It’s unlike anything he’s ever felt before…and yet feels exactly right. It defies logic. It’s fascinating, really. And very annoying.

“What does the ‘H’ stand for?” Sherlock asks, curious.

“Hamish.”
“Hamish?” Sherlock laughs, “Are you joking?”

“Oh, really? This from a man named ‘Sherlock’? It’s a family name, I’ll have you know. My great granddad was a Hamish, and he was quite a charac—”

A sequence of sharp tones sounds behind Sherlock, and he whips around and leans over the monitor as the peaks and valleys of the spectrographic representation of the synthesized chemical appears on the screen. John comes to stand beside him a moment later, looking over his shoulder at the machine.


“Yes,” Sherlock replies, a triumphant grin spreading over his sharp features. “It’s identical to the substance found on the bodies.”

“Good work,” John says genuinely, as Sherlock wheels around and begins searching through one of the cupboards of lab instruments. “Now what? I mean, what is it? What does it do?”

“Only one way to find out,” Sherlock says, thumbing off the cap of the vial of purple liquid in his hand, inserting a glass dropper into it and squeezing the small rubber bulb at the end to draw a bit of the substance up into the tube—then drops his head back, raises the dropper up to his face, and squeezes the liquid out directly into his right eye.

“What the HELL are you doing?” John yells, grabbing Sherlock’s wrist and pulling it away from his face.

“I’m testing my hypothesis,” Sherlock says, blinking rapidly and looking around the room.

“On yourself?” John fumes. “What the bloody buggering fuck has gotten into you?”

“What do you mean?” Sherlock asks, confused, then looks down at John and closes his unaffected eye and observes him with the one he’s just dropped the mystery substance into. He can see him quite clearly, there’s no distortion from the liquid. John’s familiar features are as distinct as they always are when he looks at him, with one notable exception: they are completely grey. There’s no shine of soft gold in his hair or the slight stubble at his jaw, no hint of the pink that’s surely coloring his cheeks right now, and not a trace of the warm blue in those eyes that Sherlock has become so very fond of. He blinks the affected eye closed, and then looks at him with the other—and suddenly John and the world around him bloom back into color. But when he switches eyes again, the ones that stare back at him are a cloudy grey, so dark they look nearly black in this light. They also look angry.

“What do I mean?” John spits, grabbing him by his lapels and dragging him across the room to the stainless steel sink inset into the counter. “Are you kidding me? You just dropped a chemical of unknown origin directly into your own eye without having any idea what the effects might be!”

“I had some idea, John. One very good theory, actually, I just needed to confirm it.” Sherlock tries to explain while John turns the taps and water starts to flow out of the tall, curved faucet. “It’s a filter, of sorts. I can’t see any color with this eye.”

“You risked your eyesight—hell, your very life—based on a theory?” John yells, wrestling Sherlock’s head under the tap, attempting to flush the substance out.

“It wasn’t likely to kill me, John.” Sherlock sputters, water flowing into his right eye and down over his cheek, and for a moment he can’t help but be impressed at how steady John’s hands are even as he’s clearly enraged. “The components themselves weren’t inherently lethal.”
“Just shut up, Sherlock.” John seethes, continuing to hold him in place and flush cool water from the inner corner over the surface of his eye and out again. After several minutes he pulls the taller man’s head up so their eyes are level and presses a palm to either side of his face.

“John,” Sherlock begins, but John cuts him off with a furious stare.

“Look at me,” he orders. “Shut your mouth, close that damn left eye, and look at me.”

Sherlock does as he’s told. John moves a thumb to pull up the lid of Sherlock’s right eye, then slides it down to the apple of his cheek and stretches the lower lid down and peers at the skin beneath it. He tilts Sherlock’s head in his hands, examining the surface of his eyeball from several angles. Opening his other eye slowly, he watches John’s face as he continues his examination, taking in the hard edge of anger and the manic twitch of panic underneath it. Sherlock looks directly at him, into John’s eyes that are hard, and focused, and clear…and blue.

“Are the colors back?” John asks icily.

Sherlock nods silently, his face still pressed between John’s strong hands.

“Thank God.” John says quietly, then lets out a shaky sigh before darting his head forward and crashing his lips against Sherlock’s. It’s a brief kiss, hard and bruising, and then he pushes Sherlock’s head away and walks toward the exit, grabbing his jacket on the way.

“Where are you going?” Sherlock asks as John shrugs into his coat and pulls open the door.

“Away from here,” John says without turning around, voice brimming with barely controlled rage, and disappears through the doorway and out into the hall.

Sherlock watches the door slowly swing shut, and is surprised to find himself startling a bit at the soft snick of the latch as it clicks into place.

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Lying on top of the covers, long ago having shed his suit for a soft pair of flannel pajama trousers and the t-shirt John wore to bed the night before, Sherlock stares up at the dark bedroom ceiling looking at the play of lights from the street reflected through the window and up onto the plaster. He watches the shine of passing headlamps reflected there, then counts the seconds until the familiar red glow from the traffic light below spreads over the ceiling again. He watches. And waits. Then waits some more—all the while resisting the urge to check his mobile again to see if John’s texted him back.

He knows he hasn’t.

He’d sent several texts to John in the hours that have passed since he stormed out of the lab.

*Heading home, are you there? –SH*

*Chinese for dinner? –SH*

*Haven’t seen Basil or Mrs. Hudson in hours. Fear the worst. –SH*

*I didn’t mean to upset you, you know. –SH*

*I’m sorry. –SH*

He’d waited in the sitting room, the fire in the grate gradually dying down to embers. After a while it
became clear that John wasn’t coming home any time soon, so he’d changed out of his clothes and
gone to bed. He’s reaching for his mobile, intending to check just once more to make sure it’s
functioning properly, when he hears the faint sound of a key sliding into the lock on the front door.
Holding his breath, he counts the weary footsteps that climb the seventeen steps to the flat, then
listens as they stop on the landing. He can almost see John standing there, looking through the
kitchen at the closed bedroom door, can feel his indecision, can hear the moment when he turns and
walks a few steps across the floor, then starts up the stairs to the second bedroom in the flat. He
slowly lets out the breath he’s been holding, then quietly sits up onto the edge of the bed listening to
John’s footsteps ascend the staircase.

He hears the soft creak of the door hinges, then blinks at the bright bedroom light when John
switches it on, then stands in the doorway of the third floor bedroom and stares at him where he sits.

“What are you doing up here?” John asks him, finally.

“Waiting for you. You didn’t answer my texts.”

“That’s right.” John says. “I didn’t.”

“I was worried about you.” Sherlock says.

“Were you?” John asks, but there’s no venom in his tone.

“I didn’t know if you were ever coming back,” Sherlock tells him with a shrug.

“Of course I was coming back.”

“Well, I didn’t know that.” Sherlock replies, a hint of petulance in his tone. “I wasn’t sure where
you’d gone, or if you were safe.”

There’s a long pause before John responds.

“You’re right. That wasn’t very considerate of me. I’m sorry.” he says, then takes a few steps
toward him. Sherlock watches the toes of his shoes where they’ve stopped a meter away from his
own bare feet on the floor. “And now this is the part where you say you’re sorry too. Just in case
that wasn’t clear.”

Sherlock looks up at John’s face, at the worry creasing his brow and the corners of his eyes, at the
thin line of his mouth where his lips are pressed together tightly. He’s still angry, that much is clear,
but it’s not the same level of fury he’d seen there earlier.

“I apologize for my actions at the lab, John.” Sherlock says, then looks back down at his feet. “I
wanted to confirm my theory, it never occurred to me that testing the compound on myself would
upset you.”

John takes a few steps closer to him, then reaches out a hand and tips his chin up toward him. He
carefully examines Sherlock’s eyes in the light, gently lifts each lid and seems satisfied by what he
sees. “No lasting effects, then?”

“None,” Sherlock says, shaking his head slightly—then sighing as John pushes the fingers of one
hand into the curls at the side of his head and leans into the touch. “I’m fine, John. I swear.”

John slides his other hand up and gently grasps the other side of his head, and looks down at him
intently. “You can’t do that, Sherlock. You can’t take risks like that without thinking them
through.”
“I had thought it through, John.” Sherlock says softly. “The risk of permanent injury or harm seemed minimal.”

“Ok, then let me rephrase that,” John continues. “You can’t take risks like that without talking them through with me. It’s not just you anymore, Sherlock. Don’t you get that? Those colors we gave each other mean neither of us is alone now. I’m not just your flatmate, or friend, or colleague. I am your soulmate. We just found each other. I can’t lose you.”

“Understood.” Sherlock says softly.

“Good.” John says, with a nod, then leans forward and presses a soft kiss to Sherlock’s forehead. “Tea?”

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Two half-full mugs of tea sit on the kitchen table, abandoned by the two residents of 221B when it became clear that they needed both hands free to attend to other, more pressing matters.

Stretched out on his side on top of the soft duvet, one long pale leg thrown over the back of John’s thighs, Sherlock slowly slides two slick fingers inside of the man lying flat on his stomach next to him. He hears the sharp hiss of John’s breath as he adjusts to the stretch, feels him thrust forward to grind himself against the pillow Sherlock had pushed underneath his hips when he bent him over onto his hands and knees, then pressed him down to lie flat on the bed beneath him.

He hadn’t expected the night to end this way. He’d hoped that John would come home, that he’d forgive him for acting rashly, that he’d crawl into bed next to him eventually and sleep. His mind hadn’t even entertained the possibility that John would accept his apology, make him a cup of tea, and then take it from his hands before pressing up on his toes to kiss him gently and softly ask if Sherlock would please take him to bed. And when John was finally in his arms, naked and warm and pressed tightly against him, it never crossed his mind that John would whisper that he wanted—needed—Sherlock inside him.

He’d felt John tremble a bit underneath the insistent pressure of his palm planted at the small of his back, heard him sigh as he leaned forward and peppered small kisses along the curve of his spine, felt him hold his breath when he heard the pop of the cap on the bottle of lubricant, caught the sharp edge of a gasp as he pressed one slick finger at the tight opening between his cheeks, then felt the vibration of a deep moan pass up through his lips where they were pressed to John’s skin as he slid that finger slowly inside.

Now he’s working two fingers in him, patiently stretching him with each thrust, spreading his fingers apart and rubbing the delicate skin inside his arse, occasionally sliding his fingertips lightly over the bundle of nerves that sends a small shock up John’s spine each time he brushes it. Sherlock leans forward and feathers a kiss over John’s shoulder, lips sliding along the rough skin of the scar that radiates out over it like a web of cracked and broken glass. John freezes beneath him, lifts his head from the pillow and turns to look in Sherlock’s direction.

“It’s awful, I know,” he says apologetically. “Just try and ignore it.”

Sherlock lifts his head up, his fingers stilling where they’re pressed deep inside of John. After a moment he lowers his mouth back to John’s shoulder, lips resting softly against the center of the raised skin there. “Ignore it? Why would I do that, John? It’s extraordinary.”

“It’s ugly.”
“It’s isn’t,” Sherlock insists, whispering against John’s shoulder. Picking up a steady rhythm again with his fingers, he presses a wet kiss to the knotted tissue, lays his tongue flat against it and traces the lines of the scar where they fan out from the wound at the center, talking to John between kisses. “It’s fascinating. The contrast against your skin in veins of pink, and peach, and coral, and blush, and red—perfect red. The skin is stronger here, knitted back together. This is where you were broken, and made whole again. It’s beautiful.”

John presses up on his elbows then, turns and captures Sherlock’s mouth and rolls onto his side curling a fist into the taller man’s dark curls. Sherlock’s tightens his arm around John, pulling him close while still working two fingers deep inside him. Kissing him deeply, he slides his hand out from between John’s cheeks and stifles the moan of protest by pressing his mouth more firmly against John’s, then pushes his slick palm to John’s hip to urge him down on his back beneath him. Sliding his hand down the inside of John’s thigh and pressing his leg up at the knee, Sherlock directs John to plant his foot flat on the bed and drop his raised knee outward, opening himself wide. He slides three fingers up inside John then, twisting and thrusting while plundering his mouth, licking inside and tasting passion, and want, and a hint of the tea they hadn’t bothered to finish earlier.

With infinite patience, Sherlock works him open, prepares him slowly and carefully until John is a quivering mass beneath him, sweat soaking his brow and belly slick with pre-cum where his leaking cock is pressed hard against it. He carefully slides his fingers out of John, sits up and pushes a pillow up against the headboard, then turns and presses his back against it. He reaches for the bottle of lube, slicks himself with a generous amount of it, then extends his hand to John, who takes it and sits up next to him. Wrapping a palm around the back of John’s neck, Sherlock pulls him into a kiss, then encourages him to throw a knee over his legs and straddle his lap.

“You’ll have more control this way,” he tells him, dropping one hand to John’s hip and reaching down to grab his own slick cock with the other. John raises up onto his knees and Sherlock lines them up and presses a kiss to John’s mouth, nipping softly at his bottom lip. “Whenever you’re ready.”

John takes a deep breath and slowly slides down onto him, and Sherlock watches his cock disappearing into the tight, slick heat of the man on his lap. He wants to watch John as he moves, wants to see every expression on his face, feel every shiver, hear every moan. But buried deep inside his soulmate like this his senses seem to fail, betray him by not allowing him the experience he wants—but giving him something so much more intense in return. Colors fire behind his eyes, light and heat spark across his skin with every slick slide into John. He wraps his arms around him, holds him close and rocks him where they’re joined, hears him moan and gasp, feels the tension build slowly in his muscles until he stiffens and there’s a hot spatter against his chest as John comes crying out his name. Sherlock stills for a moment, relishing the tight heat wrapped around him, then buries his teeth in the soft space above a collar bone and comes, pulsing deep within John, emptying himself.

John collapses against his chest, heavy breaths puffing into the crook of his neck where his head has fallen onto Sherlock’s shoulder. He leans back slowly against the headboard and cradles the man in his arms, running the palms of his hands over the rapidly cooling sweat-slick skin of his back. After a few minutes John shifts his knees a bit, and Sherlock’s breath hitches as he slips out of him, a small moan escaping John’s throat at the same time. He tightens his arms around the solid bundle of John in his lap, and the smaller man relaxes against him, turning his head to look up at Sherlock’s face.

“Good thing there’s an upside to you making me furious, huh?” John says with a tired smile.

Sherlock looks thoughtful for a moment, considering the possibilities.
“No,” John admonishes, sitting up suddenly and pointing a finger at him while shaking his head. “I know that look—you’d better not be coming up with reasons to fight with me just to get to the make-up sex.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it, John.”

“Yeah, you would. And I’m not sure which is worse—the fact that you would do it, or that I would probably let you.” John says fondly, running his fingers through Sherlock’s sweat soaked curls, then rises up on his knees and climbs off the bed. “Come on, let’s get cleaned up. I’m exhausted.”

Much later, long after they’d taken a quick shower, brushed their teeth, and a cursory examination of the duvet had revealed it will need to be laundered in the morning, Sherlock is lying on his back under the covers with John pressed up against his side huffing quiet snores into his shoulder. He’s not particularly tired, but nor is he willing to let go of John at the moment, so instead he stares at the ceiling, thinking about the light purple liquid that robbed him of the colors that have already become his new normal and wonders about the two other sets of eyes he found it in. It’s unlikely they’d administered the chemical themselves, so how did it get there? And what did they think when they opened their eyes? If the next time he opened his eyes, the world was grey—if he believed that John was dead, what might he be driven to do?

He pulls the sleeping man next to him a bit closer, brushes his lips over his forehead, then runs a long finger over the slightly raised impression his teeth left near the top of John’s shoulder earlier. He traces the mark, and though he can’t see what color it is in the dark, he imagines that with every pass of his fingertip he can feel that it’s red.

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Stepping behind his leather armchair next to the fireplace, Sherlock bends over and grabs it by the arms, rotates it ninety degrees to the left, and then slides it forward a meter and a half over the floor until he’s satisfied with its new placement. He steps in front of it, slips his hands underneath the edges on either side of the dressing gown he’s wearing, flips the silk fabric up dramatically behind him, then falls back heavily into the chair, admiring his handiwork on the wall above the couch. It’s hardly the first time he’s redecorated that particular patch of wallpaper, but now even the bright yellow smiley face he’d spray-painted there is covered with a collection of papers and photographs that are of a much less cheery variety.

True to his word, Lestrade had sent over copies of all the case files from the last ten years that featured circumstances similar to the suspected murder-suicides he and John are investigating. When the delivery had arrived three mornings ago, John had looked at the stack of boxes with sad eyes and said that if there were that many couples dying violent deaths at the hands of their loved ones then he may as well go ahead and proclaim his faith in humanity dead as well. A short but heated snog against the sitting room wall was sufficient to restore enough of that faith that he’d left for his shift at the surgery with a smile on his face again. As soon as he was out the door, Sherlock turned back to the boxes and got to work.

Of the nearly one hundred and twenty cases Lestrade sent over, Sherlock was able to discount most of them after just a cursory look at the evidence. The day after the files arrived, he’d managed to whittle that number down to twenty-one cases. Today he’s narrowed it down further to seven.

Seven pairs, seven bonded couples who were found dead as a result of a single gunshot to the temple, the weapon still clutched in the assumed murderer’s hand—including young Sasha and Paul (the mugging victim and her good Samaritan) and the Pritchetts (the erstwhile secondary school strangers turned soulmates).

Now the sitting room wall is papered with crime scene photos, autopsy sketches, coroner’s reports,
detective statements, obituary notices, and photographs of each of the couples in their happier days, smiling for the camera. It’s a mass of jumbled information, each piece tacked to the wall in an order that seems only to make sense to him, taut strings of bright red yarn connecting various pieces of information in a criss-cross pattern. He sits in his chair and focuses on the data, reordering the sheets and photos and reports in his mind, his steepled fingers pressed to his lips.

He has no idea how long he’s been sitting this way, but when he hears John ask him that very question he looks over to where his soulmate stands in a room gone nearly dark since last he noticed.

“Anything new?” John asks, walking over to stand beside him and surveying the seeming chaos tacked up on the sitting room wall.

“Nothing important,” Sherlock says. “I searched for coverage of their deaths, but it was spotty at best. General notices in the obituary pages, a few words from friends on the dedicated tribute sites set up by the funeral homes. Not particularly illuminating.”

“Well, they’re difficult cases to talk about, aren’t they?” John slides a hand onto Sherlock’s shoulder and squeezes lightly. “Some funerals are a celebration of the life the person lived, others are shrouded by the tragedy of their death. It’s hard enough to lose a loved one, even harder when that life was ended violently—especially by someone who was supposed to cherish them above all others.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Sherlock concedes.

“Oh, I like the sound of that. I should have you say that again so I can make a recording.”

*ping*

John pulls his mobile phone from his pocket and reads the message that’s just come in, heaves a deep sigh that could also pass for a growl, then looks up to find Sherlock cocking an eyebrow at him.

“Just Harry,” John says. “Second text since I left the surgery saying ‘Call me’. She’s probably drunk and has run out of other people to bother with her hard luck tales. Talking to her once this week was quite enough, thanks.”

Sherlock nods and goes back to looking at his evidence board, and John leans over to plant a kiss in his curls—then stands suddenly, his nose wrinkled slightly, then steps back and looks Sherlock up and down. “You’ve been wearing those clothes for nearly three days now, you realize.”

“Busy,” Sherlock says simply, gesturing to the wall.

“Right. But I highly doubt the case would be adversely affected by your taking a few moments away to have a shower. You’ve got a closet full of ridiculously expensive suits. Why don’t you go get cleaned up, put one on, and let’s go out.”

“Go out where?” Sherlock asks, suspiciously.

“Don’t care.” John pulls him to his feet and pushes him through the kitchen. “Anywhere that’s not here, staring up at photographs of dead bodies and autopsy reports. Let’s go get some dinner, I’ll bet you ten quid you haven’t had anything to eat since the piece of toast I nearly had to make aeroplane noises to entice you into eating this morning.”

“Gambling, John? I had no idea it was a vice of yours”
“Don’t change the subject,” John says, steering him toward the bathroom door.

“But the case, John.” Sherlock whines.

“The case will keep, Sherlock.” John tells him patiently, then presses a quick kiss to the taller man’s cheek. “It will be right here when we get back.”

“Fine.” Sherlock rolls his eyes and spins dramatically, then steps into the bathroom and shuts the door behind him.

John smiles and turns back to the kitchen where Basil is perched on the corner of the table, the tip of his tail tapping out a silent rhythm, his bright green eyes fixed on him.

“Never have to trick you into eating, do I?” John asks him, scratching the cat behind the ears until he’s rewarded with a soft meow. “Come on, then. Let’s get you some dinner as well.” He bends down to pull the bag of kibble out of the lower cabinet, measures out a cup and pours it into Basil’s bowl and takes a moment to ruffle the cat’s soft fur as he tucks into his food.

*RING*

Pulling out his phone again, John frowns when he sees the screen lit up with his sister’s name, the bright red and green circles below it giving him the option to either decline or accept the call. *Red,* he thinks to himself. *Definitely red.* He touches the decline call option, then looks down at his quiet phone for a moment before impulsively pressing down the power switch until the screen goes blank. He slips the phone back in his pocket, then goes upstairs to change his clothes.

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Walking back down Baker Street two hours later, the sounds of evening in London hum all around them as they head toward home. John’s carrying a takeaway container filled with nearly two-thirds of the spaghetti Bolognese that Sherlock had ordered for dinner. He’d allowed Angelo to give him a bit of a hard time at how little he’d consumed of the dish he’d prepared especially for him, but he knew that John was secretly pleased that he’d eaten anything at all. He’d gotten out of the house, he’d eaten dinner, and now John has leftovers to enjoy over his lunch break at the surgery tomorrow. That makes three things he’s done just tonight that make John happy, something which he quite enjoys doing, it turns out.

When they walk through the front door, Sherlock notices immediately that the door to 221A is open slightly and he can hear voices coming from the sitting room one flight above them. Scaling the stairs, John must not have noticed anything amiss because he’s saying something (about the cat, maybe?) But Sherlock isn’t really listening, too intent on discovering exactly who is in their flat (Two voices, both female, one familiar—Mrs. Hudson, voice quiet but tone distressed—one he doesn’t recognize—not young, but not old, voice louder, tone very distressed). Cresting the second run of stairs, he looks through the doorway to see their landlady wringing her hands and talking softly to a woman he’s never seen before but who looks strangely familiar nonetheless. (Early forties, professional career judging by the quality of her clothing and shoes. Shoulder length sandy hair—a bit of grey at the temples, but it suits her, a slight slur to her words as she speaks to their landlady. Drunk? Probably, but also clearly distressed, the skin around her eyes swollen and puffy, red rims surround eyes that are blue…a deep blue just like John’s.) And though Sherlock has never met her, he knows exactly who she is.

“Harry?” John says from behind him, then walks around Sherlock to stand in front of his sister.

“What are you doing here?”
“You weren’t answering your phone,” she says, with a snuffle.

“I know, but that doesn’t answer my question,” John says, his jaw set and looking just a bit embarrassed.

“Aunt Margery called me, because I’m the oldest and all—and I tried to call you but you wouldn’t pick up.” Harry says, her face scrunching up as though with pain. “Dad’s dead.”

There’s a moment of silence just then, the peculiar absence of sound that feels as though all the air in the room’s been sucked out through the windows—then it’s broken by a wail from Harry Watson’s throat as she rushes forward and throws her arms around her younger brother, tears flowing down her cheeks and into the fabric at his shoulder. Sherlock watches John extract one arm from between them and put it awkwardly around her, his voice quiet as he asks “How?”

“Heart attack,” Harry gulps out between sobs. “Tonight, at home. Mum found him and called the ambulance, but by the time they arrived, he was gone.”

John stands still, his face like stone, as Harry continues to cry and cling to him. Sherlock looks over at Mrs. Hudson who looks stricken, fingertips pressed to her pursed lips. He catches her eye and nods toward the Watson siblings, and his clever landlady nods back in understanding then walks forward and puts a soft hand on Harry’s shoulder.

“There, there dear. You’ve had such a shock. Come and sit down for a bit,” Mrs. Hudson tells her softly, then gently pulls her away from John and toward the couch.

Sherlock steps around to face John, then looks down at his chest—at the crushed takeaway container he’s clutching in one arm and the remains of the spaghetti Bolognese pressed all down the front of his jumper and shirt. He reaches out and gently takes the ruined container from his hand, and John looks at him, then down his own front.

“Oh no,” John says, quietly. “Look at this mess.”

“It’s all right, John,” Sherlock tells him. “Let’s just get you cleaned up a bit and then we can—”

“No—it’s fine. I’ll just go and have a quick shower, I think,” John says, looking up and giving a sharp nod. “If you’ll excuse me.”

Sherlock watches him turn and march down the hall, sees the bathroom door close behind him, then after a few moments hears the hiss of the shower as John turns on the taps. He stands there for a moment, pasta and red sauce dripping down his wrists. He looks off toward the closed bathroom door, then over to where their wonderful landlady is comforting Harry Watson on the couch—and realizes that for perhaps the first time in his life he has no idea what to do next. Mrs. Hudson rises and crosses over to him, lays a motherly hand on his cheek and smiles softly.

“I’ll just go and make us some tea, shall I?” she asks, then pats him on the shoulder.

He watches her walk into the kitchen, then shakes his head a bit to clear it. He looks around at the flat, thinks about the days that surely lie ahead and then begins to make a mental list of things that he’ll need to do. He can do this. He’s English. He’s got to do something, and tea seems like a good place to start.

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Forty five minutes later, the flat is quiet except for the steady thrum of the shower still beating down against the floor of the bathtub. Sherlock stands in the hall outside the bathroom, a clean pair of
boxers and a soft t-shirt for John in his hands, and knocks gently on the door. When there’s no
response, he knocks again a bit louder.

“John? I’ve brought you some night clothes. I’ll just put them on the tank for you, all right?” he
says, then turns the door handle and walks into the bathroom. He sets the folded items down, sees
John’s stained discarded clothing in a heap on the floor, then turns toward the shower where the
curtain is pulled away from the far wall by several inches. Glancing into the gap, he can see one tan,
freckled shoulder sticking out just over the lip of the tub. Walking over and pulling back the curtain
a bit, he sees John sitting at the back of the bath, his arms around his drawn up knees, his jaw
trembling. Extending a hand in the stream of water, Sherlock pulls it back quickly when he finds it
has gone ice cold, then reaches into the shower and shuts off the taps.

Grabbing a thick towel from the cupboard, he pulls back the curtain and crouches down next to the
tub, then unfolds the towel and drapes it around John’s shoulders. He stretches out a hand and John
looks at it, then over at Sherlock’s face, and reaches out and grabs it with cold fingers. Sherlock
helps him out of the tub, dries him off gently and efficiently, helps him into the pants and shirt he
brought from upstairs, and then wraps him in his robe. He leads him out to the kitchen table and sets
a steaming cup of tea in front of him a few minutes later. Taking the seat next to him, Sherlock
pushes the tea toward John.

“Drink,” He says firmly, but gently. “You’re freezing. It will warm you up.”

John does as he’s told, and a few sips later there’s a bit of color back in his cheeks. Sherlock reaches
over to lay a hand gently at his wrist (pulse a bit weak, confusion, clammy skin, clearly in shock—
where’s a bloody orange blanket when you need one?) and John stares up at him, eyes crinkling at
the corners looking stricken.

“I need to call my Mum,” he says.

“It’s very late,” Sherlock says gently. “The doctor gave her a sedative to help her sleep.”

John looks confused. “You’ve spoken to her?”

“To your Aunt Margery,” Sherlock explains. “She’s with her tonight, we’ll leave first thing in the
morning.”

“We?”

“You, Harry and I.”

John looks around the flat as if he’s just noticed they’re alone. “Where is Harry?”

“She’s in the bedroom upstairs, asleep.” Sherlock tells him. “I thought it best she didn’t drive home.”

“You don’t have to come, you know.” John says quietly, staring at the table.

“Of course I’m coming, John. Don’t be ridiculous.” Sherlock replies, then pauses and looks at John
carefully before continuing. “Unless…you’d rather I didn’t?”

“No,” John says, eyes snapping up to meet his. “Please. I want you to.”

“Then it’s settled. Mycroft has dispatched someone to fetch Harry’s things, and he’s sending a car in
the morning. We’ll leave at eight.”

“What about the case?”
“The case will keep, John,” Sherlock assures him. “It will still be here when we get back.”

John nods, his lips turning up in the barest of smiles, and Sherlock extends his hand in invitation. He leads him to the bedroom, tucks him under the covers, then slides into bed next to him. They lie there for a bit, staring at the ceiling. Sherlock can hear John’s even breaths as he lays awake beside him.

“He wasn’t feeling well, you know,” John whispers. “Mum told me that. Asked me to talk to him about seeing the doctor. I said I would, but I forgot.”

Sherlock rolls over onto his side to face John in the dark. “This wasn’t your fault, John.”

Sherlock sees his soulmate’s shadowy profile nod, then watches as he raises one arm and lays the palm of his hand over his eyes, feels the soft tremor in the mattress as John’s shoulders start to shake and hears a strangled cry bubble up out of his throat. Sherlock closes the space between them, reaches over John’s chest to softly grip his shoulder, then rolls him onto his side and pulls him into his arms, tucking his head into the crook of his neck. He holds him there in the dark, soft sobs the only sound in the room.

Chapter End Notes

In this week’s installment of “Quit telling me what to read, Sara—YOU’RE NOT THE BOSS OF ME!” I submit for your reading pleasure the teenlock epic <a href="https://archiveofourown.org/works/3663062" target="_blank">Cracks in the Wall</a> by the wonderfully talented sweetcupncakes.

If there was a “creepy literary groupie” button next to the “kudos” option, I would totally click it for her. Read anything she writes, it’s all fabulous. But if you’ve somehow NOT yet read this fic, crawl out from below that rock you’ve been living under and get reading, already.

It’s hot, and sweet, well crafted, brilliantly written, perfectly paced, and all around amazing. Other than that...it’s just ok. ;)

And it turns out that if you’re reading MY fic, then you should read hers—because it was that little masterpiece that convinced me there were still new stories about our boys out there waiting to be told. Which kind of makes “Colors” her fault. So consider that buck passed.

“Cracks in the Wall” by sweetcupncakes. Read it. Love it. And try not to sprain your finger getting it into your bookmarks.
Chapter Notes

Happy not-necessarily-Thursday, all!

Ever wonder what a washcloth feels like when it’s all soaked with soap and water and then you ring it out within an inch of its life until it’s wrinkled and misshapen and nearly dry? Well I don’t, because that’s pretty much exactly how this chapter made me feel. I had a lot of feelings, and they had to go somewhere. Fair warning.

Big hugs to my beta for putting up with me lately, killing Jack Watson took its toll on my admittedly already tenuous grip on what’s left of my sanity. Her focus and ruthless dedication to doing what’s in the best interest of the story continues to be invaluable.

Continued totally appropriate and not-at-all-bordering-on-creepy affection to everyone who has taken time out of their day to read, comment, subscribe, bookmark and leave kudos. Our story is headed into the homestretch, and I’m so thankful to everyone who’s come along for the ride. Have a wonderful week, see you in 7.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

John Watson has always liked flowers.

It’s not the manliest of things to admit, perhaps, but it’s true nonetheless. His mother still keeps a sprawling cutting garden in the back yard of his childhood home—a wonderfully overgrown swath of wildflowers, blooming bushes, perennial beds, and new plantings of whatever happens to catch her eye at the shops in town each spring. If the sun is out, it’s a good bet that you’ll find her outside in the mornings, a flat basket full of stems in her arms that she’ll arrange into rustic bouquets on the small table by the front door and in the middle of the kitchen table. Growing up, John and his sister ate their breakfast each morning accompanied by the sweet scent of lilacs or the perfume of irises, and when they arrived home after a long day of school or play it was to the smell of tea roses, daffodils, daylilies and countless other blooms that filled the ever present vase at the entry way of the house.

Long before he could see the vast array of colors in their petals, John was already familiar with the numerous sweet smells of the many different varieties Lynette Watson grew. His preoccupation with knowing all about the colors his young eyes couldn’t yet process meant that he was forever asking his mum to tell him what color a particular bloom was, and to her credit she never let on that she was tired of his endless stream of questions—though the repetition must surely have been a bit exhausting at times. It was due to her boundless patience that John knew the sprig of lavender she tucked away in his suitcase when he left for university was purple, that the bunch of asters he’d purchased when he was nineteen for his third date with a lovely girl named Corrine were pink, and why he’d surely have known that the large spray of calla lilies and roses at the front of the small church he’s sitting in today are white and red even if he hadn’t been able to see and identify those colors with his own eyes now.

There are flowers all over the church, actually. Every flat surface (including the floor) is covered with them. Potted pink and orange hibiscus, bunches of red and yellow roses arranged with bushy ferns, multi-hued bouquets of bright wild flowers, shiny green-leaved plants tied with tasteful ribbons,
lilies in every color and size, planters of bright golden mums, and even an exotically pale orchid or two peppered in among the rest of the offerings. From his seat in the front pew, the soft spring breeze that wafts in through the open windows of the sanctuary carries their combined scent across the altar and over the gathered congregation, wave after wave of cloying sweetness hitting him where he sits and listens to the clergyman tell those gathered all about the man his father was, and how much he will be missed.

John Watson has always liked flowers.

After today, however, he thinks he might be fine with never smelling another one ever again.

He longs to take a deep breath, a clean lung-full of fresh air to clear the sickly-sweet scent from his nose and with it the sour smell of grief that the flowers can’t quite mask no matter how many of them they’ve managed to gather in this place. He holds his breath, closes his eyes and tries to quell the panic rising in him that he’ll never again be able to breathe without tasting the thick floral haze that hangs in the air on the back of his tongue—and he needs to breathe…and he can’t breathe…and he might scream if he can’t get some fresh air right NOW and…

A sudden warmth on his left thigh grounds him, pulls him out of the whirling funnel of thoughts that have picked up speed inside his head, and he looks down to see Sherlock’s hand resting softly on his leg. He focuses on the long fingers, the neatly trimmed nails, and the steady heat of his touch that radiates through the fabric of his trousers.

He takes in a shallow breath and for some reason the scent doesn’t seem as cloying as it had just moments ago. He risks a deeper inhale, and the rush of oxygen to his lungs clears his head a bit, the gentle pressure of a palm reminding him that even here—in this place he’d rather not be—he is not alone. He lifts his own hand from where it’s tightly clenched in a fist at his side and slides it over Sherlock’s, then takes one more breath and looks back up to the front of the church, at the altar where a gleaming brass urn sits next to a large smiling photograph of his father—surrounded by dozens, and dozens, and dozens of flowers.

“Johnny, my boy,” George Stevens says in the quietest tone his booming voice will allow while shaking John’s outstretched hand firmly and grasping his opposite shoulder with calloused fingers. “So sorry for your loss. Known your pop since we were boys, and you and your sister since you were old enough to run around the factory floor getting into all sorts of trouble. He’ll be missed, your Dad. Salt of the earth, Jack Watson was.”

“Thank you for the kind words and for coming today, I know my Dad would appreciate it,” John tells him with a nod and a smile.

“John, love, you’re holding up so well,” his cousin Margaret coos, hugging his neck and pulling back to look at him with sympathetic eyes. “Take good care of your mum and sister, your dad would have wanted you to be strong.”

“Thank you for the kind words and for coming today, I know my Dad would appreciate it,” John tells her with a smile and a nod, as she pats him on the shoulder.

“Little Johnny Watson, I can hardly believe that’s you!” says Marianne Fisher, his father’s battle-axe of a secretary, reaching up and pinching his cheek. She looks exactly as he remembers her from the days he went in to work with his Dad—and she looked ancient even back then. “Seems like just yesterday you were asking me for more paper to fold into aeroplanes and launch off the balcony over the production floor. I loved your Dad, you know. We all did. It just won’t be the same without
“Thank you for the kind words and for coming today, I know my Dad would appreciate it,” John tells her, with the practiced smile he’s been wearing for nearly three days straight and a polite nod of his head.

“Hello John, Dear,” Mrs. Harris, his old primary school teacher says as she gently grips his hand in both of hers. “Look how you’ve grown, young man! So sorry about your father, he was a wonderful man and this town will miss him terribly.”

John suddenly remembers that in Mrs. Harris’ year three classroom he’d been seated behind a pretty girl named Gretchen Robinson. He’d been fascinated by the way the light shone on her glossy dark hair woven in two plaits down her back each day. He’d been fascinated by many things about her, come to think of it, and at the ripe old age of 8 that fascination had manifested itself in finding ways to bother, disgust, and annoy young Gretchen at every opportunity. On the rare occasion she turned around in her seat to look at him, he was always ready to pull a face at her, to drag down his eyelids or wrench his lips into a toothy grimace. And on the even rarer occasion that Mrs. Harris would turn around just in time to catch him in the act, she could always be counted on to shake her finger in his direction and admonish him that one day his face would freeze that way and then he’d be sorry—a warning he can’t help but think he should have heeded as his cheeks ache with the smile that hasn’t faltered once as the parade of well-intentioned mourners continue to queue up for their chance to offer him their condolences.

“Thank you for the kind words and for coming today, I know my Dad would appreciate it,” John says to her, his facial muscles sore from smiling and his neck nearly seizing with the repetitive motion of yet another polite nod.

It’s not that he begrudges these people their sadness in the wake of his father’s sudden death. He knows very well that his Dad was a beloved figure not only to his wife and children, but to damn near everyone the man came into contact with. Over the last few days he’s heard literally hundreds of stories about his father, memories shared by the endless parade of people passing through his parents’ home, though the visitation chamber at the funeral parlour, and by what he believes must be every resident of town packed in to the church today for the standing-room only memorial service honoring the late Jack Watson.

Some of these accounts he’s heard numerous times before (You should have seen your dad, John. Walked right over to the man harassing my sister and got him to back down with just a few choice words and the slap of a cricket bat into his own fist—twice his size that brute was, and still no match for Jack Watson!). Others are new to him, but have the distinct ring of truth (After my Roger died, I was sick with worry about how me and the little ones would survive, but every week for that first year an envelope with the exact amount of my late husband’s paycheck arrived on the porch along with a fresh baked pie or loaf of bread. Jack Watson would never admit to it, but I know it was him and your mum who did it. He was a great man, your Dad, and so very proud of his family.). John appreciates their words, their good wishes, and their unwavering support of his mother at this difficult time. He really does. But in his grief he’s begun to appreciate the merits of silence, of quiet moments that don’t need to be filled with voices in order to be comforting and warm.

Three nights ago, when he’d walked up the stairs to find his sister Harry crying in his flat and she’d delivered the news that their father had passed away, he remembers the few blessed moments of silence that followed that life changing pronouncement—the very absence of sound that fell like a warm weight on his shoulders, shrouded him like a heavy blanket cocooning him from the chaos that was surely imminent. He’d fled to the bathroom to avoid it a bit longer, sat in the cacophony of the echoing shower spray until the water ran cold, until Sherlock had coaxed him out with a silent
extension of his hand; and then helped him get dry, and dressed, and warmed and settled with a hot cup of tea—all without saying a single word.

And when he had spoken, it was to tell him that things were well in hand and that he had taken care of the arrangements for their departure. And there, in the quiet sanctuary of the bed they now share, his words of sympathy had been distilled to the sparsest of sentiments, the real measure of comfort the silence of his presence, the safety of his arms as John wept with grief. From that moment, and each since, Sherlock has been his rock—and island of sanity and strength that, if he’s very honest, he would never have thought the man capable of being. In this, as in all things it seems, Sherlock Holmes continues to surprise him.

“Ah, John, there you are,” a smooth baritone voice says over his right shoulder, as though the very thought of the man summoned him into being. He turns to see Sherlock standing next to him, dark black button down shirt open at the collar under an impeccably tailored back suit jacket buttoned over perfectly creased black trousers terminating in tastefully shined black shoes. He smiles up at his face as Sherlock focuses on the next people approaching John to voice their sympathies on this somber occasion and gives them an apologetic smile. “Terribly sorry to interrupt, but I’m afraid I need to borrow John for a moment, the Reverend wants to speak with him briefly before the luncheon begins.”

The couple he’s addressing (Devon and...Sophia, maybe? John thinks, the nice young couple who bought the house down the street a few years ago when the Parkers moved whose two small children mum tells him refer to his parents as ‘Auntie Lynn’ and ‘Uncle Jack’) smile graciously as Sherlock politely excuses them both and leads John away through the side door of the chapel, down the short hallway to the exit, and then out into the deserted courtyard behind the church. When he hears the door click shut behind him, John turns and walks into Sherlock’s open arms, lays his head against his chest and melts against him as his soulmate’s long arms gently fold around him.

He catches a faint whiff of tobacco smoke lingering on the fabric and smells the distinctively strong peppermint scent of the breath mint that Sherlock no doubt popped into his mouth to cover the evidence of one of the cigarettes he’s been sneaking in here and there since they arrived in John’s hometown, but doesn’t say anything. Sherlock is here for him, and if a clandestine smoke between large gatherings of strangers is what he needs to stay sane, John’s not going to give him a hard time about it. Yet, anyway. They stand there together, unmoving, their breathing and the songs of birds that call to each other between branches of the trees the only sounds to be heard.

After a few minutes, John relaxes his grip on Sherlock’s waist and sighs against him.

“Thank you,” he says, his words muffled in the posh fabric of Sherlock’s shirt.

“You looked as though you could use a moment away.” Sherlock smoothes his palms over the fabric of John’s suit jacket, softly gripping his shoulders and pulling away slightly to look down at his face. “Better?”

“Much,” John says softly.

“Good. Because I’ve been entertaining Mrs. Hudson for the last twenty minutes since the service ended and I’m not sure I can stop her from pushing past me to get to you any longer.”

“Mrs. Hudson is here?” John asks, surprised. “I didn’t see her in the church. That’s quite a long way for her to travel just for me.”

“She drove up with Mycroft and Lestrade this morning.” Sherlock explains. “She insisted on attending, wouldn’t hear a word about the travel time.”
“Greg and Mycroft came as well? How nice of them,” John says, with a small shake of his head. “They didn’t need to do that.”

“Don’t be too touched by the gesture,” Sherlock replies. “I have it on good authority that there’s an excellent selection of pastries and puddings laid out on the luncheon buffet. I assume Mycroft received an official government surveillance report detailing the offerings and deemed the journey worthwhile accordingly.”

“Stop it,” John says, a giggle bubbling up from his throat. “Bad enough you make me giggle at crime scenes, at my father’s funeral it’s downright indecent.”

Sherlock smiles down at him fondly, tilting his head in mock apology, and John’s heart swells at the affection he sees in the taller man’s eyes. He feels the stretch of a genuine smile on his own face that this impossible man has managed to coax out of him even in this place, on this day of all days—and suddenly the declaration is right there, just behind his teeth, and he’d need only to part his lips to let it spill out.

“Ready?” Sherlock asks, and when John nods he leans forward to plant a small kiss on his forehead then opens the door and waves him through. “Come on then, once more into the breach.”

They emerge back into the sanctuary to find it mostly empty, the crowds of people gathered having made their way to the large meeting hall at the rectory for the funeral luncheon. Walking the short distance across the front garden of the church, they climb the stairs to find Lynette Watson and their landlady locked in an embrace, tears on both their faces. When the two women pull apart, Mycroft discreetly hands Mrs. Hudson his handkerchief, while Gregory Lestrade places another in John’s mother’s open hand.

“Thank you so much for coming, Emma,” Lynette Watson says, dabbing her eyes with the offered handkerchief. “I’m so grateful that you were there to comfort Harriet when she came to tell Johnny the news. Bless you for being so kind.”

“Oh there’s no need to thank me dear,” Mrs. Hudson replies, wiping her nose daintily and clasping her hand over Lynette’s. “You’ve raised a wonderful young man, you know. Looking after him is no bother at all.”

“Thank you just the same.” Lynette smiles, looking up to where John and Sherlock are standing taking in the scene. “It’s good to know that there’s someone looking after our boys.”

Mrs. Hudson lets out a coo of agreement, then turns and slides her arms around John and hugs him close. While she’s voicing her condolences and generally fussing over him, John hears his mum thanking Mycroft and Greg for coming all this way and for being so kind as to bring Mrs. Hudson with them. As he listens to them converse pleasantly with his mother he finds himself surprised by the exchange—not at his mother’s genuine warmth, or Mycroft’s polite responses, or Greg Lestrade’s heartfelt expression of sympathy for her loss—but at what he doesn’t hear.

Turning with Mrs. Hudson back toward the group, he looks up to see Sherlock standing right next to Lynette Watson, her arm threaded through his and her hand resting comfortably in the crook of his elbow and Sherlock is just…listening. In any other circumstance, he’d have taken every opportunity available to dress his brother down (John counts three points in just the short part of the conversation he’s heard so far that even he recognizes as slowly lobbed pitches just begging to be struck by the swift bat of Sherlock’s wit) but instead he’s resisting the urge. John tilts his head and examines Sherlock for a moment, and the small movement must catch the consulting detective’s eye because
he turns ever so slightly toward him and shoots a very understated roll of his eyes in John’s direction—bringing yet another genuine smile to John’s lips on this day where there’s so very little to smile about.

After a moment, Mycroft extends his elbow to Mrs. Hudson who takes it and lets him lead her and Lestrade into the crowded meeting hall to join the buffet line for refreshments. Lynette Watson adjusts her hold on Sherlock’s arm and looks up at him.

“Your brother seems quite lovely,” she tells him.

“Yes,” Sherlock says carefully. “He does seem that way, doesn’t he?”

Lynette Watson huffs out a small laugh and pats the top of Sherlock’s forearm with her free hand. “Sibling relationships are rarely easy, in my experience. My sister Margery and I fought like wet hens growing up, and we can still ruffle each other’s feathers to this day. But she’d walk through fire if I needed her.”

“I believe my brother would do the same,” Sherlock concedes with a thoughtful nod. “Though it’s as likely as not that he’s the one who would have set the fire in the first place.”

“Yes,” John’s mother says with a smile. “His handsome husband is a very nice man as well, and your Mrs. Hudson is a delight. It’s nice to be surrounded by family, whether born or chosen. Oh, speaking of which…” Lynette says, then extracts her hand from around Sherlock’s arm and walks over to greet the woman cresting the top of the stairs with a warm embrace and a kiss to her cheek. John follows after her and takes his turn hugging the newcomer, and after a moment they turn back toward where Sherlock is standing alone on the landing.

“Clara,” Lynette begins, “I’d like to you to meet Johnny’s soulmate, Sherlock Holmes. Sherlock, this is my daughter-in-law Clara Wilson.”

“Well, for the time being I am, anyway,” Clara says, the pleasant expression on her face falling a bit.

“Always,” Lynette insists, squeezing the arm wrapped around her shoulder. “No matter what.”

“Thanks, Mum.” Clara smiles fondly, then extends her right hand towards Sherlock who shakes it firmly. “So pleased to meet you Sherlock, I was thrilled when Lynette told me the happy news—for both of you.”

“I’m glad to meet you as well,” Sherlock says, and John is fairly certain that he actually means it. “John’s told me how fond he is of you.”

“That’s good to hear, as I’ve known him since he was teenager and he’s had plenty of time to get over being fond of me by now.” Clara gives John a wink, then turns to Lynette. “It was a lovely ceremony, and such a wonderful turnout.”

“I saved you a seat in the front pew, you would have been welcome to join us there,” Lynette says sincerely. “Jack loved you very much—you know how proud he was of all you’ve accomplished.”

“I appreciate that, Mum. I just thought it might be best if I stayed back in the church, kept any drama to a minimum. This day is about Dad, not Harry and me.” Clara takes a deep breath and sets her shoulders. “Speaking of, I should go in and let her know I’m here.”

“Of course, love,” Lynette Watson says. “We’ll be just behind you.”

“It was very nice to meet you, Sherlock,” Clara says as she walks toward the doors. “I hope we’ll
get the chance to talk more someday soon.”

“Likewise,” Sherlock says as the three of them watch the door close behind her, his eyes narrowed and his head tilted slightly as he hums out a small note of surprise in her wake.

“What?” John asks him, raising an eyebrow.

“Nothing,” Sherlock replies with a small wave of his hand. “She’s just…different than I imagined. Very pleasant, seems quite clever as well.”

“She is,” Lynette confirms, and John nods in agreement. “It’s a shame she and Harry can’t seem to work out their differences.”

“Clara still clearly loves your daughter,” Sherlock says, then shrugs his shoulders at the quizzical looks Mrs. Watson and her son shoot his way. “It’s obvious, really. She’s still wearing her wedding ring, and it’s been recently polished by the looks of it. A woman who has given up on reconciling with her spouse wouldn’t continue to wear her ring for this long after their estrangement if she’d given up hope all together and she certainly wouldn’t regularly clean it. And at the mention of Harry’s name she worried a bit at it with the pad of her thumb, unconsciously reassuring herself that it’s still there. And then there’s the diamond solitaire she wears at her throat, a well cut stone in a setting that’s become all the rage in anniversary gifts these last few years—the small monogram ‘H’ pendant that hangs beside it obviously meant to stand for ‘Harriet’ and very likely half of a pair to a matching necklace with an identical diamond pendant next to which hangs a delicate gold ‘C’ for ‘Clara’ that your sister was wearing the other night when she came to our flat. The fact that they both still wear a piece of jewelry so meaningful to the longevity of their relationship suggests that neither of them is quite ready to give up, no matter what either may say to the contrary.”

John and his mother stand silently watching Sherlock during his speech and remain that way for a few long moments afterward, John’s face lit with the fond awe he’s become accustomed to feeling when watching Sherlock rattle off deductions, and Lynette with impressed wonder tinged with something softer around her eyes. When Sherlock begins to fidget a bit under the scrutiny, Lynette walks forward and reaches up to cup his long face in her small hands, looks at him with eyes that brim with affection and unshed tears, then rises on her toes and presses a kiss to one sharp cheekbone.

“Jack would have loved you,” she tells him with a smile, then rubs the faint lipstick impression off his cheek with her thumb before threading her arm back through one of his, and then reaching back to link her other arm through her son’s before raising her head resolutely. “There’s been enough crying today, I think. Everyone who loved my husband is gathered behind that door to celebrate his life. Let’s go and join the party, shall we?”

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When the last guest departed, and what was left of the food had already been packed away and loaded into the car of a family friend and was likely already stacked neatly into the refrigerator in Lynette (and Jack) Watson’s kitchen next to the countless other meat pies, casseroles, baked goods and cold cut trays brought and left by the parade of mourners over the last few days, Sherlock, Harry, John and his mother made their way back to the house that was quiet for the first time since they’d arrived three days ago.

They each retired to their respective bedrooms under the guise of needing to rest after such a long day, but less than an hour later the three Watsons and Sherlock found themselves drawn back together in the cozy kitchen where John’s mother cut thick slices of chocolate cake and Sherlock poured boiling water over teabags and they all sat around the table eating and drinking in silence, the
afternoon light slanting through the windows catching the curves of the gleaming brass urn on the table next to Lynette’s chair.

“Jack wanted his ashes scattered in the sea, on the beach by the cottage,” Lynette Watson tells them matter-of-factly, breaking the silence. “We should do it at dawn, I think. It was his favorite part of the day.”

John reaches across the table and covers his mother’s hand with his own. “I think that sounds perfect, Mum.”

“Yeah,” Harry agrees quietly. “He’d have liked that.”

“Good. We’ll leave in an hour,” Lynette says with a nod of her head, then cuts off a fork full of cake and scoops it into her mouth.

“An hour?” Harry asks, confused. “But—don’t you want to wait a bit, give things a week or two to settle down and then see how you feel about it then?”

“No,” Lynette says decisively, then smiles at her daughter. “Both his children are here, heaven knows we’ve got plenty of food to pack for the journey, and a day or two by the sea would do us all some good, I think.”

“All right, of course we’ll do that if you like, but Mum—wouldn’t you rather get a good night’s sleep and set out in the morning?” John asks her. “It’s been a very long few days.”

“That’s true, it certainly has. But I for one will have a better chance of sleeping to the sound of the waves running up on the shore than I will in this house right now. It’s so…quiet.” A melancholy look washes over her face before she glances down at the urn on the table and smiles softly, running her fingers down its side. “Besides, your Dad would hate being cooped up in this thing, set up on the mantle or packed away on a shelf. The cottage was his favorite place in the world, you know. That stretch of beach is where we met, where we saw our first colors, where we taught you kids to swim. He belongs there.”

Lynette Watson is a small woman, slight and willowy with a friendly smile and a welcoming disposition. But when she sets her mind to something, the best (and only, really) course of action is to nod your head and ask how you can help make it happen.

An hour later the house is closed up, the car is packed, the necessary calls notifying friends and family about their plans have been made, and Sherlock Holmes backs the car out of the driveway as John Watson plays navigator in the front passenger seat, Harry Watson folds herself up into the back seat behind him, and Lynette Watson straps herself in behind the driver and clutches the earthly remains of Jack Watson tightly in her arms.

It’s late when they arrive, and Sherlock pulls the car under the sheltered car park on the side of the cottage where a welcoming light blazes in the sitting room window facing the sea as they make their way up the wooden stairs and onto the porch.

“Is someone here?” Lynette asks, a bit confused.

“I put a call in to my brother,” Sherlock says a bit hesitantly. “His office contacted your neighbors who were only too happy use their emergency key and pull off the drop cloths and make up the beds before we arrived. I…hope that wasn’t too presumptuous of me.”
“Presumptuous?” Harry asks incredulously. “Yeah, I’d say it was—”

“Brilliant,” Lynette Watson says, cutting her off and smiling at her youngest child’s soulmate. “The Thomason’s have been good neighbors to us all these years, they sent a lovely flower arrangement to the church. Thank you, Sherlock. That was quick thinking. Now, let’s get the car unloaded, shall we?”

A quarter of an hour later the refrigerator has been stocked, their bags have all been carried in, and Harry, John and Sherlock are gathered in the comfortable sitting room awaiting further orders. Lynette walks into the room and looks at each of them, then smiles softly.

“I’m glad we’re here,” she says with a slight hitch in her voice. “I don’t know how I’d have made it through the last few days without you, thank you for humoring me and making this trip tonight. Now it’s been a very long day, we’re all exhausted, and I think we should get a good night’s sleep complete with a bit of a lie-in in the morning, spend one nice day together, and then give your father a proper send off at the next dawn.”

They all nod their assent, and Lynette steps forward and folds her daughter into a long hug and then Harry walks off toward her room down the hall. She steps in front of her son next, leaning forward to wrap her arms around him and squeezing tightly just the way she’s always done since he was a boy. She deposits a kiss on his cheek and releases him, then turns toward Sherlock. He’s standing facing slightly away from them, his eyes raking over the two model ships displayed side by side on a shelf inset into the wall over the couch, attempting to give John and his mother some privacy during this tender family moment. John sees him start a bit when Lynette touches his shoulder, his eyes wide when he looks down at her just before she steps forward and wraps him into a hug that is no less warm and welcoming than those she gave her own children moments before. He places his own long arms around her slight shoulders and returns the pressure, smiling slightly when he catches John’s eye from where he watches them a few feet away.

She steps back from Sherlock, then bends down to scoop up the urn on the coffee table before bidding them both goodnight and disappearing though the adjacent master bedroom door.

“She’s right you know,” John says, breaking the silence. “It has been a very long day, and I am exhausted.”

“Agreed,” Sherlock says with a small nod. “Come on. Let’s get some sleep.”

“And by that do you mean that I am going to fall asleep within seconds of my head hitting the pillow, but you’re going to stay up for several more hours staring at the ceiling?”

“Possibly,” Sherlock concedes. “Problem?”

“No,” John tells him with a tired smile, then reaches out and takes his hand. “No problem at all.”

Waking from a deep sleep is often a tricky business for John Watson. As a child he slept soundly—like a rock, his father always said—but rose without fail each morning just as the sun did the same, no matter how late he’d been up the night before. He can remember many an evening in his younger days stumbling home from the pub after a night out with mates and collapsing into bed in the wee hours of the morning only to have his eyes pop open at dawn, no matter how little time had elapsed between the two points. It was a trait that served him well in medical school, and in his residency work that followed. It also made the schedule of a soldier a natural fit for him, this ability to go from deep slumber to total wakefulness so easily, to be at the ready in mere moments at the call of an
alarm, or siren, or shouted plea for help. This tendency worked to his advantage, John knew. It was a gift, really, and one that made him even better at what he was already very, very good at.

These days it’s a bit more complicated.

In the months since he was shot, he still rises with the sun on most days—it’s just that more often than not it isn’t the first time he’s been awakened since he went to bed the night before. For most of his life the sounds of the outside world, the demands of his job or the breaking light of the sun coaxed him back into consciousness. Now it’s his own mind that forces him to wake, playing him loud bursts of unseen gunfire and screaming voices, dragging the ghost of the hot desert wind across his skin, filling his nose with the acrid smell of smoke and the metallic tang of the blood he watches seep into the sand below him.

It isn’t as bad as it was at first, of course. He used to wake up screaming, thrashing, attempting to run from the horrors his sleeping mind projected behind his eyes—or so the nurses on the ward told him. After a while the episodes became less intense, at least physically. He still wakes up suddenly, a cry ready to burst from his throat, but he can usually get a handle on the terror more quickly now, breathing through the worst of the panic and calming himself enough to leave the nightmare behind, occasionally even falling back to sleep until he wakes later with the dawn.

But on this morning, when his mind slowly regains consciousness to a soft breeze flowing in through the cracked bedroom window bringing with it the salty smell of the sea and the cry of gulls in the distance, John breathes deeply through his nose and smiles. He can hear the soft hum of voices from the kitchen, his father’s deep voice followed by the merry sound of his mother’s laugh, and his nose catches the scent of coffee and something else…baking? Frying? He’s not sure, but it smells delicious. Listening to his parents talking in the kitchen and basking in the warm glow of the sun that falls over his bed, he thinks he’ll go and join them in a minute, eat whatever it is his mother is making for breakfast and see if his Dad wants to work on their model schooner for a bit this morning. But first he thinks he’ll just lie here for a minute longer and nuzzle his face into the pillow and breathe in the faint scent of spicy aftershave, overpriced hair product, and just a hint of cigarette smoke. He takes a deep breath, smiles, and thinks it smells just like Sherlock…

His eyes snap open at the thought, his nose still buried in the soft down pillow on the bed he’s slept countless nights in each summer since he was born. He lifts his head a bit, blinking in the bright sunlight streaming through the window, and looks blearily around the room at the familiar furniture and pictures on the walls. At the seagull mobile hanging in the corner, at the shelf filled with adventure novels he’s read countless times, and then at the large suitcase open on the floor next to the closet, at the two pairs of shoes lined up neatly beside it; one pair brown and sturdy, the uppers creased and worn, the other pair shining sleek, black and impossibly long beside them.

He cocks his head as the voices he’d heard earlier float down the hall again from the kitchen, his mother’s melodic tones mingling with the rich baritone thrum his sleeping mind had mistaken for his father’s voice. The voice that called his name thousands of times, that cheered him on from the stands on countless Friday nights, that sang folk songs in an off-key Scottish brogue while he twirled his wife across the kitchen floor. The same voice that vibrated through his very bones when his father held him, pressing his head against his chest and telling him he’d be all right when he’d fallen off the roof when he was eight—and then again years later after he was shot, when John had woken up in the hospital after he’d been stable enough to be transferred back home for further treatment. The voice that just a few short days ago had brimmed with happiness for him. The voice he hadn’t known he was hearing for the last time.

Another burst of indistinct speech in a deep voice followed by the trill of his mother’s laugh and accompanied by the low rumble of Sherlock’s pulls him back to the present, and he stretches out his
arms and legs and sits up. Patting the mattress with both palms, John looks down the length of the bed and doesn’t recall it ever feeling quite this small, but that could be because he’d never shared it with miles of lanky consulting detective before, which did change the equation a bit. Running a hand over his scratchy face and through his hair he stands up and reaches for his dressing gown that waits for him hung over the edge of the open closet door, and walks out into the hall.

Standing in the doorway of the kitchen, he sees Sherlock where he stands bare footed (in his flannel pajama trousers, inside-out t-shirt and surprisingly wrinkle-free silk dressing gown) at the range holding a large skillet while his mother drops a pat of butter into it where it sizzles and melts as Sherlock deftly twists the pan over the flame.

“All right,” Sherlock tells Lynette Watson, “Now add the batter.”

John watches his mother lift a bowl up toward the pan to measure out a ladle of what looks like custard sauce and add it to the pan and Sherlock immediately begins to tilt it back and forth spreading the thin batter over the hot surface of the skillet.

“The trick,” Sherlock says with a look of intense concentration, “is in making sure to flip it at just the right moment, when the edges are dry, but not yet brown, and the center is set but still slightly glossy…which is right…about…now.” And with a swirl of his hand and a quick flip of his wrist, the thin pastry slides forward and up the lip of the skillet, hangs in the air for a brief second, and then flips over and lands face down once more in the hot pan.

“Wonderful, Sherlock!” Lynette exclaims, and John watches the pleased expression spread over the detective-turned-chef’s face. “Very impressive.”

“I’ll say it is,” John says from the doorway, then grins at the two faces that turn toward him in surprise.

“Good morning, Johnny,” his mother says with a warm smile. “Sherlock is teaching me to make crepes.”

“I can see that,” John says, walking over and squeezing an arm around his mother and kissing her cheek. “Not sure I’d believe it, though, if I hadn’t witnessed it with my own eyes. I had no idea you could cook, Sherlock.”

“Cooking is simple chemistry,” Sherlock replies with a shrug, sliding the crepe out of the pan and onto a plate. “Various ingredients combined to create a compound and introduced to the external force of heat and observed until the desired changes to the mixture are achieved.”

“Right. Very simple. Especially when you say it like that,” John teases. “I’ll have to remember that the next time you turn your nose up at something I’ve prepared.”

“Well no matter how you say it, the results of this particular experiment are delicious,” Lynette says, taking the plate from Sherlock’s hands and giving it to her son. “There’s jam on the table, and dusting sugar in a shaker just over there. Go ahead, love. I’ve already had two. Now, I think I’m ready to take a try with the pan.”

John sits at the worn kitchen table and spreads a spoonful of his mother’s excellent raspberry preserves over the thin pastry on his plate; then rolls it up, dusts it with sugar, takes a bite—and finds that in this case, chemistry is indeed delicious. As he eats, he watches Sherlock drop a pat of butter into the pan, followed by the thin batter, and sees his mother deftly tilt the skillet to coat the whole surface then observes his mum’s first attempt to flip the thin pastry and cheers along with her from the table as it goes off without a hitch.
“What’s all the noise about in here?” a gravelly voice asks from the doorway, and three heads turn to see Harry Watson staring back at them with puffy, bloodshot eyes.

“Crepes,” their mother says happily, sliding the one she’s just finished onto a plate and holding it out to her daughter, who looks at it through bleary eyes and shakes her head.

“No thanks, I think I’ll just have some juice,” she says, then carries the large insulated glass already in her hand over to the freezer and adds a few ice cubes before pouring in a bit of orange juice from the pitcher on the counter.

“Bit early for that, don’t you think?” John asks, the light tone of his voice in contrast with the firm set of his jaw.

“For what? Juice?” Harry asks airily, taking a long pull from her glass and then pointing to the one in front of her brother. “You’re having some.”

“True,” John says, “But there’s no vodka in mine. Brought a bottle in your suitcase, did you? I can smell it from here.”

“Not sure what business it is of yours, Johnny,” his sister says, then takes another drink.

“Harry,” Lynette Watson interjects, walking over to her daughter and gently taking the cup from her hands, “Johnny’s right, it is a bit early, why don’t you sit down and—”

“Of course, he’s right,” Harry sneers, looking at her brother. “Johnny’s always right, isn’t he?”

“Oh God, not this again,” John says, rolling his eyes and putting down his fork. “Give it a rest, will you Harry? It’s not been one whole day since our father’s funeral, and already you’re starting in with the drunken histrionics. Very respectful.”

“I’m disrespectful?” Harry bites back, her voice rising. “Dad’s ashes haven’t even been laid to rest and you’re all laughing and making crepes and blowing kisses to pretty-boy here.”

“Harry,” Sherlock says, holding a steaming mug out toward her. “Would you like a cup of coffee? It might make you feel better.”

“How do you know what will make me feel better?” Harry spits out, rounding on Sherlock who pulls the coffee back quickly to avoid her flailing arms. “You think because you shag my brother and see a few colors that makes you family? It doesn’t. And this is a family matter, so why don’t you stay out of it.”

“Harry!” Lynette exclaims, then steps between her daughter and the man she’s aiming her anger at. “Sherlock is John’s soulmate, and that makes him family.”

“Right,” Harry says with a smirk. “That makes Clara family too, then, and I don’t see her anywhere around here—do you?”

“Well, I’m sure she’s very sorry she’s missing all this,” John tells his sister sarcastically. “Can’t imagine why she left you—it’s a real mystery, that.”

“Enough!” Lynette Watson says, raising her voice to a near shout that seems to echo in the now perfect silence of the kitchen. For a long moment her two children stand staring at each other, both tense and furious and unwilling to flinch first...when suddenly Harry Watson takes a deep shaky breath that breaks in a sob when she goes to release it. She looks frantically around the room, her eyes filling with tears, and then pushes past her mother, past her brother, then out through the
screened porch door. In near unison, the three people left in the cottage turn toward the windows that look out toward the sea and watch her run down to the water where she collapses onto the sand, draws her arms up around her legs, and drops her face onto her knees and cries, her shoulders shaking with silent sobs.

Lynette takes a deep breath, then looks apologetically at Sherlock and then turns her head to look at her son. John stares back at his mother, at the sorrow and frustration and disappointment in her eyes, and his shoulders slump under the weight of her gaze. A moment later, he raises his head and gives his mother a small nod.

“I’m sorry, Mum,” he says quietly. “That was my fault, I started it. I’ll go make it right.”

“No,” a deep voice says, and John and his mother both turn to look at Sherlock, who unties his dressing gown and slips it off and over the back of a kitchen chair, then reaches out a large hand and lays it softly on Lynette Watson’s shoulder. “Let me.”

He walks past the small table, stops briefly to look down at John who is staring up at him in confusion, takes his hand and gives it a warm squeeze, then walks out of the cottage toward the beach.

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Walking at a leisurely pace over the sandy expanse between the cottage porch and where Harry Watson sits with her arms curled protectively around her drawn up shins, Sherlock steps up next to her, his bare toes digging into the cool morning sand. He doesn’t speak, just stares out to sea watching the large swells of water divide into small white tipped waves that rush toward the beach and break against it several meters from where he’s standing. Sherlock has seen the ocean before, of course, but he’s never seen it in color—and he can admit to himself that it’s a rather extraordinary sight. He observes the many shades of blue that range from the iciest light tint to a rich deep navy as the water continues its endless roll onto and then away from the shore, notices the sharp glints of gold and bronze and bright silver where the sunlight plays over the surface of the water. Even the sand itself could never be described as simply brown—its countless particles ranging in color by what must be nearly as many separate shades, if one were to examine them individually and catalog the subtle differences in hue.

After several minutes of silence, the woman sitting to his left turns her head slightly and looks down somewhere in the vicinity of his feet.

“Sent you to apologize, did he?” She asks stiffly, no longer crying but her nose still a bit stuffed from earlier tears.

“No,” Sherlock replies simply, continuing to stare out at the sea. “John is perfectly capable of offering his own apologies when necessary, and I don’t believe I owe you one myself. If there’s an apology you’d like to offer, however, now would be the time.”

She huffs out a forced laugh, short and breathy and less insincere than she’d likely meant it to sound. “Why did you come out here, then?” she asks, lifting her head and looking up at him.

“To give you this,” Sherlock says, extending his hand and offering her the large cup of ‘juice’ that her mother had taken from her hands earlier.

She looks surprised for a moment, then eyes it suspiciously—licking her lips and clearly considering whether or not she should take it.
“Go ahead,” Sherlock says calmly. “It’s exactly as you prepared it, though John was wrong about your spirit of choice. Single malt whiskey and orange juice? Interesting combination, Harriet.”

“Thank you for your input,” she says petulantly, taking the cup from Sherlock’s fingers and trying not to look too eager as she raises it to her mouth and takes a long sip. Her eyes close in relief as she rolls the liquid over her tongue, a small sigh escaping her lips after she swallows it down. When it becomes clear that Sherlock isn’t leaving, she sets the cup down next to her, pushing the bottom into the sand so it won’t tip over, and follows Sherlock’s gaze back out across the water. “Nobody calls me that, you know. Everyone calls me Harry.”

“Your family calls you Harry,” Sherlock corrects. “And, as you’ve made abundantly clear, I do not fall into that category.”

She runs her finger around the top edge of the cup. “I thought Mum would have poured this down the sink by now. Why did you bring it to me?”

“Your mother didn’t notice I’d taken it, nor did your brother,” Sherlock answers. “In a case of alcoholism as severe as yours, it’s inadvisable that you stop drinking entirely without medical supervision. And if your demeanor earlier before you’d had your first drink is any indication of what you’d be like after an even longer period of forced sobriety then I thought I’d save us all the horror of having to endure that particular version of Harriet Watson, especially on this single day that your mother has requested we all spend together.”

“I haven’t always been like this, you know,” Harry says, a touch of bitterness creeping into her voice.

“I find that somewhat difficult to believe,” Sherlock says evenly, bending his knees and depositing himself next to Harry on the beach, leaning back to plant his palms on the sand, his long legs stretched out before him crossed at the ankles. He looks over just as she opens her mouth to protest and cuts her off with a roll of his eyes. “You weren’t always a drunk, of course, but I’m fairly certain you’ve always been exactly ‘like this’. Alcohol isn’t a magic potion, Harriet. It’s an amplifier of sorts, and like any addictive substance it tends to magnify the worst in people, until eventually the worst is all that anyone can see.”

“You don’t even know me.”

“True enough,” Sherlock agrees.

“Then how can you sit there and judge me?”

“Quite comfortably, it would seem,” Sherlock says, looking around them. “And the view is very nice, so that helps as well.”

“You have no idea what it’s like—being a slave to this.” Harry lifts her cup and takes another drink.

“Also true,” says Sherlock, with a nod. “I’m not an alcoholic. I do have a bit of experience with cocaine, however, which is at least an equally harsh master.”

Harry Watson looks up in surprise, the anger in her face melting into confusion, and then into something like suspicion. “You’re lying,” she accuses. “Posh thing like you wrapped up in something as pedestrian as nose candy? I don’t believe it.”

“Half right,” Sherlock concedes then turns his torso toward her and extends his arms presenting the tender skin stretching from the underside of his wrists up to and past his elbows for inspection. “I believe arm candy would be a more accurate description.”
Harry’s eyes widen a bit when she sees the faint pink and white scars that litter the pale skin of his arms. She reaches one hand out to run a fingertip lightly over the most visible mark at the crook of Sherlock’s left elbow, then seems to notice what she’s doing and snatches her hand back. She reaches for her glass and lifts it toward her lips, then pauses and puts it back down next to her.

“When did you start?” she asks quietly.

“University. At first I was curious, and then I found that I liked it. It made things…easier—until one day it didn’t anymore. After a while, getting high wasn’t just a part of my life, life became something I did between hits.” Sherlock finishes matter-of-factly, leaning back on his hands.

“Was it hard to stop?”

“Honestly? No. Not particularly.” He shrugs as she eyes him skeptically. “It turns out that getting clean was a relatively simple process, a chemical detoxification program that was supervised by a physician in a rehabilitation clinic that came quite highly recommended. As I recall it I went to sleep one morning and woke up a few days later no longer physically addicted to cocaine. Getting clean wasn’t much of a struggle at all. Staying clean, well—that’s the sticky bit, isn’t it?”

Harry Watson takes a deep breath and stares out over the water that stretches as far as the eye can see —and much farther beyond. After a few moments she turns her head toward Sherlock and examines him curiously through narrowed eyes.

“Do you miss it?” she asks, almost shyly.

“Yes,” Sherlock answers immediately, with a small shrug. “Not all the time, not even every day anymore—but yes, I do miss it sometimes.”

“Then why did you quit?”

“Because as much as I wanted the cocaine, eventually there were things I wanted more.”

“Just like that?” Harry asks, eyes narrowed skeptically. “One day you just woke up and decided ‘Hey, I think I’ll not be a junkie anymore!’?”

“Essentially, yes,” Sherlock says, with a nod. “Though I didn’t do it alone. My insufferable git of brother had been making arrangements for years to whisk me away into treatment as soon as I gave him the word, and was forever asking me if I was finally ready to get my life together and get clean—and then one day the answer was yes. I left for rehab the following morning.”

“Well, must be nice to have connections like that.” Harry waves a dismissive hand in his direction. “Top notch care available at your beck and call, money no object and all.”

“It did give me a distinct advantage in the situation,” Sherlock agrees. “And it’s one that could be extended to you, should you decide you’d be willing to accept it.”

Harry freezes in place, her readied retort stalled on her lips after what was clearly not the response she had been expecting.

She eyes him suspiciously. “Why would you do that for me?”

“You’re important to John,” Sherlock says. “And John is important to me.”

“Oh, so that’s what this is about,” Harry says with a bitter laugh. “Impressing Johnny. I suppose the colors just weren’t gift enough, eh? Now you’re going to swoop in and save his fucked up sister and
then he’ll be sure to love you forever, yeah? I hate to break it to you, handsome, but it doesn’t work that way. The whole *soulmate* thing isn’t all it’s cracked up to be.”

“The offer has nothing to do with my soulmate, Harriet,” Sherlock says pleasantly. “It has everything to do with *yours*.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means that if you harbor any hope of saving your relationship, you’d be wise to consider accepting,” Sherlock tells her evenly. “I met your wife yesterday. And it seems that, for reasons which frankly I find difficult to discern—much less *understand*—she’s still very much in love with you. It would also appear that despite your protestations to the contrary, you return those feelings in kind. Given that all the available anecdotal evidence indicates that the state of your marriage has been declining at a rate inversely proportionate to the severity of your alcoholism, it’s hardly an astounding leap in logic that the reining in of one side of that equation might facilitate the rekindling of the other. The prospect of not continuing to add any more stress to the already difficult life of your charming mother is an additional factor worth considering, as is preventing the inevitable demise of your legal career. These are but a few of the compelling arguments you might consider carefully before declining.”

“So I’m supposed to drop everything and run off to rehab just because you say so?” Harry asks incredulously.

“Yes.”

“Just like that?”

“Yes,” Sherlock says again impatiently, and then starts to get to his feet. “Do try and listen the first time, I dislike repeating myself.”

“I’m fairly certain I dislike you.”

“If it’s any consolation at all, Harriet,” Sherlock begins, brushing his hands over the soft fabric of his pajama trousers to dislodge the sand, “the feeling is *entirely* mutual—but the offer stands nonetheless. Think it over.”

He turns away from where she’s still sitting in the sand and looking up at him through narrowed eyes with her mouth hanging open slightly, and starts walking back toward the cottage.

“Sherlock!” She calls out behind him, and he stops walking and to look at her.

“Yes, Harriet?” he asks.

She pauses for a moment, looks down at the sand, then out over the water, and finally gives a small shrug before looking back at him over her shoulder.

“Call me Harry.”

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In the end, Lynette Watson got her wish.

After an inauspicious beginning, the four of them spent the day together—and it was indeed *nice*. After Sherlock had returned to the house, he’d responded to John’s questioning look with a small shrug, and they left the matter at that. When John went out to talk to his sister a few moments later,
Sherlock helped Lynnette clear away and clean the breakfast dishes. And if, when the Watson siblings returned to the cottage together a short time later, both of them sported slightly red rimmed eyes and less prickly dispositions, no one thought it worth mentioning.

They passed the hours pleasantly in each other’s company, Lynette giving Sherlock the grand tour of the place and then pulling out the old photo albums and paging through them—pausing to tell her children’s favorite stories, and add a few that Sherlock, Harry and John heard for the first time together. Sherlock and John dragged the old wooden table from the shed, John pointing out the small paint and glue marks from the summer he and his dad built the schooner, and they ate cold sandwiches for lunch on the porch. And while Harry’s glass was never empty she refilled it much less often than usual—her sips smaller and less frequent, the burning anger and resentment that flared within her that morning cooling to warm embers as the day wore on.

It was still a bit cold for a swim, so while Sherlock busied himself collecting sand and seaweed samples from various points along the waterline John pulled one his old favorites off the bookshelf in his room and sat on the porch reading, his mother and sister having retired for a short nap that afternoon. And later, after a buffet of the leftovers from yesterday’s luncheon, the four of them took a long walk along the beach—Lynette pointing out various other homes and talking about the history of the area, how much it had changed since she’d spent her summers here as a young girl, Harry and John chiming in with their own memories. When at last they’d returned to the house, Lynette set them all up with tea and they tucked into slices of Aunt Margery’s famous banoffee pie, which even Sherlock ate every crumb of without any coaxing at all.

Yes, it had been a very nice day.

Long after the sun went down, when they’d each taken their turn getting cleaned up in the cottage’s single bathroom and said their goodnights before retiring to bed, Sherlock lies awake—John pressed up against his side in the small bed with one arm slung over his chest—and watches the moonlight streaming in through the bedroom window throw shadows over the ceiling.

“Are you going to tell me what happened out there on the beach?” John asks quietly. “What you said to Harry?”

“Yes,” Sherlock nods. “If you want to know.”

“I don’t, really,” John replies, and Sherlock feels him shrug against him before John presses up on his elbow and looks down at him in the dark. “But whatever it was—thank you.”

Sherlock turns on his side to face him. “You’re welcome, John.”

“It was a good day,” John says softly, reaching out and cupping Sherlock’s cheek. “It had no right to be, given the circumstances—but it was. And that’s down to you, you know.

“I think you’re giving me a bit too much credit.”

“I’m not,” John says firmly. “I don’t know how I’d have made it through all this without you.”

“Well then it’s lucky that you didn’t have to.”

“I am lucky,” John agrees, leaning forward to press a kiss to Sherlock’s mouth. “Very lucky.”

He leans in to take his lips again, and after a moment Sherlock rolls him gently onto his back, deepening the kiss. After a few long, breathless minutes, Sherlock presses his lips chastely to the corner of John’s mouth and lifts his shoulder to roll off of him, but John grabs his face in both hands and leans up to slide his mouth wetly against Sherlock’s.
“Please?” John whispers against his mouth, pulling Sherlock’s lower lip between his own and sucking gently, then nipping at it with his teeth. “Please, Sherlock?”

“Anything,” Sherlock whispers in reply, then presses John back against the mattress and slowly licks his way back into John’s mouth.

It’s slow, and it’s quiet, this languid slide of lips over skin, this careful removal of clothing, this affectionate exploration of each other in the dark. It’s breathy sighs, and sudden shivers, it’s the soft glow of sweat on skin in the moonlight. It’s gentle licks and firm strokes and biting down hard to avoid crying out. It’s the wet slide of a palm where it grips them both, and the warm pressure of another hand wrapped around it. It’s a tight gasp of pleasure, it’s a whispered plea not to stop, and it’s a warm flood between them followed quickly by another. Then it’s soft kisses, and gentle embraces, and sleep.

Rocking back and forth slowly, Sherlock sits on the wooden bench swing that hangs on the porch and looks out into the night. He can hear the water lapping against the beach, see the white caps of the waves shining in the moonlight as they rush in to the shore. He closes his eyes and enjoys the sound as he lifts the cigarette in his hand up to his lips and takes a long drag.

“Looks like I’m not the only one who couldn’t sleep,” Lynette Watson’s voice says softly as she pushes open the screened door, and Sherlock turns to look at her while dropping his hand quickly to his side as if to hide what he’s doing, then tilts his head resignedly before turning away blowing out the lungful of smoke he’d just inhaled.

“Sorry,” Sherlock says, looking sheepish as he waves the cigarette smoke away from her. “It’s impossible to maintain a smoking habit in London anymore, but these last few days I’ve managed to sneak in a few.”

“I’ll make you a deal then,” Lynette says, coming to sit next to him on the swing and extending a finger toward the half empty pack perched on the arm rest next to Sherlock and raising an eyebrow playfully. “I won’t tell, if you won’t tell.”

Sherlock huffs out a quiet laugh as he reaches for the box, extracts a cigarette, and hands it to her. She places it between her lips, then leans forward as he strikes a match and cups his hands around it to light it for her. Lynette Watson takes a long drag, closes her eyes, and then slowly lets it out in a thin stream from between her lips.

“Now this is something I’ve not done in a very long time.” Lynette holds up her hand to regard the glowing lit end of the cigarette in her fingers.

They sit in a silence for a few moments, then she lifts the cigarette to her lips again, inhaling the burning smoke and looking out over the porch railing at the moonlit beach.

“I’d forgotten how different this place looks without colors,” she says softly, rocking them slowly with her feet against the porch floor and pausing for a few moments before she continues. “I was in the kitchen when it happened, you know, cutting tomatoes for dinner. I was thinking about the upcoming donation drive for the library guild, looking down at my hands and suddenly things went a bit…strange. The blade was slicing through the tomato, but everything around the edges was getting darker, but not really darker—just…less. I was so focused on the tomato itself, on why it looked wrong to me, that the when the knife slipped the pain took me by surprise. And when I lifted my finger up to see how badly I’d been cut, I realized that I was bleeding—but it wasn’t red…and that’s when I knew. I called Jack’s name and ran downstairs and he was lying there on the floor, he was
so still, he could have been sleeping. The paramedics tried to get him back, kept working and pressing down on his chest and shocking him—until I finally told them to stop. He was gone, and the whole world was grey.”

She stops and takes another drag of her cigarette, and Sherlock turns his rapt gaze away from her face and back toward the sea.

“I never thought I’d have colors,” Sherlock admits, looking out over the dark ocean. “I believed it unlikely that I had soulmate at all, much less one who might actually be anxious to find me. Certainly not someone like John. Everything about this has been…unexpected.”

“That’s how it works, love,” Lynette replies with a small smile, lifting her cigarette to her lips. “It’s a surprise—something completely new that very quickly becomes something you don’t know how you ever lived without.”

“I miss the grey sometimes,” Sherlock says softly.

Lynette Watson turns to look at him, but there’s no judgment or admonition in her eyes, only curiosity.

“It was—simpler, I suppose,” Sherlock clarifies. “Easier to predict. When everything was grey there was a certainty to the world, less worrying about how what I did might affect anyone but myself.”

“It certainly changes things, the bond,” Lynette agrees, nodding. “Makes you beholden to another soul, binds you together with this person who is uniquely suited for no one else in the entire world but you. The colors are wonderful, but they’re just the beginning. What follows after, the joy and the learning and yes, even the pain—that’s the real gift of it. The blue of my children’s eyes, the red flowers in my wedding bouquet, the yellow clapboard siding of our first home, the pink blanket wrapped around Harry when we brought her home from the hospital, the green grass stains on Johnny’s knees after every football match, even the dark grey blood on my finger the other night. I will miss my Jack for the rest of my days, and I don’t know if this new pain will ever really end—but I’ve had forty-six years of colors to help me bear it.”

Sherlock watches her intently, the moonlight reflected off the wet shine in her eyes as she stares out to sea for a bit longer and then takes a deep breath and lifts the cigarette in her fingers up to her lips.

“It’s been years since I smoked,” she says, exhaling into the night and grimacing slightly. “And now I remember why. It’s bloody awful, really.”

“Terrible habit,” Sherlock agrees, taking another drag himself. “I’ve not really even enjoyed this pack, to be honest. But don’t tell John I said so. He can be insufferably smug when he’s right.”

Lynette throws her head back and laughs at that, then looks over and regards Sherlock fondly. “I can see why he loves you.”

Sherlock straightens a bit where he sits, tilts his head and considers this pronouncement before looking back over at Lynette and raising one eyebrow slightly.

“Does he?”

“Oh yes,” she replies with certainty, nodding. “He definitely does.”

“It’s just,” Sherlock says, then bites his bottom lip before continuing, “Well, he’s never said.”

“Well no, he won’t have. Not yet.” Lynette looks at him thoughtfully. “He’s a muller, my John.
Likes to think things over, be very sure before he speaks. There’s a right moment for everything, you know."

Sherlock regards her earnestly. "Is there?"

"Yes," Lynette confirms with a smile. "And you’ll know it when it comes."

Leaning over and tamping out the lit end of her spent cigarette in the makeshift ashtray between them, she stands up and lays a hand softly on Sherlock’s cheek.

"Don’t stay up too late." She leans over and presses a quick kiss into the curls on the top of his head. "Dawn will be here before you know it."

He nods his understanding and she smiles in response and walks back into the cottage. Sherlock looks at the closed door for a few moments, then extinguishes his own cigarette and stares back out at the sea.

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Shoulder to shoulder, they stand in a line at the edge of the water, four sets of eyes focused on the dim horizon where the cobalt night sky is steadily beginning to lighten. They’ve not spoken a word since rising, dressing, and making their way from their various starting points to convene on the porch of the darkened cottage by the sea. There was no directive against speaking, no tacit agreement not to disturb the early morning stillness with chatter (idle or otherwise) but when the moment arrived it felt right to honor the task that brought them here by allowing the ceaseless crash of the tide against the beach before them to be the only voice to break the silence.

Looking out over the sea, a firm yet gentle breeze at their backs, the comfortable silence is interrupted only by a slight gasp from the woman who clutches the gleaming brass urn to her chest as the barest sliver of shining light crests over the waves, throwing it’s glow over the rolling surface of the water and slowly brightening the sky where it rises. Lynette Watson watches the sun push back the night above it, feels the warmth of its first rays on her face—and though her eyes cannot see them, her heart knows that the sky before her is alight with the colors that her beloved husband took with him when he passed.

She lays a hand on the top of the urn, then carefully removes the lid and hands it to her daughter. She turns toward the three gazes locked on her in this moment, smiles gently, and then walks into the water—the tide dragging the hem of her gauzy skirt with it as it ebbs and flows, the ocean swirling up past her ankles to the middle of her shins. As the sun continues its steady climb in the sky she slowly extends her arms and tilts the open vessel away from her—where the wind rushes across the opening and carries the man she’s loved for nearly half a century out to sea in a swirling cloud of grey that rises with the breeze to spread across the morning sky in tribute to the man who loved to stand in this very place and watch that same patch of sky streaked with shades of salmon and marmalade and claret and turquoise and butter and wheat.

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“We don’t have to go, Mum,” John says to his mother, again.

“The car is here, love,” Lynette Watson says shaking her head. “Your bags are being loaded into it as we speak.”

“I know, but we can always wait and go back later—” John begins, but is cut off when his mother pulls him into a tight hug.
“I’ll be fine,” she whispers, then pulls back to smile at him. “It’ll be nice to spend another night, I think. Enjoy the peace and quiet.”

“I know,” John replies, “but I hate to think about you out here all alone.”

“She won’t be,” Harry Watson says, coming to stand beside her mother who snakes an arm around her daughter’s waist.

“Are you sure you don’t want to come back to London with us, Harry?” John asks, looking from his mother to his sister with a concerned frown. “There’s plenty of room in the car.”

“I’m not going back to London, not yet,” Harry says as their mother tightens the arm at her hip and smiles up at her. “I’ll stay with Mum tonight, and then I’m going…away, for a while, to get my head back on straight.”

“You are?” John asks, surprised. “Where?”

“A private facility, comes very highly recommended,” Harry says lightly, throwing a quick glance at the tall, dark haired man descending the steps from the cottage and walking toward them. “The arrangements have all been made. I’ll leave tomorrow morning, and then—well, we’ll see.”

John looks at her with a confused expression, and then over to Sherlock where he’s standing next to him now. He opens his mouth to speak when Harry Watson steps forward and puts her arms around her brother in an awkward hug. “It’s a good thing, Johnny.” She whispers in his ear, and he lifts his arms and wraps them around his sister, returning the embrace.

Lynette Watson walks over to Sherlock and folds him into her arms, and he leans forward and presses a fond kiss to her cheek. “Take good care of each other,” she tells him, then pats his cheek affectionately before turning to her son and hugging him one more time.

“You call if you need anything. Ok, Mum? Anything at all.”

“Of course love,” she says, depositing a kiss on his cheek. “We’ll talk very soon.”

John stands up straight, squares his shoulders and nods briskly, then walks over to the open back door of the sleek black car idling on the road and climbs in. Sherlock follows after him, and just as he ducks his head to get into the car, a voice calls his name.

“Oi, Sherlock!”

The detective straightens and turns toward where Harry Watson stands a few meters away. She looks a bit lost for a moment, like she’s forgotten what she wanted to say, then she shrugs one shoulder and says, “Safe travels, yeah?”

Sherlock looks at her for a long moment, the corner of his mouth tipping up in the slightest of grins.

“And to you, Harry.”

John Watson watches the bright screen of Sherlock’s mobile throw his angular face into shadow in the dim back seat of the car that left the cottage half an hour ago to take them back to London.

“I’m impressed, you know,” John tells him.

“Are you?” Sherlock asks, distracted.
“Yes. I can’t believe how long you lasted without your nose in that phone. This is the first time I’ve seen you use your mobile since we left London.”

“Partially correct,” Sherlock agrees. “This is the first time you’ve *seen* me use it.”

“Of course it is,” John says, shaking his head.

He looks at Sherlock for a bit longer, then slides over the space between them on the long back seat and wraps his fingers lightly around the wrist of the hand holding his phone. Sherlock looks up from the screen and cocks a questioning eyebrow at him.

“So.” John says. “Harry’s going to rehab, huh?”

Sherlock shrugs. “It was mostly Mycroft’s doing. My involvement was limited to no more than a phone call, really.”

“Not entirely accurate,” John disagrees, “but thank you all the same.”

“No thanks necessary, John.” Sherlock responds, looking back at his phone.

“No, I mean it Sherlock.” John insists, “It could change her whole life, and I know she’s grateful. And I know Mum thanks you as well. What you’ve done for Harry, well, it’s quite something.”

“What she gets out of it from this point on is entirely up to her,” Sherlock replies. “Besides, I didn’t do it for Harry. I did it for you.”

“For me?” John says, with a laugh. “You could have just gotten me some flowers, you know.”

“I think we’ve all seen enough flowers for a while, don’t you?” Sherlock looks at John for a moment before continuing. “I merely told her that if and when she was ready to sober up that I’d see to it that she’d have the needed resources available.”

“Exactly,” John says. “And that’s why I’m saying thank you. You didn’t have do that, but you did.”

“She’s your sister,” Sherlock says with a shrug, looking back down at his phone. “You love her, and I love you. Seemed like the logical thing to do.”

John freezes next to him, his fingers tightening where they still grasp Sherlock’s wrist. The consulting detective flinches a bit at the increased pressure, then looks up into John’s face with concern.

“John?” Sherlock asks. “Are you all right?”

“Did you…” John begins, then blinks his eyes a few times and takes a deep breath. “Did you just say that you love me?”

“It seemed like the right moment,” Sherlock says carefully, then narrows his eyes a bit and tilts his head. “Not good?”

“Very good, actually,” John says softly, a wide smile breaking out over his face before he leans in and presses a kiss to Sherlock’s mouth, then sits back and smiles at the look of relief on his soulmate’s face.

“Good” Sherlock says with a sigh, then looks back down at his phone.

“Sherlock?” John says a moment later.
“Yes, John?”

“I love you too.”

Chapter End Notes

For this week’s edition of “OH MY GOD IT’S SO GOOD I’M MAYBE GOING TO DIE!” I submit for your approval PoppyAlexander’s oh-so-beautiful period piece Art and Nature.

Have you ever wondered what might happen if Sherlock was the head butler at a Downton Abbey-esque manor house and John Watson came to work there as a gardener? If the answer is YES, then do I have a fic for you! And if you haven’t wondered that, read it anyway—because it’s just that good.

I stumbled on this little beauty when reading through the author’s tags made me giggle like an idiot, and I figured that anyone who added the tag “My ongoing subconscious making of John Watson into the ideal man” to her fic was someone I would want to hang out with—and reading her fic seemed like the next best thing.

Stunningly romantic, breathtakingly hot, superbly penned and all around delicious, this is 7600 words of AU gorgeousness that you won’t want to miss. And it has SEQUELS! Which I mention because I just realized that RIGHT THIS VERY MINUTE, so if anyone is looking for me tonight tell them “Too bad! She’s reading hot turn-of-the-century servant porn with feelings--so many, many feelings.”
Chapter Notes

Happy not-really-Thursday to you, dear readers!

The boys are back in London and the case is heating up—this week’s update finds our favorite pair hot on the trail of the mystery at hand.

High five to my superhero of a beta who assures me that my honorary doctoral degree in “fake science” is in the mail. She’s put up with a lot during this project, and this story would never have happened without her. And now she’s got that on her conscience for eternity. Sucks to be her.

Endless gratitude to everyone who takes a moment to read, subscribe, bookmark, comment or leave Kudos. With the end in sight, the continued support and interest has made all the feels and writer’s angst totally worth it. One day I’ll bake each and every one of you a cupcake. :)

As ever, comments are welcome, appreciated, cooed over and often incite manic jumping around the room that unintentionally terrifies the pets.

Hope July is treating you well thus far, as ever thank you for stopping by and see you back here in seven days!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

John Watson has had quite an eventful month.

It was just over four weeks ago that he’d been sitting on a London park bench on a lovely spring afternoon under the guise of enjoying the weather and getting a bit of fresh air. At least that’s the story he’d told himself, the alibi his mind concocted to tamp down the darker motive lurking just below. The part of his brain that knew if he’d bypassed the park that afternoon and limped the rest of the long way back to his dreary little bedsit that he might never have left it again. Not alive, anyway.

He remembers those days more vividly than he’d like. His regular morning routine of bed-making, showering, breakfast, and tea, and then opening his desk drawer and removing the meticulously maintained pistol he kept there. The daily ritual of holding it in his hand, of sliding it between his lips, of feeling the cold steel against his teeth and tongue and deciding if that particular morning would be his last. He recalls no other period of his life to that point when the world had felt as grey as it looked. It’s a time he’d rather forget, but he’s strangely thankful he can remember. For the true beauty of life, someone once said, isn’t found in the highest of highs or the lowest of lows—but rather the contrast between the two. For John, it’s against those darkest of days that he measures the present, that he appreciates how very lucky he is and marvels at what a difference a month can make.

In the last four weeks he’s moved out of a dim and drab rented room and moved into a bright and boldly patterned home. He’s lost a debilitating limp and found the excitement of running toward danger. He’s left behind a lifetime of grey and traded it for a world full of colors—exchanged the loneliness of solitude for the comfort of togetherness. He’s known the immeasurable anguish of
losing the most important man in his life until now, and the ever increasing joy of finding the one most important to the rest of it.

Yes, it’s been a very eventful month.

If you’d sat down next to him on that park bench just before his old friend Mike Stamford had called his name and asked him to tell you where he expected himself to be a month from now, frankly he’s not sure how he would have answered—but he’s almost certain what his answer wouldn’t have been. In a million years, he’d never have said that in almost exactly one month’s time he’d be leaning face first up against the wet tiles of a shower wall, his forehead resting against the back of his arms folded above his head, feet set wide and heels braced against the tub behind him with just over six feet of wet, warm, panting consulting detective pressed tightly against his back—strong, slim hips rolling forward to fill him again and again with one long arm wrapped tightly around his chest while a soap-slick hand slipped over his hip to work his cock in a relentless matching rhythm.

And if for some reason this particular scenario had been on John’s radar, it isn’t likely that he would have envisioned himself craning his head back to catch Sherlock’s mouth in a wet slide of lips, or heard himself growling out a demand for more—and faster—and harder—before losing all ability for speech as his whole body stiffened and he came moaning a hoarse approximation of his soulmate’s name while thick ribbons of semen splattered against the tile and began to slide down the wall just as Sherlock wrapped his lips around his left earlobe and sucked hard, snapping his hips roughly against him, until John felt hot pulses of come flooding him with warmth as the shower water continued to rain down over them both.

No. This is definitely one vision of the future John Watson simply hadn’t seen coming. So to speak.

After a quick and thorough re-soaping between stolen kisses, the water is just beginning to run cold as they turn off the taps and Sherlock reaches out a long arm to retrieve two towels. Pulling back the curtain and climbing out of the tub they are greeted by a pair of almond shaped green eyes that stare pointedly at them from where Basil is perched on the corner of the sink, fluffy orange tail swishing lazily back and forth over the edge.

“This is getting a bit creepy, mate. Just once I’d like to shag my boyfriend without an audience, if it’s all right with you.” John tells him, reaching out to scratch behind the cat’s ears and realizing too late that his hand must not be quite dry when Basil looks affronted and backs away from him, pounces gracefully to the floor, and stops in the open bedroom doorway to lick his front paw and run it repeatedly over the fur behind his right ear.

“He is a cat, John.” Sherlock props one long leg up on the edge of the commode and runs his towel over the length of it. “Curiosity is a common trait among his species.”

“You’re right,” John agrees, rubbing his own towel roughly over his head and then reaching for his dressing gown. “And if memory serves, it’s the trait that often leads to their demise—if the metaphor is to be believed.”

“It’s an idiom, not a metaphor, John. Do try and keep the two straight,” Sherlock corrects, throwing his towel haphazardly over the shower rod, stepping over Basil where he sits and striding naked into the bedroom. “And it sounds a bit like you’re threatening to kill our cat, by the way.”

“It’s not him I’d like to harm at the moment,” John calls after him playfully, opening the door to the hallway. “I’m making tea. Do you want a cuppa?”

“Yes, please,” Sherlock calls from the bedroom. “And I’m sure Lestrade will want one too.”
“What? Is Lestrade coming over this morning?” John asks toward the closed door to the bedroom off the hallway, throwing his towel over his shoulder and walking through the kitchen to retrieve his mobile phone from the table next to his armchair…where Gregory Lestrade is sitting with a look on his face that is equal parts embarrassed and smug.

“Good morning,” Lestrade says pleasantly.

“What does he do that?” John wonders, for not the first—and surely not the last—time).

“I’m not sure there’s time,” Lestrade answers, just as Sherlock emerges from the bedroom, fully dressed and presentable (How does he do that? John wonders, for not the first—and surely not the last—time).

“Good morning, Gregory,” Sherlock says as his brother’s husband rises from his chair and turns to face him. “I hope you haven’t been waiting long.”

“Not at all,” Lestrade replies with a knowing grin. “Mrs. Hudson let me in, told me you were ‘getting cleaned up’ and to go on up if I liked. And by the time I arrived it did seem as though things were, uh, wrapping up so to speak so I thought I’d have a seat and wait.”

“Well, I do hope the delay won’t prohibit us from having a look at the scene before it’s been thoroughly disturbed by Anderson and his team of so-called professionals,” Sherlock says, buttoning his left cuff and shrugging into his suit jacket.

“I’ve asked that everything, including the bodies, remain untouched until you arrive,” Lestrade confirms, and then starts toward the door. “I’ve got a car outside.”

“Wait,” John says looking between Lestrade and Sherlock. “There’s been another murder-suicide? Or double suicide? Or whatever the hell they are?”

“Obviously,” Sherlock says.

John rolls his eyes.

Not ten minutes later they’re in a cab and headed toward the address Lestrade sent to Sherlock’s mobile while John was hastily getting dressed. John watches him hunched over his phone, his indescribable eyes darting over whatever information he’s reviewing at the moment, and feels the strange mixture of impressed awe and affection he’s become so familiar with since he met him—but this time it’s tinged with a bit of something else, something less like wonder and more like…not disappointment, per se, but something in that family. He can’t quite name it.
“Three sets of bodies in less than two weeks,” Sherlock says suddenly, more to himself than to him, John thinks. “Now that we know to look for the presence of the color filtering substance in the eyes, if it’s present at this scene we can definitively link the cases and begin looking for other commonalities between the victims. The escalation in the number of cases would indicate that there’s far more to these sets of deaths than meets the eye—there has to be a connection, however cleverly hidden. Oh, I love the clever ones, there’s so much to look forward to.”

John feels a bit of bile rise in his throat at Sherlock’s gleeful tone, coughs to suppress it, and turns his face away from him and toward the window to hide the growing anger there, his fist clenched tightly next to his thigh.

“John?” Sherlock asks, concerned. “Are you all right?”

“Fine,” John replies tersely, looking out the window.

“You’re not fine,” Sherlock observes, sliding a hand over to John’s curled fist before the shorter man shakes it off and turns his head to look at him, eyes blazing.

“No,” John confirms with a tight nod. “I guess I’m not.”

“Problem?” Sherlock asks, looking a bit confused.

“Actually, yeah,” John replies, his voice low and a bit rough. “People are dead, Sherlock. Real people. They’re not puzzle pieces or chess men for your amusement, you know. They had families, and friends. They were someone’s sons, and daughters, and sisters, and brothers. People mourned them, and they probably still do. And you’re acting like it’s all a big laugh, a game of Cluedo for you to win. Like you don’t care about them at all. That’s my problem.”

“Will my caring about them bring them back?” Sherlock asks carefully. “Will it return them whole and alive to their families?”

“Nope.”

“Then I’ll continue to direct my efforts in a more productive manner.”

“Well that’s just perfect,” John says. “Wouldn’t want to let on to anyone else in the world that you’ve actually got feelings, would you? I suppose the great Sherlock Holmes can only deal compassionately with one death at a time and I should be grateful my father’s occurred on a day when it didn’t have to compete with anything more interesting.”

Sherlock flinches—a quick tightening of his shoulders and facial muscles that happens over mere fractions of a second, but to John’s eyes plays out in slow motion-freeze frame: a clear progression of pain and shocked hurt that he can read all over Sherlock’s body, can see it rise in his eyes as though he’s just been physically slapped, John’s hand having delivered the blow. The mere sight deflates something in him, the anger that flared hot just a moment before rushing out of him so quickly that he nearly doubles over from the sensation.

“Oh God,” John says, trying to catch his breath. “Oh Sherlock, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean th—”

Sherlock slowly raises a hand to stop him, then turns and looks out the window.

“They’re gone, John,” Sherlock says quietly. “I don’t take pleasure in their deaths. My concern must be why it happened—who made it happen—and how I can prevent it from happening again.”

“I know,” John whispers, his eyes pricking hot with moisture. “I know that. I don’t know what
happened there, and I wish I could take it back.” He slides across the seat and lays a hand lightly on Sherlock’s thigh, just the barest amount of pressure as though he’s afraid the other man might throw it off at any second.

After a long moment, Sherlock turns his head slowly away from the window and looks at him—and the depth of emotion John sees there, the hurt and fear and uncertainty, but also compassion and affection and so much love...he has no idea how he could ever have accused this man of not feeling. John’s eyes well up and he closes them to stop the flow of tears he doesn’t want to shed, and he feels Sherlock’s warm palm cup his face, his long thumb brushing away an escaped teardrop. He feels the hand slide away from his face, around the back of his neck, then down across his shoulder where it pulls him in with a gentle pressure until his face is tucked in the warm crook of Sherlock’s neck above his open shirt collar. John snakes his arm around the taller man’s slim waist and inhales his scent, steadies his own breathing to the rhythm of Sherlock’s pulse beneath his cheek, and after a few long moments feels himself relax.

“I’m so sorry, Sherlock,” He whispers again. “I didn’t mean that, I just—I don’t know why I said those things.”

“You were very strong, you know,” Sherlock tells him softly. “Through the funeral and all the days leading up to and beyond it. Frankly it’s a wonder you lasted this long before such an outburst.”

“That’s no excuse,” John says, shaking his head against Sherlock’s shoulder.

“Of course it is. Anger is one of the primary stages of mourning, according to the widely accepted Kubler-Ross model of loss and grief—and as the stages themselves tend to be less linear and more fluid in nature I suspect it’s not the last time you’ll experience it in some fashion.”

Listening to Sherlock explain the underlying mechanics of his beastly flare of temper, John suddenly finds his shoulders shaking uncontrollably, and feels Sherlock tighten his arm around him in comfort until he can’t hold in the emotion anymore and his mouth opens and he…giggles.

Sherlock stiffens a bit beneath him, then pulls his head back to look down his nose at John’s face where it’s tucked against his shoulder.

“John,” he asks carefully. “Are you laughing?”

“I’m sorry,” John says, another laugh bubbling up his throat and coming out as he lifts his head from Sherlock’s shoulder and sits up to stare back at the perplexed expression that greets him. “It’s just—well, here I am being an absolute dick, accusing you of not having compassion, and you’re the one who ends up consoling me. Just struck me as ridiculous, is all.”

“Perhaps a bit,” Sherlock says with a shrug and a slight smile. “But I am given to understand that in relationships it is quite common for one partner to shoulder the majority of the emotional burden during times of crisis, with the assumption that when and if the roles are reversed the other partner will do the same. You need me to be strong for you now, and one day you’ll extend the same courtesy to me, I’m sure.”

John looks at him then, at this impossible man whom he could never have imagined was the person he’d been waiting his whole life to meet, and vows to himself that he will rise to the challenge when it’s his turn to be strong. He smiles at his soulmate who returns the expression in kind.

“I love you, Sherlock Holmes,” John says, enjoying the feel of the words on his tongue.

“And I you, John Hamish Watson,” Sherlock responds, before breaking into a low chuckle.
“What?” John asks, a quizzical look on his face.

“Hamish,” Sherlock says, his voice breaking in the middle of the word into another breathy laugh. “I’m sorry, it’s a very funny name.”

“Yeah, yeah—ok,” John says sliding away from him in mock indignation as the cab slows to a stop in front of their destination. “Come on then, Sherlock—how about you make yourself useful and solve me a crime?”

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Ascending four floors in the open walled utility elevator attached to the London Transplant Hospital building currently still under construction, Gregory Lestrade tells them a bit about the scene they’ve been called in to investigate.

“Crew found them this morning when they showed up for work,” he shouts over the loud whir of the elevator’s motor. “The site’s fenced in but there’s a large perimeter and the building itself is still in early stages of construction so it’s quite open. Foreman says the elevator would have been operational even when no one was here, and even if it hadn’t been the stairwells are complete and fully passable,” he finishes as they come to a stop and the barred gates separate in the middle to allow them to exit onto the fourth floor.

Crossing a large of expanse of empty space they walk toward the group of people assembled in the corner, several of them clad in sterile blue coverings while other uniformed and plain-clothed officers linger on the outskirts of the scene. Sherlock strides purposefully through the gathered crowd and John follows closely in his wake until they are standing a few meters away from an eerily familiar scene.

An olive skinned woman lies on her back, lifeless ebony eyes staring at the steel girders above her, a small gunshot wound at her temple—glossy black hair splayed out around her, a dark pool of congealed blood soaked into one side of it. Laying across her chest, another woman—about the same age (early thirties, John guesses) her stylish, short blond pixie haircut standing in stark contrast to the deep red spray of blood around the matching small caliber bullet wound ostensibly left by the gleaming silver pistol gripped tightly in her right hand where it rests on the thigh of the dead woman beneath her. Sherlock circles the pair slowly, his eyes darting over various points on the bodies, the floor, and the half-constructed building around them. He kneels down on the floor, careful not to disturb anything, and then leans over and examines the dark haired woman’s eyes with his pocket magnifier.

“John,” he calls out, “would you please bring me a light? It’s too dark to see properly.”

“Yeah, of course.” John says, pulling out his mobile and tapping the screen to turn the camera flash to a steady beam before he bends down next to Sherlock and aims it at the woman’s open eyes, turning the phone slightly until the light catches a faint purple sheen along the bottom edge of her eyelid. “There it is. Just like the others.”

Sherlock nods, moving his pocket magnifier up to the other woman’s face as John shines the light on her eyes from several angles, but there’s no trace of the strange lavender hue.

“And the others,” Sherlock says quietly, extracting a wrapped cotton tipped swab from his pocket and running it lightly over the blond woman’s eye, then dropping it into the tall slim envelope John holds out to him, then repeating the process on the dark haired woman’s eye. He then carefully takes each woman’s hand in his own gloved fingers, and looks up at John who nods after aiming the light carefully over their skin, affirming that he too sees the same pattern of visible gunshot residue
on their palms and trigger fingers.

“Do we have identification on them yet?” Sherlock asks, not looking up as he continues to examine the bodies.

“Actually, we do. Their purses were both found a few meters away, tucked up against the wall just there.” Lestrade says, pointing to an open doorway in the drywall that leads into a darkened room beyond. “Divya and Jennifer Patel-Bowman. Both 34 years old, home address is in the Primrose Hill neighborhood.”

“Married,” Sherlock nods, pointing to their hands. “And happily, it would appear, given the state of their meticulously cleaned mixed metal filigree rings. Anderson—take samples of the ocular secretions, both surface and under the lid. And make sure you take good scrapings from under the fingernails as well, Jennifer’s manicure looks quite fresh, but the tips of three of her nails are noticeably chipped, we’ll need to identify anything beneath them.”

“Oh thank you so much for the advice,” Anderson sneers. “We’d never have thought to look under her nails—cutting edge forensic science, that is.”

“As you neglected to notice the presence of a foreign substance in the eyes of not one but two earlier sets of bodies, you’ll forgive me if I don’t assume that you’re familiar with even the most rudimentary procedures of your job,” Sherlock responds smoothly, snapping his magnifying glass closed and pocketing it along with the two samples from the victims’ eyes. “You’ll be sending the bodies to Bart’s, I assume?”

“Of course we will,” Anderson says, with a roll of his eyes as he waves his team forward to begin processing the evidence. “And I’m sure I speak for Dr. Hooper when I say that she’d prefer you stay out of her way while they’re being processed and leave that delicate work to the professionals.

“Really, Anderson,” Sherlock sighs heavily while getting to his feet and walking past him. “You can barely speak for yourself on the best of days, perhaps you should refrain from attempting to speak for anyone else until you’ve first mastered that basic skill.”

“Are you going to let him talk to me like that?” Anderson asks Lestrade angrily.

“Oh do as he says, Anderson,” Lestrade says waving a tired hand in his direction, and then turns to follow Sherlock as he and John walk back toward the elevator. “So, you think they’re connected then? The three sets of bodies?”

“Undoubtedly.” Sherlock replies dismissively. “We’ll be at Bart’s confirming my findings and waiting for the bodies to arrive. Text me if you find anything new worth mentioning, you’ll know where to find us.”

John nods a farewell to Lestrade and follows Sherlock back into the wide elevator that begins to descend back toward the ground.

“So, three sets of soulmates, three sets of apparent double suicides?” John asks.

“Eight sets, actually, including Divya and Jennifer.” Sherlock corrects. “And they’re not suicides, John. They’re murders.”

“Murders? You think someone else pulled the trigger?”

“No,” Sherlock says thoughtfully. “I don’t.”
“But then how can they be murders?” John asks him, confused.

“Simple deduction.” Sherlock says. “Three sets of bodies where one of the pair had color-filtering eye drops applied, that’s not a coincidence, that’s a pattern. There’s an order here, a common link that strings them all together. We’ve got to find it, and follow it back to where it begins—to the person pulling the strings.”

“Ok,” John says, “But how do we do that?”

“No idea,” Sherlock concedes. “But I know where to start.”

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Sitting on a stool in the now familiar third floor lab of St. Bartholomew’s Hospital, John watches Sherlock as he meticulously prepares a sample of the lavender residue found in Divya Patel-Bowman’s eyes for analysis, and then feeds it into the mass spectrometer before setting the controls and turning back to him.

“So you think they are suicides,” John asks carefully. “But that there’s someone else involved—another party who, what, drives them to it?”

“Unclear,” Sherlock says with a tilt of his head, “but that seems as plausible a theory as any at the moment.”

“And the way the bodies have all been found, is that significant as well?”

“The three recent scenes have all been strikingly similar, I grant you—though not identical. As are the five other couples I believe to be connected, according to the crime scene photos available in their files.” Sherlock says thoughtfully. “This pattern must be significant to our suspect; the juxtaposition of the bodies may be part of their ritual. The placement seems to suggest that one person—the one with the filter applied to their eyes in the three cases we can confirm—shot themselves first, and then the other half of the pair did the same while kneeling or standing next to the body of their deceased soulmate.”

“For never was a story of more woe, than this of Juliet—and her Romeo.” John says softly, then looks up at the confused expression on Sherlock’s face. “Well, it’s a bit like that, isn’t it?”

“Like what?” Sherlock asks, confusion giving way to frustration.

“Romeo and Juliet.” John prompts, then continues when no dawning look of recognition crosses Sherlock’s angular features. “You know, the teenage ‘star cross’d lovers’ from feuding families who concocted an overly complicated plan to be together that ultimately resulted in each of them committing suicide?”

“Was it in the papers?” Sherlock asks.

“It’s a play, Sherlock.”

“Oh, well then.” Sherlock says dismissively. “That explains it. Dull.”

“Oh for God’s sake,” John says, with an incredulous laugh. “It’s only one of the most famous theatrical works of all time—it’s Shakespeare, Sherlock! How can you not know that?”

“Well if I did, I’ve deleted it.”
“Again with the ‘my brain is a hard drive’ thing.” John sighs. “You know, you might want to consider not deleting things outright, and instead moving them into a ‘recycle bin’ of sorts in that mind palace of yours. That way they’d be out of the way, but still accessible should you find you need them someday.”

“An interesting concept,” Sherlock concedes with a tilt of his chin. “I’ll take it under advisement.”

*ping*

“Molly” Sherlock explains, scanning the screen of his mobile. “The bodies have arrived.” He turns around and confirms that the mass spec analysis of the lavender fluid from this morning’s scene is still in progress and then he and John make their way down the four flights of stairs to the basement where Dr. Molly Hooper is supervising the transfer of the two heavy black bags containing the bodies of Jennifer and Divya Patel-Bowman as they are wheeled in by two attendants followed closely by Detective Inspector Gregory Lestrade.

“Oh hello, Sherlock, and you too John.” Molly says pleasantly, swiping an errant hair that’s come loose from her ponytail back behind her ear. “I’m afraid I may have spoken too soon—Divya’s family is here in the identification suite and I’ll need to prepare her for viewing—so it will be a bit longer before we can begin the autopsies.”

“Excellent,” Sherlock says immediately. “I’ll need to speak with the family as soon as possible.”


“No, it can’t.” Sherlock says rather impatiently. “They may have information that is useful to the investigation and the sooner we can extract it from them the better.”

“These are grieving people, Sherlock.” Lestrade reiterates. “John, talk some sense into him.”

“Actually, Greg, Sherlock has a point.” John says carefully. “They’ve had a quite a shock, but the next several days will be a whirlwind of activity for them, and this might be our best chance to find out if they know anything that could help. With utmost sensitivity and respect, of course.”

“I don’t know what they’ll be able to add,” Greg begins hesitantly, but Sherlock cuts him off with an exasperated sigh.

“There have been three sets of soulmates found dead in suspiciously similar circumstances in the last two weeks, Lestrade.” Sherlock explains. “That’s six people, six families looking for answers as to how something like this could have happened—and if past is prologue then it’s very likely that number will soon be eight, so unless more deaths are indeed your goal I suggest you let me speak to them. Today.”


“Yes, of course.” John says stepping in front of Sherlock as he opens his mouth to reply in something he’s fairly certain would have been a less than polite manner. “We hear you loud and clear. I’ll make sure of it.”

“Good,” the DI replies, looking tired. “Now you two stay put, yeah? I’ll let you know when they’re ready to speak with you.”
In the sparsely furnished waiting room off of the small set of suites where families come to gaze through a curtained window to confirm that the body on the table is in fact their loved one, Narendra Patel sits close to his wife Padmini, their hands clutched together tightly as John follows Sherlock into the room and they sit down on the small couch opposite Divya Patel-Bowman’s grieving parents.

“Mr. and Mrs. Patel,” John begins, “My name is John Watson, and this is Sherlock Holmes. We are working closely with the police in the investigation into your daughter and daughter-in-law’s deaths. We’re very sorry for your loss, and we will try not to take up too much of your time.”

The Patels nod their understanding, and John reaches over and squeezes Sherlock’s thigh, a gesture that is both encouragement and a reminder to handle the situation as delicately as possible.

“How long had Divya and Jennifer been married?” Sherlock asks, keeping his opening question simple.

“Two years, last month.” Narendra Patel tells him.

“It was a beautiful wedding,” Padmini adds softly, reaching into her purse and carefully extracting a small photo from her wallet of the two women they’d examined earlier in much happier times—dressed in bright pink saris embroidered with golden thread, their hands painted with ornate henna designs and jeweled headpieces sparkling in their hair. The contrast between them is striking; Divya’s dark skin and eyes, her long black hair shining against the rich magenta fabric of her wedding clothes, and Jennifer with her fair skin, blond hair and ice blue eyes smiling at the camera adorned in gleaming blush-pink satin. “Such a celebration.”

“They’re lovely,” John says with a smile, handing the photograph back to her.

“Was there any indication that they’d been unhappy recently?” Sherlock asks them. “Any problems that they might have confided in you about?”

“No,” Mr. Patel says firmly. “The girls were very happy. What they are telling us, that they died by their own hands? It cannot be true.”

“And do you agree with that assessment, Mrs. Patel?” Sherlock asks looking at the grief stricken woman after her husband finishes speaking.

“Yes,” Padmini Patel answers firmly, looking him in the eye. “They were so very happy—they’d just begun plans to start a family, we were so excited to be grandparents. Mary and Steve were as well.”

“Mary and Steve?” John asks.

“Jennifer’s parents.” Mr. Patel explains. “Mary and Steve Bowman, they’re American. They live in Cleveland.”

“They won’t be able to be here until at least tomorrow. Narendra and I will identify Jennifer as well today in their stead,” Mrs. Patel says, her voice shaking. “Our poor girls. After everything they’ve been through. How could this have happened?”

“That’s what we want to find out, Mrs. Patel.” John says soothingly.

“So they were married two years ago, correct? And how long before that did they bond?” Sherlock asks, attempting to get the interview back on course.
“Our daughter went color six years ago, Mr. Holmes.” Narendra tells them. “But she and Jennifer didn’t find each other for nearly three years after that.”

“I don’t understand,” John interjects, confused. “There was a three year gap between when Divya went color and when she and Jennifer met?”

“Our daughter was very sick in her early twenties,” Mrs. Patel explains. “Leukemia. A bone marrow transplant was the best chance she had at achieving a full remission. We waited years for a donor, for the right match to her rare blood type, and six years ago the transplant network told us a match was found in the American donor bank, and arrangements for the procedure were made soon after. Divya went in for surgery one morning, and when she woke up, she’d gone color.”

“That’s extraordinary,” John says, a bit of wonder in his voice.

“It was,” Padmini Patel says with a smile. “But it was difficult as well. Our daughter had no idea who her soulmate was. All of the doctors and nurses that performed her surgery were bonded. The hospital tracked down everyone on their staff that had any contact with her during her stay—but each one was a dead end. But through it all my daughter insisted that the person who had given her colors wasn’t anyone she’d met in the hospital—she believed that her soulmate was the person who had donated their bone marrow, the person who had saved her life.”

“And even when the doctors told her that it couldn’t be true, that no such thing had ever been known to happen before, my Divya believed it with all her heart.” Narendra Patel tells them earnestly. “She told me ‘I know it’s true, Papa. I can feel it in my bones’.”

The Patels smile at the memory, and John joins them—and to his surprise, so does Sherlock.

“Donor banks protect their records under the strictest guidelines of secrecy. How is that you were able to eventually identify Divya’s donor?” Sherlock asks.

“Nearly two years after her surgery, when our daughter was in good health and all likely leads to find her soulmate had been exhausted, Divya pleaded her case to the transplant ethics board at London General, and they took up the cause from there,” Padmini Patel explains. “After months of bureaucratic red tape and international phone calls, her donor was located and told about our daughter’s theory. Jennifer Bowman got on a plane that very night, flew to London and knocked on our daughter’s front door. As soon as Divya opened it, Jennifer stepped forward and put her arms around her—and her colors came. So you see, our girls would never have taken their own lives. They waited so long just to find each other. Jennifer loved our Cricket so very much, Mr. Holmes. And Cricket loved her.”

“Cricket?” John asks, wiping his damp cheeks with the back of his hand.

“Our daughter’s pet name. No one had called her Divya in years,” her father explains, dabbing his own eyes quickly before passing his handkerchief to his crying wife. “Please, you’ll find out how this happened, won’t you Mr. Holmes?”

“I will do my very best,” Sherlock tells him, looking over at John who has pulled out his mobile and is swiping his finger over the screen. “You have my word. Thank you very much for your time, and please accept our deepest condolences for your loss.”

“Yes,” John agrees, looking up from his mobile and standing to shake each of their hands warmly. “We’ll be in touch.”

When they’ve made their way into the hall and the door is firmly shut behind them, Sherlock leans
heavily against the wall and looks at John who has gone back to staring at his phone.

“I believe that this is the part where, if our roles were reversed, you would snatch my mobile from my fingers and ask me how I could possibly be so insensitive as to have my nose stuck in my phone at a time like this.” Sherlock says evenly.

“I know, and don’t think the irony is lost on me, just give me a minute—it’s important.” John answers as he continues to swipe the screen for a minute or two longer before letting out a small gasp. “As soon as she said ‘Cricket’, I knew I’d seen that name before. I didn’t click through and read the link the first time, but look--that’s them.”

John turns his phone around and holds the screen up for Sherlock to examine. There, underneath the bright “Color Stories” logo at the top of the page, is an article dated just over a year ago with the same wedding photo Padmini Patel had shown them earlier, the headline above it reads “Jennifer & Cricket: Love Is In Their Bones”. John watches Sherlock stare down at the screen, sees his eyes narrow and pull out of focus a bit, then watches them widen and hears a sudden gasp of surprise escape from his throat.

“That’s it!” he exclaims, spinning around in the hall once, tossing the phone at John who catches it inelegantly as he watches Sherlock ruffle his long fingers rapidly through his curls before he lunges forward and grabs John’s face, hauling him up into a fierce kiss, then looks him in the eye. “You, John, are brilliant!”

“Am I?” John asks, confused, as Sherlock lets go of him and begins to pace back and forth for a few long strides as he continues speaking.

“You’re not a genius, of course, and you’ve never been the most luminous of men in general but as a conductor of light you are unparalleled!”

“Thank you?” John asks carefully.

“No, John.” Sherlock insists. “Thank you. I’ve been looking at this all wrong, and I still would be if it wasn’t for your rather pedestrian reading habits and tendency to over-romanticize things in general.”

“Yeah,” John interrupts, “sounding a lot less like a compliment the more you keep talking.”

“It is most definitely a compliment,” Sherlock says, spinning around to face him with a triumphant smile. “I was convinced that the link was in the way we found the bodies—which it turns out is important, but it’s not the string that connects them. Don’t you see John? It’s not about how they died—it’s about how they met.”

Staring at the jumble of papers, photos, police reports and hastily scrawled notes covering the fleur-de-lis wallpaper above the couch, Sherlock runs the fingers of his right hand down a taut length of red string stretched in a straight line between two couples smiling cheerfully at him from their photographs tacked up on his sitting room wall, slips a finger under the thread, and pulls it gently toward him before it glides back down the rounded edge of his fingertip to vibrate slightly where it snaps back flush against the wall.

Eight sets of bodies, eight colorbonded couples, eight different guns, eight different locations—ending in sixteen people dead from sixteen separate gunshot wounds to the head. Eight different pairs of two, seemingly unconnected to each other, yet very much connected to someone else—but
He hears the soft swish of John’s stocking feet on the floor behind him, feels the warm touch of his hand over his own wrist, and then the even warmer press of a ceramic mug against his palm. Lifting it toward his lips he blows absently across the steaming surface of the hot, sweet tea and asks “Anything on the first two couples yet?”

“No,” John says. “I’ve scoured the site for the last three hours, clicked on the link for every weekly posting going back to the very first one nearly six years ago when the blog began. I’ve read enough inspiring ‘Color Stories’ that ours seems downright boring, to be honest. ‘My soulmate went color when he shook my hand after a Chinese dinner’ can hardly compete with ‘As he dove into the pool from his high perch on the life guard tower, Ben couldn’t have known that just a few moments later as he was performing CPR on the unconscious man that he’d be breathing not only life back into him, but a life full of colors as well’.

“To be fair, John, it seems far less pedestrian when you include the rather important bit about how you shot the devious serial killer through two panes of glass from a building away.” Sherlock replies, sipping his tea and glancing up at a picture of two fit young men smiling broadly for the camera as each holds up their left hand to display the gleaming gold rings they’d just exchanged moments before on the scenic beach in the background spread out beneath a vivid pink sunset. “Young Martin and his savior met quite an unfortunate end, however. And very likely due to the nature of their meeting as noteworthy enough to be featured on ‘Color Stories’ in the first place.”

When this provokes no response, Sherlock turns to find John staring up at the same picture he’d been looking at himself just moments ago, a pained expression around his eyes and his lips pressed tightly to a thin line.

“They look so happy there, don’t they?” John asks him quietly. “Like they have their whole lives ahead of them—what kind of monster could see that photo, could read that story and wish them harm? What kind of person could orchestrate something so terrible that it would not only end their lives, but alter the lives of everyone who loved them, forever?

“The same person who saw the faces of two people who survived the terrorist bombings on the underground,” Sherlock says, pointing up to a smiling man and woman high on the wall. “Martha and Roger were strangers when he promised to hold her hand until the rescue crews could pull her out of the rubble, and soulmates by the time they did.”

His extended hand follows the red string from that photo to one tacked below it, a grinning ebony skinned man with his arm around a smiling woman with curly ginger hair and countless freckles clutching a happy looking terrier between them sticking out its long pink tongue and appearing to smile just as broadly, and taps it with one long finger. “The same kind of person who read about how Eugenia dove into the Thames one spring to save a dog that had fallen in, and how Lawrence dove in afterwards to pull them both to shore, and by the end of that day they both had colors—and a dog.”

Sherlock pulls his arm back and presses his palms together and sets his fingertips against his lips and narrows his eyes at the connected photographs and documents on the wall. “Someone read these stories, singled them out, fixated on the way they met and saw to it that they met an equally dramatic end.”

“Six couples, all featured on the same blog—all turn up dead in what looks at first glance to be a murder-suicide scenario. How did no one notice this before?” John asks, incredulously.

“No one was looking for a pattern, John.” Sherlock tells him, his eyes never leaving the wall. “You
said it yourself last week: these are difficult cases to talk about. The stories of how people meet are easy to share, the happy circumstances surrounding the beginning of love—but the tragic events surrounding the violent end to it are often kept close to the vest whenever possible.”

“But they were soulmates, Sherlock.” John continues, his voice brimming with righteous indignation. “These were people who belonged together—they loved each other.”

“Which unfortunately doesn’t guarantee that they wouldn’t also harm one other.” Sherlock replies, gesturing toward the file boxes stacked neatly up against the arm of the couch furthest from the sitting room door. “There were one hundred and twenty files in those boxes when they arrived, one hundred and twenty cases of purported murder-suicide between colorbonded partners over the last decade. Seven of them appear to fit the suspicious pattern we’re investigating. That leaves one hundred and thirteen that are likely exactly what they seem to be.”

“I just don’t understand.” John says, rubbing his palms over his face, his tone stricken. “Someone should have noticed.”

“Someone did,” Sherlock tells him, walking over to crouch down in front of John where he sits in his armchair by the fireplace. “Someone looked at the bodies of two soulmates lying dead on the floor of an abandoned school building and noticed something no one else had.”

“I suppose that’s true,” John concedes with a nod. “But you’re the one who figured out what it was.”

“Yes,” Sherlock says with a nod. “We’re an effective team, you and I.”

“You’re right,” John says with a smile, then leans forward and presses their lips together.

“I usually am.” Sherlock agrees as he gets back to his feet, his mouth quirking up in a grin as John rolls his eyes, and strides back over to look at the interconnected photos and documents on the wall. “Eight cases over the last eight years—three of them in the last three weeks alone. The last six featured on the popular “Color Stories” blog…but not these first two. Expand your search, John—look for any stories relating to these two couples in the media at large.”

“On it,” John says, tapping out the last few letters of his search words and then squinting at the results on his laptop screen while Sherlock goes back to staring at the photos of sixteen people whose lives ended far too soon. He’s reaching down to retrieve his mug of tea from the coffee table when John emits a short gasp behind him, then looks up from his computer at Sherlock who is raises and eyebrow in his direction.

“I found them.” John says, scanning over the page on his screen.

“Which couple?” Sherlock asks, striding over to where he sits.

“Both of them.”

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December 26, 2005

London Examiner, Online Edition

Riding the Wave: Finding Love in the Midst of Tragedy

By Joseph Wickham
One year after the devastating Tsunami that claimed the lives of nearly a quarter of a million people in sixteen countries, the coastal areas hit by the largest earthquake induced land breaking wave ever recorded have yet to recover, the tsunami leaving physical devastation and an unprecedented humanitarian crisis in its wake.

“It was the scariest day of my life,” Victoria Marsh of London remembers, “yet also one of the very best. Looking back it’s hard to believe we survived at all, much less came home with such an unbelievable story to tell.”

Unbelievable, indeed. While enjoying a Christmas diving holiday in Thailand on the Island of Phi Phi, Victoria reports that on the morning of December twenty-sixth she had just left the beachside bungalow she’d been sharing with three of her girlfriends to go and have some breakfast in the main dining room at the resort.

“We’d gone out the night before to the Christmas celebration at the hotel, and I was the only one of us four girls who’d come back to the room that night. I remember seeing people milling about and looking out toward the sea, but I didn’t think much of it until I heard this deafening roar behind me—and when I turned to look I saw a giant wall of water rushing toward me. I tried to run but something hard slammed into my back and suddenly I was underwater. It was dark and I had no idea which way was up, and I just started kicking and thrashing and eventually my face broke the surface of the water and I took a really deep breath.”

But this wasn’t a gently rolling wave of water that one could ride safely until it began to ebb, far from it according to Victoria.

“The water was rushing so quickly, destroying everything in its path—and it wasn’t clear like the ocean, it was dark and muddy and swirling with giant pieces of debris. As it carried me across the resort picking up people, and buildings, and cars and furniture I remember looking ahead and thinking that it felt like I was in a video game—that I had to look at the obstacles coming up and try to avoid them. It was a ridiculous feeling, but it helped me stay calm.”

And stay calm, she did. As the wave carried Victoria and all manner of detritus along in its wake, she recalls the moment she saw the man standing in the top of the tree the surge was carrying her directly toward.

“He was clinging to the very top fronds of a large palm, sort of sitting in the middle of it. As I got closer I could see his face, and I watched his eyes go wide as he saw me coming toward him. I remember reaching my arms out, thinking that if I could just take hold of one of the leaves I might be able to stop myself and shelter there until the water receded.”

But that’s not quite how it worked out.

“I could see this face coming toward me,” Jürgen Blumkvist, originally of Stockholm, recalls. “A pale, frightened face attached to a woman who was raising her arms in my direction. She was moving so fast, I knew she’d never be able to grab hold of the tree—and in that moment, I decided that I couldn’t watch her go by without trying to help.”

In what he describes as a split second decision, Jürgen says he wrapped one arm tightly around the thick branch in front of him and then leaned out as far as he could, managing to grab the back of Victoria’s shirt (and a fair bit of her hair as well, according to Ms. Marsh) as she swept by, and hauled her toward him where they clung to the tree—and each other—for dear life. When the water started to recede, they looked around the land from where they were stranded, at the torn landscape and flattened buildings, and both realized that they were seeing the devastated landscape in a way they never expected: in color.
“It was tough to know how to feel,” Victoria admits. “I mean, you wait for this day your whole life—and when it comes on the heels of something so frightening and traumatic, well, it wasn’t at all how I pictured it happening.”

“I had very mixed emotions,” agrees Jürgen, putting his arm around the woman who will be his wife in less than a month’s time. “I had two friends that I’d come on holiday with and I didn’t know if they were safe, we’d just been through the scariest experience I could imagine, we’d gone color right in the midst of it, and to top it all off—we were stuck in a tree.”

After they were rescued from their perch some hours later, both Jürgen and Victoria were relieved to find out that the friends they’d each come on holiday with separately had all miraculously survived the event as well, though so many countless others in the area weren’t as lucky.

“It was a miracle we all left Thailand alive,” Victoria says, rubbing her fingers over a small emerald encrusted pendant shaped like a wave that hangs around her neck, then holding it up for my inspection. “I had these made for each of my girlfriends, and matching cufflinks for each of Jürgen’s friends as well, to remind us of what we’d been through and how lucky we were to come home.”

They will all be wearing the keepsakes when Jürgen and Victoria say ‘I do’ in front of their friends and family next month, as a reminder that even in the midst of tragedy there is still happiness to be found.

And theirs is not the only happy story to emerge from the disaster. Two months after the tsunami hit, when Canadian Red Cross worker Brenda Thompson’s plane touched down in Indonesia and she reported for duty at the volunteer station, she had no idea what a life changing experience it would be.

“I wanted to help,” Brenda says. “I’d seen the coverage on TV and just felt that I needed to be there, to play whatever small part I could in the cleanup.”

So she signed up for a three week relief trip to the area, and it was there that she met British Red Cross volunteer Marcus Plinth who was in charge of the program.

“She walked into the tent, and mostly I remember being very tired and glad that we were getting some new volunteers that day,” says Marcus of the day they met. “I was covered in mud, I didn’t even have a clean patch of trouser to wipe my hands on, but Brenda just smiled and shook my hand anyway. I remember thinking that any girl with a smile like hers who didn’t mind getting her hands dirty was the kind of woman I’d always hoped to meet one day. Twelve hours later, we’d both gone color.”

And the rest, as they say, is history.

“I traveled half way around the world to give something back, and I ended up getting the best gift of all,” says the recently wed Mrs. Thompson-Plinth.

The happy couple married last month, and now live in London. They plan to continue traveling with the Red Cross and doing humanitarian work together.
“The first two couples on the wall both went color during—or as a result of—the 2004 Asian tsunami,” John says. “That can’t be a coincidence.”

“No,” Sherlock says, getting up and striding over to his meticulously constructed case wall. “It can’t.”

“But what does it mean?” John asks. “Is our killer connected to the tsunami in some way?”

“Undoubtedly,” Sherlock replies.

“Ok,” John says. “But how?”

“I don’t know.” The detective admits, his eyes scanning the photos and documents before him. “Yet. But this is where it started, John. Two couples who found their soulmate in the midst, or aftermath, of the same tragedy, then appear to have taken their own lives in the years following. Victoria and Jürgen were the first, and then Marcus and Brenda met a similar fate.”

“It was a devastating disaster,” John says. “Had I not been deployed at the time I’d have joined the relief effort myself. It was nearly a decade ago and there are still thousands of victims unaccounted for. There was a story in the news just a few weeks ago that they were working to identify some remains that were uncovered miles away from one of the large resorts that was leveled. The British government is hopeful that they might be able to give some families closure.”

“That would certainly help explain the escalation we’ve seen in the pattern,” Sherlock says, pointing to each of the couples up on the wall in turn. “Five sets of soulmates found dead with months and even years separating each set of deaths, but now three in just the last two weeks? A renewal of interest in those killed by the tsunami might have triggered this new spate of cases.”

“But the other six couples, they had nothing to do with the first two,” says John. “Why were the first two double suicides both so closely related to that disaster, but the others aren’t?”

“Because it started out being about the tsunami,” Sherlock says slowly, “but eventually that wasn’t the point any more. All eight of these couples met in unique—even extreme—circumstances. Someone saw these stories, saw what these people had, more particularly saw where they found it, and not only wanted to destroy them—they wanted to make them destroy themselves.”

“Who could be that bitter?” John asks incredulously.

“Not bitter, John. Bitterness is a paralytic.” Sherlock says, his voice pitched low. “Now love—love is a far more vicious motivator.”

“Love?” John says, “You think someone did this for love?”

“It would hardly be the first time such atrocities had been perpetrated in its name,” Sherlock tells him. “Nor will it be the last.”

*p*ing*

Sherlock looks down at his mobile and scans the text that just arrived.

“Molly’s gathered all the toxicology reports from the morgue records of the past victims and the blood test results on Jennifer and Divya have just come back from the lab as well,” Sherlock says excitedly, crossing the room and picking up John’s shoes from where they sit by the door and tossing them toward him where he sits in his chair. “There’s too much information to text, we’ll need to go to Bart’s and pick it up.”
“Ok.” John says, knocking one shoe to the ground before it hits him in the face and deftly catching the other and bending over to pull them on and lace them up. “But there’s going to be food involved in this trip across town, Sherlock. And you’re going to eat some as well, understood?”

“How can you think about food at a time like this, John?” Sherlock huffs impatiently, tapping his foot at the top of the stairs, muscles coiled to spring down them the moment John is on his feet. “The game is on!”

“Which is fine with me,” John calls after him good naturedly, standing up and following in Sherlock’s wake. “As long as supper is on at some point as well.”

Papers spread out all over the table in front of him, Sherlock scans the pages of cryptic looking numerical results detailing the various substances found in blood samples taken from sixteen separate apparent suicides by London medical examiners over the last several years while John noisily slurps noodles from the large bowl of ramen before him.

“What you looking for, exactly?” John asks, sucking up a long, curly noodle between his pursed lips from where it hangs several inches below his chin.

“At the moment?” Sherlock replies, not looking up. “Your table manners, it would seem.”

“Very funny,” John says, purposely putting just the very end of a particularly long string of pasta between his lips before making quite a production of inhaling it into his mouth and then smiling broadly at the eye roll the action provokes from the man sitting across from him. “But seriously. What?”

“Our first set of victims—Victoria and Jürgen—died in their home,” Sherlock begins, his voice taut and authoritative. “But each subsequent couple was either lured or taken to a location that had at least a vague relationship to the circumstances in which they discovered their colorbond. Marcus and Brenda were found at a rarely used British Red Cross supplies warehouse. Roger and Martha near an old and disused underground station. Ben and Martin at the drained outdoor swimming pool at their recently closed health club, and Lawrence and Eugenia were discovered shortly after someone reported hearing what they believed to be gunshots in the vicinity of the base of one of the lesser used bridges that cross the Thames.”

“Paul and Sasha met in a seedy neighborhood as she walked home, and they were found in an abandoned warehouse in a less than respectable area of London.” John says, cottoning on to the pattern and picking up the narrative. “Then Michael and Caroline—the reunited schoolmate strangers turned sweethearts, they died at the abandoned school they both attended.”

“And now Jennifer and Cricket, found at the construction site of the new London Transplant Hospital.” Sherlock finishes. “All locations that afforded our perpetrator some measure of privacy, but he must incapacitate them somehow. He’d need them to be unconscious in order to administer the color filtering eye drops to the first victim.”

“All right, but then what?” John asks, between bites. “He packs them up in his car and drags them to wherever it is he wants them to die? He must be quite strong—and careful, for that matter, I don’t recall seeing any obvious signs on any of the bodies that would indicate they’d been moved over a long distance.”

“I don’t believe they were.” Sherlock says, continuing to scan the coroner’s reports fanned out before him. “I think it’s more likely that they were lured to the location somehow, and the fact that each
scene where the bodies were discovered had at least a tangential connection to their personal stories would lend credence to the idea that it was a murder-suicide situation. Taken individually it might make sense that a disturbed individual would choose a significant location to commit such an act. It’s only when you look at them as a group that it becomes suspicious.”

John mulls this information over for a few bites while Sherlock leafs through the stack of papers in order again before he suddenly stops—inhales sharply—and then rapidly picks through them and fans out several in an overlapping arc around him on the table. He runs his fingers roughly through his curls, then looks up at John with a lopsided, yet triumphant, grin.

“You’ve found something,” John says, grinning back.

“Standard blood panels have a finite list of the chemicals they’re searching for in the test sample.” Sherlock says excitedly. “There’s a protocol involved, a threshold for each foreign substance that is considered significant enough to make it into the final report.”

“I did go to medical school, you know.” John reminds him as Sherlock shoots him an impatient look and continues.

“In each of our victims, the lab findings showed no significant levels of any legal or illegal substances worth reporting.” Sherlock tells him with a gleam in his eye, passing several sheets to John and pointing to various lines on the one on top. “But look here, John—there are insignificant levels of at least four compounds the standard toxicology protocol looks for. Individually they might not have any effect on a person—but in combination?”

“They could very well incapacitate someone,” John finishes, his eyes widening. “But how would he convince them to take the drugs?”

“An excellent question,” Sherlock says, taking the reports from John’s hands and reordering them in front of him. “There was no evidence of undigested pills in their stomach or intestinal contents, and no visible needle marks on the bodies.”

“An inhalant, perhaps?” John offers.


“Yeah, but—an inhalable compound drug that incapacitates a person for an indeterminate period of time and yet breaks down quickly enough not to leave obvious trace evidence in routine blood work?” John asks, looking skeptical. “It doesn’t exist, as far as I know. I’ve never even heard of such a thing.”

“I’d never heard of a liquid chemical compound that filters out all evidence of color in a bonded individual when applied topically to the eye, either, John. Yet we know it exists.”

“Oh,” John concedes with a tip of his head. “So he lures them there—and then knocks them out, somehow—and then…well, what then?”

“Imagine being with your soulmate one moment, and then waking up after suddenly losing consciousness and finding the world looks grey.” Sherlock says.


“Exactly,” Sherlock agrees. “And if you believed that your soulmate was gone, if someone was right there beside you telling you they were dead—whispering in your ear, offering you an end to the pain—what might you be driven to do?”
John puts his chopsticks down, his left hand resting next to the bowl on the table, clenching and unclenching rhythmically while he stares down into the now cold soup before him with a grim expression.

“I’ve been in that place, Sherlock.” He says softly. “I know how it feels to believe that a bullet is the only solution to the pain. To decide every morning whether this day will be your last. In one of those moments, if someone had stood next to me and told me to do it—I wouldn’t be here today.”

Sherlock slides an arm out over the pile of papers and slips his large hand around John’s clenched fist. John looks up at him, the hardness in his eyes softening a bit at what he sees reflected in Sherlock’s.

“You have to find him,” John tells his soulmate. “You have to find him and stop him.”

“We will.” Sherlock says, then gives his hand a squeeze and goes to pull it back across the table, but John catches it in his own and threads their fingers together.

“Promise me something?” John asks, looking him in the eye. “Promise me that if anything ever happens to me, that you won’t give up, yeah? That you’ll go on, grey or not?”

Sherlock looks down at their hands thoughtfully, then back up at John—at the sandy gold in his hair, the ruddy pink on his cheeks, the deep and steady blue of his earnest eyes—and for a moment the mere thought of not being able to see those colors seems enough to make him stop breathing, to stop his very heart in his chest. Then his breath comes back in a rush, and he squeezes the tan hand in his own, feels the coarse tawny hairs at his wrist, sees the soft pink under his smooth fingernails. He looks at his soulmate, at this person who he was once quite certain did not exist—the person who he can no longer imagine living without—and knows that there is nothing he would deny this man, not even this.

“I promise.” He says solemnly. “And I ask the same vow of you, John.”

John looks hard at him for a long moment, then nods.

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After they’d returned home, after they’d scaled the stairs up to their flat and took turns pressing each other up against every bare patch of wall between the sitting room and their bedroom door, after they’d sealed the vow they made with not one—but hundreds—of kisses, after the sweat had beaded on their skin, had soaked into the sheets, had left a salty taste on each of their tongues, and had finally dried when they at last lay still and sated and spent, and long after John’s panting breaths had turned to quiet snores against his shoulder—only then does Sherlock leave John’s side.

Reaching for his dressing gown, he slips it over his shoulders and ties it around his naked form and looks down at John lying peacefully in their bed, lit by moonlight streaming in through the bedroom window. Smiling at the sight, he bends over and presses a kiss to John’s rough cheek and feels the shorter man stir beneath his lips, raising his head and opening his eyes blearily.

“Sh’lock? Whas wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong, John.” Sherlock whispers softly, his lips against John’s ear. “Go back to sleep.”

“Hmm. Pink.” John slurs sleepily, snuffling down into the pillow, and Sherlock huffs out a low chuckle against his ear.

“Pink?” He asks softly, “What’s pink?”
“Pink is soft,” John says dreamily. “Like a whisper...”

Sherlock smiles against his skin, lays a final tender kiss on his cheek, and then walks out of the bedroom closing the door softly behind him. He stands in front of the couch, stares up at the smiling faces of eight couples robbed of this joy he feels now, this contentment in knowing that you’re loved not in spite of who you are—but because of it. Pressing his fingers to his lips, he lets his eyes scan over the various notes and documents and photographs and begins rearranging them in his mind palace, searching for the hidden clue, the yet to be revealed pattern that will lead him to the person responsible for ending these sixteen lives. He will find him. He has to.

He made a promise.

Chapter End Notes

Welcome to the part of this little adventure where I continue to list some of my favorite Johnlock fics in the name of spreading the fangirl love.

Ever read a fic and love it so much that you wish it was alive so you could hug it, and snuggle up to it, and maybe follow it to work and just stare at it from afar until it disappears into the building and you sit in your parked car and try to imagine what it’s doing right now while you can’t see it?

No one? Really? Just me? Hm. Ok then. But for the record, that’s how I feel about this fic.

So in this chapter’s installment of “Love this as much as I do. I DEMAND IT!” may I heartily recommend (and by “heartily” I mean “with the fiery heat of a thousand burning suns”) emmagrant01’s beautiful post-fall fic Nothing To Make A Song About.

This wonderful work imagines a post Reichenbach world where John couldn’t forgive Sherlock when he returned home, and a decade long separation ensued. When John returns to London, it isn’t long before Sherlock returns to his life. They’re both a little older, a little wiser, and yet still essentially the same. After all that time apart, can the men they are now finally admit what they mean to each other? Read and find out. And then swoon. SWOON I SAY!

That’s it for this week, now go forth and read, my pretties. READ!

(P.S. Ha! Look! It’s a real live LINK! I did it! I also updated all the previous fic recs at the end of chapters to include clickable links to the recommended works. FYI.)
Happy Let’s-keep-pretending-I-update-on-Thursdays my friends!

I’m going to skip the preamble this week and just say that I wrestled this chapter out of my brain like it was a big, angry bear protecting her cubs—and I was, well, me. And I feel it would be wise to add this friendly reminder: the story isn’t over yet.

That said: Watch your step there at the end, there be cliffs ahead.

An obscene amount of love to my tireless beta, and all the rest of the love in the world to everyone who’s hung in there each week with me—and to anyone who just hopped on board this crazy train. My endless thanks for each and every hit, kudo, subscription, bookmark and comment. You’re the coolest. All of you.

Last chapter (and bonus epilogue!) posts next week, same time—same place. Hope you’ll stop by and say goodbye. Have the best week ever!

Baker Street is never completely quiet.

London is a bustling metropolis, after all, and even in the middle of the night the sounds of traffic and voices passing by are likely to waft through the windows of 221B. Living in the city you get used to the constant noise, to its rhythms and sounds. To the early morning rumble of truck engines as they drive past, to shouted calls for cabs to stop, to the conversation and clatter of the patrons at Speedy’s Café as they enjoy their morning coffee and breakfast on the sidewalk below the flat. It’s a heartbeat, of sorts, a constant stream of white noise that after a while only becomes remarkable in its absence.

It’s a soundtrack that John Watson has become quite accustomed to, it seems.

On this morning, it’s not the blare of a passing horn or the crash of a full tray of mugs shattering against the pavement a story below that wakes him. John is lulled out of a deep, restful sleep by the murmur of a voice two rooms away—a melodic baritone speaking in a stream of indistinct words that float through the air of the sitting room, through the kitchen, down the short hallway and under the closed door of the bedroom that he and Sherlock share.

As the voice continues its rhythmic cadence, John takes a deep breath that crests in a yawn and slowly opens his eyes. The drapes are drawn fairly tightly, but the window is open a few inches and the soft morning breeze wafts in making the curtains sway and letting in golden shafts of sunlight that gather in warm pools over the polished honey wood floor. His sleepy gaze travels over his blue and black striped jumper in a pile near the foot of the bed, lingers on a dark red pair of Sherlock’s obscenely expensive boxer briefs balled up next to it, and then across the heap of light blue button down shirt where it fell when he pulled it off of Sherlock’s broad shoulders last night just before he’d pressed his hands to his chest and pushed him down onto the mattress.

His eyelashes brush against the smooth cotton of the pillowcase he’s buried his face into, the soft
lilac color of the sheets filling his vision. He closes his eyes again, presses his face deeper into the pillow and breathes in the comforting scent of Sherlock’s expensive shampoo mingled with his own favorite aftershave, the fresh smell of fabric conditioner, and underneath it all a hint of their combined musk and sweat where it still lingers on the sheets from last night.

John breathes deeply and smiles into the soft fabric, enjoying the feel of the posh cotton against his face. If you’d asked him a month ago what kind of bed coverings he preferred he’d likely have shrugged and told you he’d slept on a stretched canvas cot covered with a sleeping bag and a scratchy blanket for the better part of a decade, so any sheets at all seemed luxurious to him. But in the last few weeks John has to admit that he’s come to understand all the fuss surrounding Egyptian cotton woven into obscenely high thread counts per inch. Apparently an appreciation for fine linens is an unexpected side effect of sharing a bed with the world’s only consulting detective.

Another thing you get when you sleep with Sherlock Holmes? *Sticky.*

Pulling his arms out from where they’re folded beneath his head under the pillow, John starts to roll over onto his back and feels the rumpled fitted sheet now stuck to his hip and upper thigh pull away from his skin, taking a few coarse hairs out by the root as it does. He curses quietly at the sting, then carefully peels the fabric away from where it’s adhered to his skin with the byproduct of last night’s amorous activities. They’re usually far more fastidious, one of them fetching a wet flannel or at the very least reaching down to retrieve a discarded item of clothing to wipe away the worst of the mess, but it had been a very long day and John barely remembers anything after his own orgasm washed over him other than the feel of his flushed cheek against the slick skin of Sherlock’s chest in the moments before sleep took him.

Reaching an arm out over the empty space in the bed next to him, John’s hand skims over soft, cool sheets with no trace of warmth left from the body that lay there last night. He doesn’t know when Sherlock got up, but he suspects it wasn’t long after John himself had fallen asleep. Sherlock isn’t an easy sleeper in the best of circumstances, and during a case he tends to sleep even less than usual. Given all that, John’s amazed he was able to lure him into bed at all.

Well, maybe not *that* amazed.

It seems to John that sex isn’t so much a distraction for Sherlock as it is a *tool*—a palate cleanser of sorts—a way to wipe away the flurry of thoughts and words and theories scattered across his mind so he can start fresh with a clean slate and begin to make some sense out of the information in front of him. It’s a reset button, essentially, but not a strictly mechanical one. Even in the throes of a case, Sherlock is a thoughtful lover, attentive and present and John never feels anything but adored—and if the side effect of that passion happens to be that Sherlock’s mind can focus more acutely on the puzzle before him, then everyone wins.

Everyone but the bed sheets, that is.

John looks over at the clock, notes that it’s barely half past seven then listens to Sherlock speaking in low tones in the other room for a few more minutes. With a sigh he gets out of bed, hits the bathroom for a quick piss and to grab his dressing gown, then walks out to the kitchen and flips on the kettle before making his way out to the sitting room. He leans a hip against his armchair for a few minutes listening to Sherlock who is standing in front of his evidence wall and pointing to each couple in turn and summarizing the case so far, earnestly explaining all the facts they’ve gathered… to the large ginger cat sprawled lazily on the grey leather armchair facing the couch.

“How have you been up all night?” John asks, yawning, as two sets of eyes turn to look at him where he stands—one emerald green, and one blue/grey/green/silver/with a touch of amber. When neither of his flatmates bother to respond he shakes his head and goes back into the kitchen where the kettle’s
just boiled. Stirring milk and sugar into one cup, he walks it out into the sitting room and stands next to Sherlock where he’s now perched on the back of his chair, his feet planted on either side of Basil who lies stretched out across the cushion, completely unperturbed by the unorthodox seating arrangement.

“I’ll make you some toast when I’m out of the shower,” John says, putting the hot mug of tea into his outstretched hand.

“Not hungry,” Sherlock says dismissively, taking a sip as his eyes continue scanning the wall.

“Yes you are,” John says patiently, rolling his eyes and turning back toward the kitchen. “You’ve just forgotten what it feels like.”

“John?” Sherlock says, reaching out to grasp the cuff of his dressing gown between two long fingers.

“Yeah?” John says, turning back toward him.

“Thank you.” Sherlock says, holding up the tea and nodding toward it.

“You’re welcome, love.” John tells him, then steps forward and kisses him softly, tasting the tea on his mouth.

“Hmm. I understand, now.” Sherlock says thoughtfully, running his tongue over his front teeth behind his lips.

“You understand what?” asks John.

“Your preoccupation with oral hygiene.” He replies with an exaggerated look of distaste, taking another sip of tea. “You’re right, it is important.”

“Thanks for that, you twat.” John says with fond irritation walking into the kitchen. “How about you make your own tea from now on, then?”

“Unacceptable.” Sherlock says with a wave of his hand. “Your tea always tastes best, so it seems that enduring morning breath is the price I must pay.”

“We all make sacrifices in this life,” John says with mock seriousness, then gets himself a cup of tea and walks toward the bedroom where he strips off the soiled bedclothes, replaces them with clean linens, then makes the bed with military efficiency before heading into the bathroom for a wash.

After an uncharacteristically long shower where he’d enjoyed letting the hot water slowly melt away the tension in his shoulders and back and treated himself to a vigorous scrub down with Sherlock’s poncy shower gel, John finally emerged from the bedroom clean shaven and fully dressed nearly an hour later. Chewing on a piece of toast spread with butter and a spoonful of his mother’s excellent marmalade she’d sent home with them, John sets a plate with two more slices prepared the same way down on the coffee table in front of Sherlock.

“Eat those,” John tells him, slipping his mobile into his front pocket and looking around for his keys. “Even if you eat nothing else while I’m gone, at least you’ll have taken in enough calories that I won’t worry you’ll pass out and fall off the back of that chair.”

“Where are you going?” Sherlock asks, looking vaguely alarmed.
“I have a shift at the surgery,” John tells him, looking at the scattering of raindrops that have begun to splatter against the large sitting room windows and then retrieving his jacket from its hook behind the door. “I’ve been gone nearly a week with the funeral on absolutely no notice, so it’s time I went back.”

“But we’ve got a case,” Sherlock says, gesturing to the mess of paper and string up on the wall.

“Yes, we do. And if anything new and important arises in the next eight hours or so, you’ll know exactly where to find me.” John says, crossing back over to where Sherlock still sits perched on the back of his chair and reaching out his left hand to thread his short fingers through the pouting man’s untamed curls before leaning in and giving him a very thorough kiss good-bye, after which he reaches down to scratch their cat between the ears. “Besides, it looks as though Basil is already doing my job by listening raptly to and being terribly impressed by your deductions, so you hardly need me anyway.”

“He’s a cat, John.” Sherlock pouts. “He can’t make tea.”

“He can make tea, John!”

“Then it’s lucky I won’t be gone for long,” John says, heading toward the stairs and talking over his shoulder. “I’ll have my mobile, text if you need me. Love you.”

Pushing open the front door and looking out onto Baker Street where the rain is now coming down in earnest, John zips his jacket and flips the collar up against the wind then shoves his hands down into his pockets preparing to step outside when the fingers of his right hand touch a thick piece of wrinkled paper. He pulls out the white scrap that’s torn on two edges and unfolds it to see a phone number scrawled in red ink. He’s puzzled for a moment but then remembers his old classmate and girlfriend leaning forward and writing her number on his sandwich wrapper. That had been, what—ten days ago? It feels like months. He hastily refolds the paper and slips it back into his pocket along with his hands, then heads out into the rain.

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When he’d arrived at the surgery just after nine o’clock, there was already an impressive queue of patients waiting to be seen—and according to the scheduling clerk they had a full appointment book for the rest of the day as well. There were a few mumbled condolences and words of welcome from the staff, but it wasn’t long before he was swept up in the parade of spring colds, strep throat, and sinus infections. It was nearly three o’clock by the time he had a break in his schedule, and after assuring a young mother that her little one’s stuffy nose and fever would pass soon enough and didn’t require antibiotics, he went to the sink to give his hands yet another thorough washing and then gave his arms and back a good stretch before sitting down behind the desk in the small office off the examination room.

*ping*

_The Patels have been talking to the press, Lestrade is livid. —SH_

John taps the link attached to Sherlock’s message and his browser opens to a page on the site of a popular tabloid newspaper featuring the wedding picture that Divya’s mother had shown him, the same one that appeared in the “Color Stories” article that had very likely made them a target in the first place. Scanning the short piece, he’s relieved that there is no mention of an unidentified substance found on the bodies or any possible ties to the other dead couples—merely the assertion of the dead women’s parents that while the police have classified the deaths as suicides, they are certain there was foul play involved and the families are “…relieved to report that noted Super Sleuth Sherlock Holmes and his charming companion Dr. John Watson are assisting with the investigation and we are confident they will soon uncover the truth.”
John finishes reading and taps out a response:

_That will be good for business, anyway._

Sherlock’s response is almost immediate.

*_ping_*

_Not if I don’t solve it._ –SH

John’s lips turn down in a small frown, his thumbs working over the small keyboard once again:

_Of course you’ll solve it. ‘Noted Super Sleuth Sherlock Holmes’ always gets his man._

*_ping_*

_Usually, yes. But it should be noted that he’s nothing without his ‘charming companion’._ –SH

John huffs out a quiet chuckle as he types a reply.

_And don’t you forget it, either. If you’re very nice to him, he may bring home Chinese for dinner._

*_ping_*

_I was talking about Basil. To whom are you referring? _–SH

John shakes his head and grins.

_Very funny. Teach him to make tea and you’ll have no use for me at all._

*_ping_*

_Not true. He’s a terrible kisser._ –SH

John lets out a genuine laugh at that.

_Good to know. Now stop molesting the cat and get back to work. Text if you need me._

*_ping_*

_I always need you._ –SH

John smiles down at his phone and slips it into his pocket just as there’s a sharp knock on the door, and he looks up at the sound.

“Come in.” He calls, and Dr. Sarah Sawyer swings open the door and walks through it. John smiles at her. “Hello, Sarah.”

“Hi, John.” She says, smiling warmly in return and coming to sit in the chair opposite the small desk. “It’s been such a busy day, I didn’t even get a chance to say hello when you came in.”

“I’ve barely had a chance to breathe since I arrived.” John concurs. “I’m glad you had a moment to stop in.”

“I’m so sorry about your father,” Sarah tells him. “You spoke so fondly of both your parents, I can’t imagine how difficult this has all been for you.”
“I’ve had better weeks,” John says honestly. “But my Mum’s doing remarkably well, and Dad had a lovely sendoff.”

“I’m sure it was a comfort to have Sherlock there as well,” Sarah adds sincerely. “He called to let me know you’d be out of town for the week, you know. He was very polite, but he sounded a bit… lost. I asked him if there was anything I could do to help and he asked me what I thought was the most important thing he could do for you. I told him to trust his instincts and just be there for you, in any way you needed him. He thanked me so earnestly for the advice. It was quite charming, really.”

“I didn’t know he did that,” Johns tells her, a slow smile spreading over his face. “He took your advice to heart, it seems. He really was wonderful. I don’t know what I’d have done without him. Thank you, Sarah.”

“No thanks necessary, John.” Sarah tells him with a wave of her hand. “That’s what friends do, after all—help each other out. Speaking of which, stand up for a minute—your tie’s gone all crooked.”

John stands and Sarah walks around the side of the desk, then reaches out and slips her small fingers into the hastily formed knot he had made that morning and rearranges the fabric until it’s hanging straight and smooth from an expertly tied double Windsor knot at his throat.

“That’s better,” Sarah says, nodding at him and then cocking her head to one side and looking at his tie and then up to his face. “That’s a lovely shade of green, by the way. Brings out the blue in your eyes.”

“Does it?” John says, looking down his chest and pulling up the end of the tie to regard the color in the light before what Sarah just said registers and he looks up to see the sly grin and a sparkle in her eyes and smiles back at her in sudden understanding. “Sarah! You’ve gone color?”

“MmHmm.” She says, nodding her head and smiling broadly.

“When?” John says, grasping her upper arms and squeezing them warmly. “Who?”

“Just last week,” Sarah gushes. “His name is Ethan, he’s a barrister. We met at my favorite book shop just down the street from my flat. Turns out it’s his favorite too. Seems we’d both been going there for years, and just happened to bump into each other one day and got to talking…and the colors came. Not terribly exciting, is it?”

“Are you joking?” John asks, with a happy laugh. “It’s very exciting! I’m thrilled for you Sarah, I really am.”

“Thank you,” Sarah Sawyer tells him, smiling. “Things do have a way of working themselves out, don’t they?”

“They certainly do.” John agrees.

*RING*

They both jump a bit at the sound of his ringtone, then laugh as John reaches into his pocket for his mobile and looks at the number on the screen. It’s not one he recognizes, but it does look vaguely familiar for some reason.

“Go on and get that,” Sarah says with a smile, heading for the door. “Your next patient is in 5 minutes, I’ll tell them you’ll be ready.”

“Thanks, Sarah.” John calls after her as she shuts the door behind her and he looks back down at the
phone that is just beginning to ring for a third time, taps the green circle marked ‘accept call’ and lifts it to his ear.

“Hello?”

“John?” A pleasant female voice asks on the other end of the line. “Hello, it’s Lucy. Lucy Chaplain-Wallace.”

“Lucy!” John says, a hint of surprise in his tone. “I was just thinking about you this morning, found your number in my jacket pocket. How are you?”

“I’m well,” Lucy says, though John catches a touch of something hesitant in the tone of her quick reply. “I ran into Mike Stamford the other day at a lecture I was attending over at Bart’s, and he told me about your Dad. I’m so sorry, John.”

“Thank you, I appreciate that.” John says honestly. “It was quite a shock.”

“I’m sure it was. It’s such a terrible blow to lose a loved one,” Lucy continues, “I do hope you were surrounded by friends and family to help you through.”

“I was,” John says, smiling in spite of the difficult subject matter. “And yes, that did seem to make things easier.”

“I’m very glad to hear it,” Lucy says warmly. “I was wondering if you might have time for a cup of coffee later this afternoon?”

“Well,” John says, thinking about Sherlock at home obsessing about the case, “I’ve got patients booked all the way through quarter of five this afternoon, and Sherlock and I are working on a case…”

“Oh, that’s all right.” Lucy says quickly, her disappointment not entirely masked by her cheery tone. “I completely understand. It’s just that Peter’s at a symposium in Glasgow until tomorrow night and I was on my own for the afternoon and I just thought it might be nice to catch up with an old friend. Some other time, maybe?”

“Actually,” John says, making a quick decision, “this afternoon would be just fine.”

“Perfect,” Lucy says, and John can hear the smile in her voice. “I promise I won’t keep you long, don’t want to interfere with your case.” Lucy rattles off the name of a popular coffee shop just a few blocks from his flat in Westminster, and they agree to meet there at five thirty. After they’ve said their goodbyes, John composes a text to Sherlock.

Having a cup of coffee with Lucy Chaplain after work. Shouldn’t be more than an hour, I’ll bring home dinner afterward.

He’s barely hit send when a reply comes in.

*ping*

It’s Lucy Chaplain-WALLACE, John. Leaving me for her, are you? –SH

John shakes his head, smiling as he types his response.

Haven’t decided yet. Depends on how good the coffee is.
John laughs softly and closes the messaging app, then slips his phone back into his pocket just as the nurse knocks on the door to announce his next patient.

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Sitting in the coffee shop they’d agreed upon, John looks up at the door and then back down at his phone again for the fifth time in as many minutes. It’s five forty-six, and Lucy still hasn’t arrived. Frowning down into his cup of coffee he decides that he’ll give her a few more minutes and then call to see if she’s still intending to meet him. He’s pulled up the call he received earlier and is typing her name into his contacts when she slides into the chair opposite him, looking flushed and out of breath.

“I’m so sorry I’m late, John.” She apologizes, peeling off her wet coat and hanging it on the back of the chair. “I had an errand to run and it took longer than I expected it to—got a bit tied up, you know how it is.”

“Of course,” John says, with a smile. “Happens to us all.”

“I dislike being late,” Lucy says, with a shake of her long strawberry blond curls as she gets back to her feet with her pocketbook in hand. “I’ll just grab myself a coffee, and be right back.”

“Oh no,” John says, moving to stand. “Let me do that.”

“I wouldn’t hear of it.” Lucy says with a smile and a wave of her hand as she turns toward the counter. “I’ll be back in a tick.”

John watches her walk away, then looks back down at his mobile and taps out a quick text to Sherlock.

Lucy was running late, she just arrived. I’ll stop by Ming’s on the way home. Lo Mein and sticky dumplings, I assume?

John waits for Sherlock’s typical lightning fast response, but when it doesn’t come he shrugs and slips his phone back into his pocket just as Lucy sits back down across from him, a steaming mug clenched in her hands. She smiles warmly at him.

“It’s very good to see you again, John.” She says with a small nod. “I’ve thought of you often over the years.”

“It’s lovely to see you as well,” John replies sincerely, returning her smile. “It’s hard to believe that was so many years ago.”

“Isn’t it, though?” Lucy agrees. “I look in the mirror some days and I barely recognize the old woman staring back at me.”

“I find that a bit hard to believe,” John chides with a grin. “You’re every bit as lovely as I remember you. Me, on the other hand, well—years of army camp living and the relentless desert sun do take their toll on a body.”

“You look just the same to me, John.” Lucy says with a twinkle in her eye. “I could hardly believe my eyes when I saw you walk by that day. Peter was curious about you, of course. I told him we’d
dated a bit back in our residency days, that for a time I’d even hoped that we might bring each other colors—but unfortunately, it was not to be. I think he was a bit jealous, actually.”

“It’s funny that you mention that,” John says with a laugh. “I think Sherlock was a bit jealous himself. It’s ridiculous for either of them to feel threatened, really—but a bit flattering nonetheless, yeah?”

“A bit,” Lucy agrees, her smile faltering slightly before she catches herself and puts it back on brightly. “So, your Sherlock—he’s quite something, it seems.”

“I’ll say,” John agrees. “He’s not like anyone else I’ve ever known, that’s for sure. And I’d be lying if I said he’s what I envisioned when I pictured who my soulmate might turn out to be. I always assumed it would be someone more like—well, you. But in the end, I suppose it works out the way it’s meant to.”

“That’s what they say, anyway.” Lucy says softly, nodding and staring down into her coffee.

John looks over at her, and feels a pang of regret for gushing on about his soulmate, when according to Sherlock Lucy is still grey. He smiles, pulls his cup to his lips and takes a drink before continuing.

“So, how about your Peter?” John asks her, with an interested tip of his head. “How did you two meet?”

Lucy sets her cup down and looks at him thoughtfully, then John watches her seem to make a silent decision and then punctuate it with a nod. “We’re not soulmates, you know, Peter and I.”

“Oh?” John says, hoping that his expression conveys the interested surprise he’d intended it to.

“Though I think you probably know that already,” Lucy says with a small smile. “I have a confession to make, John. After I saw you that day in the café I may have poked around a bit online. I already knew what a remarkable man you were, but it turns out that you’ve bonded with someone remarkable in his own right as well.”

“I’m afraid I don’t have much of an online presence,” John tells her. “Just a neglected blog my therapist suggested I begin where I’ve started to write up a few of the more interesting cases Sherlock and I have gotten involved in. I’m surprised you found it at all.”

“I very much enjoyed your retelling of the case of the pink lady,” Lucy tells him. “And the case of the killer cat was very entertaining as well. If you keep writing like that I suspect you’ll have a devoted following in no time at all.”

“We’ll see how it goes,” John says, with a tip of his head. “It’s early days yet.”

“Which brings me to my second confession. I called you today for two reasons, actually. One is that I truly did want to catch up with you…” Lucy says trailing off and looking down into her mug, then she takes a deep breath and appears to steel herself before looking back up at John. “The second is that I am fairly certain my husband is having an affair—and I was hoping Sherlock might be able to help me find out for sure.”

Walking the few blocks between the coffee shop and Baker Street, John checks his mobile again to see if Sherlock has responded to his last two texts:
Lucy suspects her husband of infidelity, requesting your help to confirm it. Do this for me?

We’re three blocks away, I’m bringing her to the flat for a consultation. Might be a good time to put on some pants if you’re still in your dressing gown.

There’s been no response yet, nor has he received a reply to his earlier text either. Shrugging, John slips his phone back in his pocket as he and Lucy turn the corner and begin walking down Baker Street toward the tall black door with the large brass knocker.

“He didn’t sleep much the last few days,” John tells her. “It’s entirely possible he’s passed out on the couch.”

“I’m sorry to spring this on you with such short notice, John.” Lucy says apologetically. “I’d be happy to come back another time, we don’t have to—”

“Oh, don’t worry about it.” John reassures her. “We were already so close to the flat, I just wanted to warn you that I’m not sure exactly what we’ll find when we get inside. Might want to avert your eyes until I tell you it’s safe to look.”

“Understood,” Lucy says with a giggle, her sparkling laugh sounding exactly as he remembers it all those years ago. “Thank you again for doing this, John.”

“It’s my pleasure.” John tells her, walking past an idling taxi and up to the large front door marked 221B and pulling out his keys. “That’s what friends do, right? Help each other out.”

As John is reaching for the knob, the door swings suddenly inward and John nearly collides with their landlady who is dressed in her hat and coat and dragging a floral tapestry suitcase behind her.

“Oi, Mrs. Hudson!” John says, reaching out and steadying the older woman he’s barely avoided knocked over. “Are you all right?”

“Good heavens John!” Emma Hudson says, looking at him, then over his shoulder. “Back so soon?”

“Soon?” John asks, a bit confused. “I had a shift at the surgery today, but yeah—I’m back now. Going somewhere are you?”

“Visiting my sister for a few days, love.” Mrs. Hudson confirms, indicating her suitcase. “My taxi’s waiting just there.”

“Let me get that for you.” John says, bending down to get his landlady’s bag and offering his elbow to escort her to the waiting cab and then helping her into it while Lucy supervises the driver loading the luggage into the boot. As the older woman gets settled into the back seat, Lucy steps back to stand beside John who stoops over and looks through the open car door. “Have a safe trip, Mrs. H. We’ll see you in a few days.”

“Of course you will, John.” She says with a smile, then waves in his direction. “It was lovely to see you again, dear.”

“Thanks,” John says, closing the door, puzzlement giving way to a touch of worry as the cab drives away. He looks back at Lucy and suddenly remembers his manners. “Oh, I should have introduced you—that was our landlady, Mrs. Hudson.”

“She seems nice,” Lucy replies, with a smile.
“She is. Sharp as a tack, too—though she did seem a bit off today to be honest.” John says, holding open the door and waving Lucy through and then closing it behind them before turning to meet her where she’s waiting for him in the foyer. “We’re on the second floor, just up this way.”

John begins to climb the stairs, leading the way to the flat, but his mind is on the strange exchange with their landlady and he wonders if he might be able to convince her to come into the surgery for a quick physical when she returns home. It’s not like her to be confused, and he plays the events of the last few minutes over again in his mind. He’d been gone all day, but she acted as though she’d just seen him much more recently. And then when he’d sent her off in the cab, she’d told him it was lovely to see him again. Very strange.

As he rounds the corner and begins to scale the second run of stairs up to the sitting room door, he hears Lucy’s soft footsteps echoing his own behind him, and is suddenly reminded that he hadn’t been alone on the stoop a few moments ago. Mr. Hudson, he realizes, hadn’t been looking at him each time she’d spoken the phrases that seemed odd to him—she’d been looking at Lucy. But Lucy had never been to 221B before…had she? Cresting the seventeenth step and walking toward the closed door that opens into their cluttered sitting room, John reaches for the doorknob, then knits his brow and turns back to look at the woman standing behind him.

“Lucy, have you ever been here bef—”

But that’s as far as he gets before he feels the cool mist hit his face, then his knees buckle and suddenly he’s falling, crumpling helplessly into a heap on the hard wooden landing outside of his flat. He can barely keep his eyes open, the light in the hall beginning to fade inward, and he struggles to make out any detail in the form slowly lowering toward him as he feels two small hands slip behind his head and set it gently down on the floor. A flash of light reflects off something swinging back and forth close to his face, the hard glint of sunlight shining on metal, then a glittering sparkle of green, and just before he loses consciousness, John’s eyes focus on the small shape hanging before him on a delicate silver chain—an emerald encrusted wave.

John loves the sound of the waves against the shore, the rush of water up the beach that ends in a crash of white foam on the sand before falling again out to sea—only to be drawn right back toward the land moments later. It’s a comforting sound, steady and true and it never fails to calm him. The familiar rhythm of the ocean paired with the stroke of fingertips over his scalp makes him smile, his cheek pressed down against the finely woven fabric covering a long, muscular thigh. He can hear the rhythmic creak of the bench swing, feel the muscles under his head contract with each soft push against the wooden floorboards as Sherlock rocks them slowly back and forth on the porch facing the sea.

“John,” Sherlock says, sliding his long fingered hand down the back of his head and over his shoulder and squeezing gently. “Look.”

John opens his eyes, turns his head to gaze up at his soulmate and sees his angular features staring out toward the water, eyes narrowed in concentration. Sitting up carefully, John follows his line of sight down the beach and sees the rolling ridge of a wave moving toward the shore—a crest of blue topped by a foamy line of white that extends in an unbroken line over the horizon as far as he can see in either direction. He waits for it to break apart, to prepare to come ashore in smaller peaks, but it doesn’t dissolve—it keeps coming, advancing faster than seems possible, gaining height and speed and beginning to rise so high that it blocks out the sun setting over the ocean behind it. While they watch helplessly as it rushes ever closer, John extends his hand toward Sherlock who grasps it tightly in his own.
“It’s nearly on us, Sherlock.” John says, his voice panicked. “What do we do?”

“Take a deep breath,” Sherlock says calmly and turns his face toward him and John watches it fall into shadow as the wave looms over them, catches its profile reflected in those shining pools of green/grey/silver/blue, hears the scream of the water advancing up the beach as Sherlock holds their clasped hands up between them and stares intensely into his eyes.

John can feel the rush of air the wall of water pushes before it, sees it blow the soft curls off of Sherlock’s pale forehead, and he keeps his eyes locked on his soulmate’s as the wave towers over them where they sit.

“Hang on tight!” Sherlock yells, his deep voice barely audible over the deafening roar of the water as it crashes over them, lifts them off the porch and pulls them into its deadly flow. It feels like falling, this tossing and spinning beneath the crushing weight of the sea—a disorienting quiet at odds with the rough pull of the tide, and his eyes are open but he has no idea which way is up or where they’re being carried, his only anchor the tight grip of a large hand and long fingers against and around his own. He catches a glimmer of light above him, pulls Sherlock’s hand toward him and kicks toward the surface when a sudden shift in the current slams something long and hard against his back, forcing the stale air he’s been desperately holding in out of his lungs in a rush and he feels his fingers slip beneath Sherlock’s grasp as he’s thrown in one direction and his soulmate ripped away from him in another.

He opens his lips to scream, to yell out Sherlock’s name, but when he does the water rushes into his mouth, pours down his throat and fills his lungs and he can’t move—can’t think—can’t do anything but sink helplessly down into the water, further and further into the darkness that swallows him whole.

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He wakes with a start, the heavy pressure of the wave still on his chest and he fights to breathe, trying desperately to gulp in a fresh lung-full of air—but his body won’t cooperate, won’t let him sit up and open his mouth and breathe deeply enough to quell the panic he feels. He can’t even open his eyes, can’t assure himself that it was only a dream—an awful, terrible dream. He lies still and concentrates on his breathing, on relaxing enough to feel the air slipping through his lips and into his lungs—lungs that aren’t full of dark sea water as he feared, but seem to be functioning normally (if a bit sluggishly) at the moment.

John tries to raise his head but finds it’s far too heavy on his neck to lift it off the—bed? No, not his bed. Something hard, and cool. The floor, then? With what feels like a monumental effort, he opens his eyes, and the merest hint of light streaming into his barely cracked eyelids is almost too bright to bear. He takes it slowly, this return to sight, and after a few long moments the brightness recedes and the room around him comes gradually into focus.

He sees the white plaster ceiling arching high above him, catches a glimpse of the familiar fleur-de-lis wallpaper at the corner of his vision, sees the jumble of papers tacked above the couch to his left, and the painting of a skull staring down at him from the same wall, turning his head ever so slightly to the right he sees the cushion of his favorite arm chair set upon the rug beneath him. He’s at home, then. In the sitting room. It looks exactly as it did this morning—with one important exception.

It’s completely grey.

He presses his eyelids tightly closed for a moment, hoping desperately that the colors will return when he next looks out at the room. He slowly opens his eyes and looks at this place that has become his home…and sees only black, and white, and an endless series of shades between the two.
Oh God.  Sherlock.

A wave of anguish washes over him, a weight pressing down on his chest—the sorrow so heavy he feels as though he’ll be crushed beneath it.  A silent sob works its way up his throat, his vision slowly blurring with tears, and he tries to call out—to form his soulmate’s name on his lips and call to him, beg him to answer, to assure him that this is all part of the same terrible dream he’d awoken from just moments ago.  But he can’t make it happen, too weak to even summon the strength to cry out.  He opens his mouth again to try, forces air through his vocal chords but all that comes out is a strangled moan, a hoarse bark that isn’t a word at all.

“You won’t be able to speak yet, John.” A voice says softly off to his right.

John tries to look toward the sound and finds that he’s able to move his neck a bit more easily this time, and a slow turn of his head lands his gaze on Sherlock’s leather armchair, currently occupied by Lucy Chaplain-Wallace.  She sits there staring at him, her legs crossed daintily, one delicate hand fingerling the small charm hanging on the chain around her neck—and her other hand wrapped loosely around John’s own Browning pistol.

“But there’s really nothing to say at the moment, is there?” She says, leaning over and peering down at him curiously.  “It’s indescribable, isn’t it?  The absence of color—the sudden return to grey.  There are no words that could do it justice, wouldn’t you agree?”

John’s eyes dart desperately around the room from where he lays, tears streaming out the corners of his eyes then down over his cheeks and onto the floor.

“Shhh.” Lucy whispers gently, slipping off the chair and kneeling beside him, her fingers swiping softly at the moisture on his face.  “It’s terrible, the loss.  I know.”

He wants to move, to shrink back from this stranger he thought he knew.  He flinches at her touch, turns his head slowly away and feels his shoulders start to shake with the sobs that begin to wrack through him in waves.

“Crying won’t bring him back,” Lucy tells him then, the softness in her voice just moments ago evaporating as she gets to her feet and settles back into the chair.  “My little aerosol cocktail will begin to wear off soon enough, and then you and I can have a proper chat.”

John turns his face as far away from her as he can, pressing his cheek into the carpet, wanting desperately not to give her the satisfaction of his sorrow but unable to stop the tears that continue to flow as she speaks.

“I was so surprised to run into you in that café.” Lucy says, conversationally.  “I’ve often thought about you over the years, about that amazing night we shared—wondered how things might have turned out differently.  I really had hoped it would be you, John.  I kept my eyes shut tight until I fell asleep in your arms, and when I awoke before you did I kept them shut a while longer—not wanting to break the spell.  But then I opened them, and…well, you know the rest.”

John’s breathing is coming a bit easier now, though it hitches with emotion as the tears continue to flow.  He wishes he could cover his ears, or better yet—spring up and take his pistol from her hands and put it to her head for what she’s done to his Sherlock.

“Fate is funny, sometimes, don’t you think?” Lucy says.  “I thought I was just running into an old friend that day, but then your soulmate appeared and mentioned something about bodies, and the names Paul and Sasha—and well, suddenly it didn’t seem like a coincidence at all.”
John does the only thing he can and continues to look away from her and blinks his eyes hard, trying desperately to clear his head, and as he does there’s a flash of…something…near the border of his vision. He blinks again, tears flowing out the corner of his eye and there it is again—a flash—of red.

“Our whole lives they told us that if we were patient, that one day a chance meeting with a stranger would open up a whole new world—a place full of color and joy and the promise of a life filled with love.” Lucy says, a touch of bitterness in her voice. “Only they never bothered to mention that we could just as easily lose those colors, did they? That a twist of fate could take them away as quickly as it gave them. It’s awful, isn’t it?”

She keeps talking, but John is no longer listening. He’s focused on the small patch of red on the carpet near his head, on the hint of green that fills the same space when he raises his head just slightly to look at the wall next to the sitting room door, at the flash of bright blue that briefly crosses his field of vision as he catches a glimpse of the skull painting hung in the corner of the room. The fog in his mind is lifting a bit now and he suddenly realizes that he hasn’t lost his colors—they’ve just been blocked, his tears managing to clear away a bit of the mysterious chemical that Lucy must have dropped into his eyes after he’d passed out. Which means one thing. One miraculous, wonderful thing:

Sherlock is still alive.

“So you see John,” Lucy says in summation, “Perhaps finding one’s soulmate isn’t the only way that a chance meeting can change the course of our lives. Maybe our finding each other again after all this time wasn’t an accident at all.”

John thinks back over the events of the evening, his cloudy head getting clearer by the moment. Lucy was late to their meeting. Mrs. Hudson seemed to recognize her. Lucy had been here before—and that means that Sherlock is likely here as well. John turns his face back toward the ceiling, takes a few small breaths and then an experimentally larger one. He coughs a bit on the last inhale, and Lucy stands up from her chair and looms over him, peering down at his face.

“Well, John?” She says looking at him expectantly. “What do you have to say?”

John Watson looks up at her face, at the planes and curves and features he once found so attractive, and he can’t help but think that this lack of color suits her—that the grey matches the soul beneath the skin. He slowly takes a deep breath, filling his lungs as full as he can manage, then opens his lips and concentrates on using every bit of his available energy to force his voice out of his throat, and Lucy flinches in surprise at the wave of sound that bursts out of his mouth and fills the room as he cries out:

“SHERLOCK!”

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His eyes pop open, panic rising in his chest as his ears register the faint echo of whatever it was that woke him. He opens his mouth to call out but finds it’s already open—and stuffed full of something soft, a thick wad of fabric so large that his face aches with the pressure it’s exerting on the roof of his mouth and lower jaw. His chest burns and he can’t breathe through the obstruction so he tries to relax and takes a deep breath through his nose, the cool air (and a fair amount of dust) rushing into his lungs and helping his brain come back online after…after…what, exactly?

Struggling to recall what happened in the moments before he lost consciousness, he takes stock of his situation. He’s face down on the floor, unable to move. His shoulders ache and his hands and feet
feel numb—or he imagines they would, if he could feel them at all. His back is arched at an uncomfor-
table angle making it difficult to raise his head to scan his surroundings (polished wood floor needs dusting, faint light trickling in through the closed curtains—late afternoon sun, not yet dark. A flash of black and blue striped fabric to his right, a jumper—John’s jumper—the one that Sherlock pulled off him last night and threw down on the floor of their bedroom—he’s in his own bedroom. Hard ridge of something long against his upper arm and shoulder—the end of the bed, the footboard and solid leg of the frame). He closes his eyes and goes over what he knows. It’s early evening. He’s at home, in Baker Street, on the floor of the bedroom he shares with John, gagged and tied up—rather effectively, it seems—near the end of the bed.

Now that he knows where he is, he tries very hard to push past the thick fog that wraps itself around his mind. He takes a few more deep breaths through his nose and wills himself to remember how he got here, and what happened before that.

There was a text. Yes, he remembers that much. John was having coffee with…someone…who? Lucy! Lucy Chaplain-Wallace. He’d made a joke then, a passing comment about John leaving him for her—a feeble attempt to poke fun at his own insecurities—and John had joked back at him, had said something funny—something that made him smile. John is very good at that, making him smile…

When his forehead hits the floor he jerks awake again, shakes his head a bit in an attempt to clear it, again willing himself to think.

He’d been looking at the wall, at the photos and reports and papers tacked up and linked by lengths of red string—looking at them for hours, pacing the floor and talking out loud—going through the facts again, one by one, running his fingers through his hair in frustration that a new pattern had as of yet failed to appear. He was distracted, annoyed by what he couldn’t see, his lack of progress long ago having managed to bore even the cat who lost interest and left the room during Sherlock’s oral recitation of the article John had found online about the tsunami soulmates—and initial victims in his case—Victoria and Jürgen.

He’d been rearranging the toxicology reports on the coffee table when his landlady’s voice trilled up the stairs, and he’d only half listened as she shouted up from the landing.

“Sherlock?” Mrs. Hudson had called. “Didn’t you hear the bell? You’ve got a visitor!”

“Busy!” He’d shouted back.

“Mind your manners, young man!” Mrs. Hudson scolded, then in a quieter tone addressed whomever it was that had rung the bell he couldn’t be bothered to answer. “Go on, dear—he’s just up the stairs, I can hear him stomping about up there.”

At the soft knock on the jamb of the open sitting room door, he’d looked up to see a pleasant looking woman standing on the landing, her wet coat wrapped around her and rain beading a bit in her long reddish blond curls. Her green eyes focused on him, and with a smile she walked into the room and extended her hand toward Sherlock in greeting.

“Mr. Holmes? You may not remember me, but I’m—”

“Lucy Chaplain-Wallace,” Sherlock finishes, shaking her hand and examining her through narrowed eyes with a tilt of his head. “John isn’t here.”

“Actually, I’m not here to see John.” She explains, untying the belt of her coat and shrugging it off her shoulders. “I was rather hoping to talk to you.”
“I see.” Sherlock replies, watching as she lays her coat over the back of his leather chair.

“I’m having a bit of a problem, and I’m hoping it’s something you can help me with.” She tells him as she lifts her purse up in front of her and begins fishing through it for something, then pulls out what appears to be a small gold tube of lipstick. “You see, I think I’ve gotten myself into a spot of trouble…”

Sherlock senses something is off as she uncaps the tube, and when he looks past the metallic cylinder in her hand and sees the silver pendant hanging from a chain at her throat—a small curved shape inset with tiny emeralds—he barely has time to raise his eyes to hers before the mist hits his face…and everything goes black.

So this is what he knows:

He knows where he is. He knows how he got here. He knows who put him here. He suspects he even knows why she did it.

Now what is he going to do about it?

Whatever Lucy dosed him with, it seems to be wearing off now—and likely rather more quickly than she’d expected it to. There are very few advantages to having an impressive record of illegal drug use in one’s past, but a higher tolerance to narcotics in general is one that he’s rather glad for at the moment. The layers of gauzy confusion are peeling away from his brain, and even now he can feel his faculties returning to him—reminding him to put his deductive powers to use, knowing that an accurate assessment of the situation at hand is the key to finding a way out of it.

He closes his eyes and takes a deep breath in through his nose, then holds it in and stays very still—listening. He filters out the traffic outside, the whispering rustle of the curtains in the breeze, the thud of his own pulse echoing in his skull—and hears the faint sound of a voice somewhere out in the flat. A woman’s voice, steady and melodic, a one-sided conversation that he strains to hear but the words are indistinct and he can’t make out what she’s saying—or who she’s talking to—when suddenly there’s a noise that sounds like a slap, or the sharp clap of a hand against skin, that’s followed by an answering groan from another voice, rough and deep, and wonderfully familiar.

John.

His protective instincts having been triggered by the smallest sound of his soulmate in peril, Sherlock strains against his bonds, breathing heavily through his nose while the shout in his throat is muffled nearly completely by the gag packed firmly in his mouth. He feels a stab of panic, a rising terror in his chest and he struggles to roll off of his stomach, but his bonds are too tight and the increased blood flow from his thrashing about serves only to send sharp spikes of pain up and down his bound limbs, his wrists and ankles aching more with every attempt to break his bonds—until all at once he remembers himself and stops moving.

Panicking will not save John. To be of any use, he has to get free. And if he has any hope of getting free, he needs to calm down and use the single asset he has at his disposal at the moment: He needs to think. He forces his body to relax, concentrates on the steady, soft drone of the voice beyond the closed bedroom door, and begins to take stock of his restraints.

He takes in even breaths through his nose, focusing on each part of his body in turn. Mouth: Gagged and taped. Neck: Unrestrained. Arms: pulled back, hands tightly bound—thin material, but very strong, plastic zip tie, most likely. Legs: bent at the knee, ankles similarly bound, and pulled uncomfortably high up his back and tied together with his wrists. The position is designed to be both effective and uncomfortable, leaving the victim no leverage to break free with brute strength—a
technique meant to terrorize as well as immobilize. Brutal. Efficient. And nearly impossible to break free of.

Nearly impossible.

The trick to keeping your victim restrained, Sherlock has learned, is all in the hands. As long as they remain useless, the other bonds are equally effective. Long before primitive humans learned to make tools, their hands were tools—the human hand is the single most important physiological evolutionary development in mankind’s history, and Sherlock Holmes is in possession of a fairly clever pair if he does say so himself. He tests the bonds at the end of his arms again, finds them too tight to slip his hands free, the hard plastic cutting into the joint where the base of his thumb meets the heel of his hand. That connection, the jut of bone and cartilage that controls the opposable digit that separates us from nearly every other species on earth, prevents him slipping his bindings. As long as that joint is intact and in working order, Sherlock will never be able to free himself and find a way to save John.

Sherlock knows that it is rarely ever impossible to break out of even the tightest bindings. By their very nature, even the simplest of wrist restraints work because the natural shape of the hand won’t fit through the tight circle of any material tied around them. To free yourself, you must purposely alter that shape, thereby removing the very obstacle that keeps them bound—and the truth is that most people can’t do that. Most people can’t even conceive of how much concentration it requires to do that kind of damage to themselves, regardless of the stakes. Most people have no idea how difficult it is to break bone, how much strength and commitment it takes to willingly cause themselves excruciating pain. Most people simply don’t have it in them.

Sherlock Holmes is not most people.

Listening again to the rising pitch and tempo of the unwelcome voice in his flat and imagining what the woman attached to that voice intends to do to John, Sherlock is suddenly thankful for the thick fabric that fills his mouth and clogs his throat—knowing that it will mask the inevitable scream that he won’t be able to fully suppress.

Rolling slowly onto his side, Sherlock rolls his shoulders back, uses his stretched thigh muscles to push his bound hands and ankles toward the heavy footboard on the solid bed frame behind him. Finding the hard ridge along the smooth bottom of the wood he lays his wrist joint against it, tucks his left thumb into his palm, and slides his hands back until the sharp edge of the board is pressed firmly against the bone that connects his wrist to his thumb. He presses his eyes closed, takes a deep breath through his nose, imagines John’s face...and breaks his own hand.

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His whole body shaking, Sherlock uses the trembling, still-stiff fingers of his least injured hand to peel away the heavy tape covering his mouth and winces a bit at the pain—in both the raw skin exposed around his lips, and the throbbing ache that radiates from his left hand all the way up his arm and into his shoulder. He’d nearly blacked out from the first wave of pain, kept conscious only by the sheer determination not to lose even a moment of time before freeing himself of his bonds and getting to John.

He pauses to stretch out his legs, encouraging the flow of blood to his muscles as he quickly assesses his injuries. Other than his ruined hand, which his current levels of adrenaline seem to be doing a rather impressive job of minimizing the impact of at the moment, he’s relatively unharmed. Evidently Lucy’s primary ambition had been to merely restrain him, not to hurt him. Yet, anyway.

Getting quietly to his feet, Sherlock sways unsteadily for a just a moment as he acclimates to standing
upright again, then carefully makes his way to the bedroom door. Turning the knob slowly, his senses tuned to the sound of Lucy’s voice, he carefully pulls it open a crack and pushes his ear against the small space he’s created. He can hear her better now, not the words themselves, but he can more clearly judge the distance between them and determines that the voice is coming from the sitting room. With all the stealth he can manage, Sherlock eases the door open until there’s enough space for him to slip through. Looking down the short hall and through the kitchen to the sitting room beyond, Sherlock can hear his attacker, but not see her—or John—which affords him the opportunity to move quietly through the flat until he catches a glimpse of Lucy where she stands next to Sherlock’s repositioned chair with one hand propped casually on her hip, the other hanging loosely at her side, clutching John’s gun.

Sherlock takes another silent step, observes the downward tilt to the back of Lucy’s head, and follows her gaze down to the floor where it falls on John.

He’s lying on his back, his face streaked with tears, his eyes pressed closed as he defiantly refuses to look at her.

“It’s not that I don’t sympathize, John. I really, really do.” Lucy tells him calmly. “I’d let you call out your poor, dead soulmate’s name all day if I thought it would make you feel better—but unfortunately it would also attract attention, and that’s something we simply cannot afford right now. So be a good boy, and look at me.”

“Go to hell, Lucy.” John says through clenched teeth, refusing to open his eyes.

Lucy heaves out a tired sigh then pulls back her foot and kicks John in the ribs, hard—hard enough that John lets out a gasp of pain and the tears begin to flow again. It takes every ounce of strength Sherlock has not to run into the room right then, but he calculates that the distance between them coupled with his own compromised physical state at the moment would afford Lucy more than enough time to aim and fire the gun she’s holding—and he can’t take that chance.

“The drug wears off in stages, I’m afraid,” Lucy tells John, her tone sounding far too pleasant under the circumstances. “Took me a while to get the compound just right, though. The mind clears first, the ability to speak returning far more quickly than the ability to move. I don’t want to hurt you again, but if you won’t even listen to what I have to say then I’m afraid you leave me no choice.”

John opens his eyes then, and Sherlock catches a hard glint of anger in the wet pools of blue that look up from the floor at the woman looming over him.

“That’s better.” Lucy says, then smiles. “I know the loss of your colors is difficult, and I realize it’s quite a shock—but for heaven’s sake, John. All these tears are a bit much, don’t you think? You’d only known him for a month.”

Sherlock’s mind races along ahead of the conversation, piecing together what has happened so far. Lucy must have knocked John out with the same drug she’d used on him. Then used the color-filtering drops. John would have awoken to a world gone grey. He believes Sherlock is dead.

“He is my soulmate, Lucy.” John spits back at her, his expression dissolving back into despair as he squeezes his eyes shut and the tears continue to flow down his cheeks.

Sherlock stiffens where he stands, holding his breath. He replays John’s words in his mind. He is my soulmate, John had said. Not was, but is. It’s a crucial difference, and it seems that Lucy missed it—but Sherlock didn’t. John knows that he is alive. He knows because…because the color filter can be washed out of the eyes with a steady stream of water—or tears. Clever, clever John.
“Oh what does that even mean?” Lucy asks, exasperated. “So you meet someone and it triggers a random chemical reaction that lets your eyes suddenly experience colors. Does that make them your only chance at happiness in this world? Does it mean that if you find him one day, and then lose him the next that there’s no reason to go on living?

“Is that how it happened for you, Lucy?” Sherlock asks, stepping into the space between the kitchen and the sitting room and looking at her calmly.

Lucy startles a bit and turns to face him, raising the gun toward him where he stands.

“You shouldn’t be awake yet,” she says, irritated, the hand grasping John’s gun lowering a bit.

“I’m sure I shouldn’t be,” Sherlock says lightly, raising his eyebrows and shrugging. “There are so few benefits to being a former junkie, but this particular side effect did come in quite handy. As a chemist—and an admittedly rather brilliant one, I might add—you really should have taken that into consideration when you dosed me.”

“This isn’t the way this is supposed to happen.” Lucy replies, her eyebrows knitted together in confusion and her voice less sure than it had been moments ago.

“Things rarely happen the way we expect them to, do they?” Sherlock asks her, then glances down at John. “Are you all right?”

“Yeah,” John says, with a sigh. “You?”

“Fine,” Sherlock says, looking back at Lucy, who shakes her head and then raises the gun back up toward him.

“Don’t come any closer,” She warns him. “I’ll shoot you.”

“I doubt that very much, Lucy.” Sherlock replies coolly. “You had the perfect chance to kill me earlier when I was helpless to stop you—yet you didn’t take it. Your chances of doing so successfully now are far slimmer given the fact that I’m conscious.”

“You don’t believe I’ll kill you?” Lucy says, her green eyes going steely as she continues to point the gun at him. “I brought a gun with me, you know. But it was very nice of you to have this one tucked away so conveniently in the night stand. It’s a much larger caliber than I’d usually choose. It’ll be a bit messier than I’d like, but will get the job done.”

“I absolutely believe that you’re capable of killing me,” Sherlock clarifies. “You’ve killed sixteen people, after all. I just don’t believe that you’ll shoot me. Pulling the trigger isn’t really your style.”

“I didn’t kill anybody, Mr. Holmes.” Lucy says, a disturbing grin quirking at one side of her lips.

“You didn’t shoot anyone, that’s true.” Sherlock agrees. “But you killed them nonetheless.”

“They shot themselves,” she argues.

“Yes, they did.” Sherlock says, “They shot themselves because they’d lost hope. The hope you stole from them. They died because you drove them to it.”

“They died because they were weak!” Lucy argues. “They woke up having lost their colors and they couldn’t bear the thought of going on without them. They died because they weren’t strong enough to live.”
“They weren’t strong like you, were they Lucy?” Sherlock says, his voice calm and even. “When you lost your colors, when the wave came in and took your soulmate—you didn’t take the easy way out did you?”

“No,” Lucy snarls. “I didn’t.”

“You just found him, hadn’t you?” Sherlock asks, taking another small step forward and decreasing the distance between them by a few more inches. “A chance meeting on holiday, an unexpected Christmas surprise?”

“Very good, Mr. Holmes.” Lucy says, the smile dissolving from her face. “It was just a holiday away with my girlfriends, just a chance to get out of town and away from all the happily bonded couples and have a little fun. I had no idea I’d meet Richard—that we’d lived in the same city for years but only crossed paths when we were both so far away from home—that he’d ask me to dance and we’d talk and laugh and later that night we’d go color. That I’d fall asleep in his arms—and the next day we’d wake up to the ocean crashing through the door and sweeping us away. I had no idea that I’d find him one day only to lose him the next.”

“I’m sorry for your loss,” Sherlock says with a small nod. “It must have been very hard to have so little time with your soulmate. Even harder to see your friend so happy to have found hers.”

“Vicki was my best friend, you know. And she was so over the moon to have found Jürgen—and I wanted to tell her what had happened but—” Lucy pauses, her eyes grown misty with unshed tears, and swallows thickly. “I tried to tell her, once. But I couldn’t find the words and after a while it just never seemed like the right time.”

“So instead you killed her?” Sherlock asks.

“I didn’t mean for that to happen,” Lucy says, hitching out a small sob and wiping at her cheeks with the back of her free hand. “My work was all I had back then. I threw myself into the search for a medical cure for colorblindness—a way to give those who never found their soulmate colors, or restore colors for those who lost them. One of my failed experiments had quite an unexpected outcome, and I theorized that it would temporarily filter out colors. I just wanted to see if it worked.”

“So you drugged your best friend and took her colors away.”

“I thought if she knew what it felt like—if I could show her what had happened to me—then maybe someone would finally understand.” Lucy explains, a plea in her voice. “When she woke up, she was hysterical. I tried to calm her down, but she ran up to her bedroom—I didn’t even know she had a gun until I heard the shot. By the time I got upstairs, she was dead. I stood there for the longest time, and when I heard the door open below, heard Jürgen coming up the stairs frantically calling her name…I panicked. I hid in the closet, I watched through the slats of the door as he found her—I watched him cry and pick up the gun and put it to his own head…I didn’t mean for it to happen.”

“And so you played out the same scenario seven other times hoping for another outcome?” Sherlock asks skeptically.

Lucy sniffs and wipes the back of her hand under her nose, then huffs out a small laugh and looks over at the wall above the couch. As soon as her gaze leaves his face, Sherlock glances down at John who catches his eye and lifts one hand from the floor in a careful thumbs-up gesture, eyes darting back and forth between him and Lucy. Sherlock gives him a very slight nod and turns his attention back to the woman with the gun.

“They were all so eager to tell their stories,” she says, staring at the photos of the dead couples.
“They’d flaunted their bond to the whole world already so convincing them I was a producer looking for soulmates to feature on a new television series wasn’t a difficult sell. Knocking them out was easy too—another little chemical of my own design that I perfected after what happened to Vicki. And then I’d take colors away from one of them, put a gun in their hand, and wait for them to wake up. They could have shot me, you know. Each time, I expected it—but it never happened. They’d see the world in grey, and turn the gun on themselves. Then their soulmate would wake up grey, and the gun was right there…so they used it. All of them.”

“It made you feel better, didn’t it?” Sherlock says, taking a step closer to Lucy who spins around to face him, bringing the gun back up and pointing it at his chest. He puts his hands up before him slowly, then takes another step toward her. “At least for a while, anyway. But it never lasted, did it?”

“Don’t come any closer.” Lucy warns, the pitch of her voice rising.

“Or what?” Sherlock asks, taking yet another step toward the woman threatening to kill him. “What is your end game here, Lucy? John isn’t going to shoot himself—and clearly neither am I. How did you think this would end?”

“No.” Sherlock says, his eyes locked on hers but not missing the slow movement of the man lying on the floor behind her as he sits up slowly, before he continues to speak keeping her attention focused directly on him. “I don’t think you will. You’ve just told me yourself: you’ve never killed anyone.”

“No, I haven’t.” Lucy says, biting her bottom lip as the gun drops a few inches in her grasp.

“And you’re not going to start now, are you?” Sherlock asks, watching John get silently to his feet behind her. “Give me the gun, Lucy.”

She looks at the weapon in her hand, then back up at Sherlock’s face, and he sees her considering her options—so he takes one more small step forward.

“Give it to me, Lucy.” He says, reaching slowly toward her—and as she’s watching his hand he looks over her shoulder and into John’s eyes. “Give it to me…right…NOW!”

As soon as the last word leaves Sherlock’s lips, John rushes at Lucy from behind—his compact body moving a bit clumsily under the influence of the drug he’d inhaled earlier. Lucy hears him, and her eyes widen frantically as she points the gun toward Sherlock just as he rushes forward and grabs her arm. She’s surprisingly strong for being so slight, and his broken hand and dislocated wrist erupt in a hot wave of pain as he tries to wrestle the gun away from her while she pulls her arms in and traps the weapon between their bodies. John wraps his arms around her shoulders from behind, pinning down her upper arms and she falls back while Sherlock falls forward and the deafening sound of a gunshot rings out through the flat.

They all stand still for a moment, then Lucy lets out a quiet gasp and her knees buckle where she’s sandwiched between them. Sherlock steps back and she falls out of John’s grasp, crumpling to the floor onto her back with a large hole in her abdomen and a thick red pool of blood spreading out from underneath her. Sherlock drops to his knees and plucks the gun from her hand, tossing it aside and out of her reach before looking into her vacant stare and reaching his less injured hand up to press under her jaw to feel for a pulse.
“She took my mobile. Do you have yours?” Sherlock says to John, still looking down at Lucy and the rapidly growing pool of blood around her. When John doesn’t respond right away, Sherlock looks up at him where he’s standing, his hands pressed flat against chest, just below his ribs.

“Sherlock?” He answers softly, then pulls his hands away to reveal a red stain rapidly spreading beneath them.

Sherlock springs to his feet just as John begins to fall backward, and he throws out his arms to catch him before the shorter man hits the floor. He presses the palm of his broken hand against the wound, wincing but ignoring the pain, then frantically begins searching John’s pockets for his phone. When he finds it he forces his clumsy fingers to dial 999, and barks out “221B Baker Street, send an ambulance immediately!” before tossing the phone aside and pressing that hand to the wound as well.

“Shot.” John says, his eyes beginning to close.

“Obviously!” Sherlock says, keeping one hand pressed to John’s bleeding chest and reaching below his neck with the other to elevate his shoulders and hold him close. “Nothing you haven’t been through before, John. Help is on the way.”

John huffs out a small chuckle, then wheezes as it morphs into a cough. He slides one of his hands up to grasp the wrist of Sherlock’s hand where it is pressed against the bleeding bullet hole in his skin, squeezes gently and Sherlock knows it should hurt, that his broken bones should register the touch as excruciating, but it feels warm and comforting instead. John looks up at him and his lips stretch slowly into a smile.

“Thank you, Sherlock.” He whispers.

“For applying pressure to your wound?” Sherlock asks with a wry smile. “Don’t mention it.”

“I was so alone,” John says softly, “And I owe you so much.”

“And you’ll repay me,” Sherlock tells him. “I’ll make sure of it. Every day for the rest of our lives.”

John opens his mouth to speak again, but a wet cough interrupts him and Sherlock holds him closer, pressing his lips hard into the short sandy hair on top of his head, and closes his eyes in relief as he hears the drone of sirens in the distance, growing louder with each second that passes.

“Look at me?” John asks, smiling and raising his hand shakily to rest it against the taller man’s face as he complies, staring up at him with such unguarded affection that Sherlock’s eyes fill up with tears and he suppresses the sob that rises in his throat. “Your eyes. So many colors. I never know what to call them.”

“I know,” Sherlock says, a tear spilling over his lashes and running down a long, pale cheek. “I’m sorry about that.”

“Don’t be.” John's voice hitches a bit as he shudders in Sherlock’s arms. “Price doesn’t have a word to explain what color they are. But I do. Ocean. They’re ocean.”

John’s eyes go a bit unfocused, his fingers slipping down the skin of his soulmate’s cheek, and Sherlock feels it before he sees it—the sudden press of darkness at the edge of his vision, a creeping grey that washes slowly over everything around them, flowing relentlessly inward until only John’s face holds any color at all—Sherlock drinks in the honeyed tan skin, the soft pink lips, the golden fringe of his hair—focuses on the colors that make up John—his John—his soulmate. From far away he hears the crash of the front door being forced open, the frenzied beat of several pairs of feet
on the stairs, voices calling out for him to move, to let them help... but Sherlock is frozen in place, refusing to let anyone rob him of the moment when he catches his last glimpse of the first color he ever saw.

He locks his eyes on John’s face, stares at the single point of color left at the center of his vision and refuses to look away, forcing himself to memorize the only color he knows he can’t live without:

Blue.

Chapter End Notes

Yeah. So that just happened. And I’m really, really sorry. But remember—this story isn’t over yet! I’m just saying.

So in this week’s installment of “I SAID I Was Sorry--Now Here’s Something To Cheer You Up” I offer you my apology via not one but TWO wonderful fics that I hope will distract you while you wait for the final chapter and epilogue.

First up is a poetic little beauty that I ran across purely by accident the other day consisting of 2,435 words and I love EVERY. SINGLE. ONE. OF. THEM. Author cwb’s Of Velvet and Silk, Cotton and Cashmere is a gorgeous little imagining of Sherlock’s lifelong obsession with all things sensory, and how loving John allows him to embrace and express it. I’m not even going to try to explain it any further because you’ve got to let your own senses devour this little piece of magic in order to understand just how delicious it is.

And then if you’re still depressed go and sink your teeth into the big old pile of cotton candy that is allfinehere’s wonderful little AU tale Learning Curve. John is a kindergarten teacher, Sherlock is a single Dad of a precocious five year old, and this is the softest, fluffiest, cuddliest little bunny of a fic ever written and I want to hug it, and kiss it, and pet it, and name it Bluebell.

Go and read and smile and meet me back here next week. Please?
ORANGE

Chapter Notes

PLEASE NOTE: There are TWO chapters in this FINAL update (Ch. 15 ORANGE and bonus epilogue Ch.16 GOLD)
This is the FIRST chapter of the two.

Happy Might-as-Well-Keep-Pretending-I-Update-on-Thursdays-I-mean-Why-Stop-Now, friends!

Well, folks—this is it.

The final update is here, and if you lean in really close and lick the screen you can taste the bitter tang of my reluctant tears. I’m going to miss our boys and this world. *sniff*

As this tale comes to an end, let me express my sincerest thanks to my amazing, wonderful, beautiful, brutal, capable and irreplaceable beta for being the best partner-in-fic that a girl could ever ask for. This story wouldn’t have happened without her. Much, much love to you, BFF.

And let me also express my endless gratitude to every single person who has clicked on this little project of mine and given it a read—to the faces who dropped by every week, to the new faces that joined along the way, to all the many faces behind each Kudo, subscription, bookmark & comment. It’s been a labor love and I’ll miss sharing it with all of you.

Thank you, thank you, thank you.

And now: Read on…

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It’s not the first time John Watson’s been shot.

The first time, he’d been far from home.

This time, he’s in the only place that’s felt like home since he left the one he grew up in.

The first time he was staring face down at the black pool of his own blood as it spread out and seeped into the grey sand beneath him.

This time he’s staring up at ivory skin, soft rose lips, mahogany curls, ocean eyes and the bright red stain of his own blood smeared down one pale cheek as his fingers slip from where they’d rested just moments before.

The first time, he was alone and terrified.

This time, he’s held and calm.

It should hurt more, he thinks. Dying shouldn’t be this easy.
Moments after gentle fingers tried to pull him away from the man in his arms while he’d held him closer and refused to budge, rough hands took over and yanked John from his grasp, as the first responders closed ranks around the former army doctor where he lay stone-still on the floor.

Sherlock watches through the undulating wall of heads and torsos and catches small glimpses of the man whose blood now covers his hands, seeps under his fingernails and into his cuticles staining his pale skin a wet, dark grey.

He sees the toe of a steely leather loafer with its laces untied, watches it seem to move as the paramedics position the lifeless body on the floor to administer chest compressions and forced respiration. His eyes focus on a shock of short heathery hair as a head lolls on a slack neck, then on an ashen hand as it falls over the bent knees of the paramedic pulling open the soft button down shirt stained dark and black with John’s blood.

He hears a sudden, high pitched whine—a metallic hum that fills the air and sets his teeth on edge, and then a voice he doesn’t recognize shouts:

“Clear!”

The crowd surrounding the body on the floor shuffles away automatically, three sets of hands raised up as in surrender as a wet clunking sound reaches his ears and the world immediately blooms back into color—the grey disappearing in a flash of light and the room around him once again awash with greens and blues and reds and…orange…a flash of bright, blinding orange from across his own shoulders where someone has covered them with a blanket. When had that happened? Sherlock lifts one arm slowly to pull a stitched edge up to examine more closely when suddenly the darkness creeps back into the edges of his vision again—closing in more quickly this time than the last—and the fabric in his hand fades into a muted pewter. He stares at it numbly, his mind fuzzy as though wrapped in layers of cotton wool when a distant voice calls out once again:

“Clear!”

Sherlock gasps at the spike of pain that shoots through his skull, squints against the searing light that burns his eyes as the grey is banished once again in favor of the sea of colors that assault his vision from every direction.

“We’ve got him back, we need to move!” says one of the people surrounding John on the floor, and as they lift his slack body from the ground Sherlock catches a glimpse of golden hair reflecting the soft light from the lamp and focuses on it as John is strapped onto a collapsible gurney and wheeled toward the door.

Strong hands reach out and grasp Sherlock’s shoulders, pull the blanket tighter around them and lift him to his feet to press a steady hand between his shoulder blades that directs him out the door where he follows the prone body of his soulmate down the stairs and into the back of a waiting ambulance. As the doors slam shut and the vehicle begins to move, Sherlock sits on the molded plastic bench beside John, watches the paramedic working on his bared chest, packing gauze into and keeping pressure on the wound there, adjusting the oxygen mask over his face, uncoiling the IV line that runs from a bag of dark red liquid hanging from a steel pole to where it disappears into John’s arm.

Sherlock looks at the small, tan hand lying limply next to a denim clad hip and reaches out from underneath the orange blanket around him to grasp those short, strong fingers in his own—but before he makes contact he feels his elbow being pressed upward. Another set of fingers runs the length of
his forearm to squeeze gently at his wrist causing him to gasp involuntarily at the pain caused by the unwelcome pressure.

“That’s a nasty break, sir.” A steady voice says near his ear. “I need you to keep your hand raised just like this for me until we get to A&E.”

Sherlock doesn’t look toward the sound, his eyes locked on John’s still face—on the fan of sable lashes against the rough tan of his cheeks, on the spray of coarse golden hair over the muscles of his exposed chest, on the pink and coral ropes of scarred flesh radiating from the bullet wound that is responsible for bringing him into Sherlock’s life, and on the red seep of blood through the gauze pressed over the bullet wound that could take him away. He wants to tear his arm from the grasp of the person attempting to treat him, insist that their talents would be better spent helping the grievously injured man lying before him, but instead he does as he’s told and keeps his arm elevated as instructed while his mind absently catalogues the various colors he sees, anchoring himself in the peripheral glow of orange from the blanket wrapped around him.

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Sherlock has never been terribly fond of hospitals.

He dislikes the bright white walls, the fluorescent lighting, the cloying scent of disinfectant lingering ever-present in a futile effort to mask the even less pleasant smells beneath it. He hates the constant hum of noise in the background, the mumbled torrent of voices and machinery and beeps and coughs and cries—it grates against his skin like flying sand, a soundtrack that provides none of the comfort that the ceaseless sound of this city he loves lays over him each day like a soothing balm.

He can hear it all from where he sits, deafening and relentless, and wishes he could put his fingers in his ears to muffle the noise. But he can barely move his badly broken, swollen hand—and the dark film of liquid that coats the digits of his less damaged hand feels strangely fragile, as though bending his fingers would cause the dried streaks of blood to crack and flake off, taking the only piece of John he carries with him away as they fell.

He wishes he could close his eyes against the assault of the bright overhead lights, press them shut and welcome the calm of darkness. He longs to retreat into his mind palace, to roam the room he’s built there where the shelves that line the walls extend up toward the soaring ceilings. To run his fingertips lightly over every John-related item he stores there, pick each one up and hold it to his chest tightly enough to leave an imprint on his heart.

But he can’t.

He can’t close his eyes, not even for a moment. He’s loathe to even blink, afraid that in the fraction of a second while his body reflexively snaps his eyelids shut that the darkness will press in and the world he sees when he opens his eyes again will be one without color, without hope, without John.

He’d followed the rolling gurney out of the ambulance doors when they were thrown open, ran clumsily alongside the paramedics as they barked out the stats and condition of the man whose heart they’d had to restart on their sitting room floor, half-listened to the questions of the doctors and nurses who took over his care as John was rushed through the crowded A&E and down a long, white hallway through a set of swinging double doors that led to the operating theaters—a barrier which he was not permitted to breach.

As the doors clicked shut behind the crowd of people who’d just wheeled his soulmate through them, his eye was drawn to the wall on his left, the long expanse of white interrupted only by one large, square item: a riot of brightly colored paint on canvas. Sherlock locked his eyes on the
painting, his gaze never wavering as he shrugged off hands that tried to coax him back toward the intake desk and examination suites, silently but firmly refusing any treatment for his own injuries.

At some point after it became clear he had no intention of moving, he heard the soft scrape of rubber over the industrial tile floor behind him followed by the metallic squeak of hinges and felt the gentle hands of someone dressed in nurses scrubs (blue, shot through with a pattern of orange and white) guide him slowly backwards and down to sit into the cold metal folding chair, a palm resting softly on his shoulder before turning and walking back toward the crowded waiting room.

He’s been sitting here ever since. How long he’s been sitting here (minutes? hours? days?), he isn’t entirely sure. He’s not wearing a watch and his mobile is somewhere back in the flat—wherever Lucy put it after she took it from the pocket of his dressing gown, the same one he’s still wearing over the pajama trousers and t-shirt he’d pulled on after Mrs. Hudson brought him up some tea and biscuits around three and told him to put on some pants for heaven’s sake. He doesn’t know how long he’s been sitting here, staring at this collection of brushstrokes before him, and he frankly doesn’t much care. The only thing that matters to him is that he can see the blended green and yellow mottled background surrounding a mantle of bright blue streaked with curved lighter blue stripes from which rises a frenzy of soft peach and pink and bright white and lemon yellow and bold red and stark black surrounded by a jagged ring of orange—a bright halo framing the chaos of the colors within its confines.

His eyes flit from one color to the next in an endless circle that repeats itself as he finds and names each hue silently, a ritual that makes it possible for him to sit here—to resist the urge to scream at the top of his lungs and burst through the doors that John disappeared through off to his right.

He doesn’t pay much attention to the approaching footsteps until he notices faint metallic click that accompanies every other step, the unmistakable sound of the sharp tip of an umbrella as it rhythmically strikes the tiles until the party responsible for the noise comes to a stop less than a meter away from where he sits.

“Piss off, Mycroft.”

“Hello, brother.” The elder Holmes replies softly, walking a few more steps to move in front of his younger sibling where he sits, and observes the automatic shift in Sherlock’s position, a slight lean to the right to remove the new obstacle from his line of sight. Mycroft takes a step back toward his original position and turns to follow his brother’s gaze and lets out a small gasp of surprise followed by a tut of obvious distaste. “Good Lord. In a place full of ill people, no less?”

“Go away,” Sherlock says with a bit more force, his eyes never leaving the framed canvas on the wall.

“You must allow the staff to treat your injuries, Sherlock.”

“I’m fine,” Sherlock insists, throwing out a hand to deliver his trademark dismissive wave, a sharp gasp of pain escaping his lips that crests in a small yelp of discomfort as he remembers himself and brings his arm slowly back in and cradles it against his body.

“You’re not.” Mycroft crouches down beside him, lays his umbrella on the floor, then reaches out and pulls his younger brother’s arm slowly toward him to probe at it with gentle fingers before setting it carefully back in his lap. He repeats the process with the other arm as Sherlock’s eyes remain locked on the painting behind him. “You’ve got a severe break in your left hand and the accompanying tissue damage is quite extensive as well. Your other wrist is dislocated at the very least, there are deep abrasions on both your ankles and wrists, damage to the skin around your lips and cheeks, and you’ve been recently under the influence of a drug of unknown origin that rendered
you unconscious.”

“I know exactly where that drug came from, Mycroft,” Sherlock argues. "And regardless of your unimpressive amateur diagnostic skills I have already told you, I am fine."

Mycroft sighs. “Sherlock, for once in your life do attempt to listen to reason. John will be out of surgery at some point, and when he is I believe you will wish to see him—and the staff will not allow you to be with him in your current condition.”

“The staff will allow whatever you tell them they must, Mycroft,” Sherlock replies without looking at him. “Perhaps you could see your way clear to throwing your—not inconsiderable, I might add—weight around to ensure that I won’t be kept from my soulmate’s side.”

Mycroft sighs again, then picks up his umbrella and stands. He looks down at his brother, then over to where his gaze continues to fall. Hooking his umbrella over his wrist, he turns and walks toward the wall, reaches up and grasps the heavy frame with both hands, then lifts the long wire stretched across the back of it off the hooks mounted into the plaster. Sherlock’s eyes widen in alarm as Mycroft removes the painting from the wall, shifts his hands to grasp the bottom corners of the frame, then rests the canvas against his chest and begins to slowly back down the corridor away from where his brother is seated.

The younger man’s unwavering gaze tracks the painting’s progress, then with a resigned slump of his shoulders he rises from the chair and follows.

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Light, John thinks.

It was dark, and then it wasn’t.

No dream wakes him, no ambient noise jolts him into consciousness, one moment he just opens his eyes and realizes that he doesn’t remember having shut them. Looking blearily around the unfamiliar room, he tries to lift his head but a stab of dull pain convinces him to leave it where it lies, and just that brief bit of activity leaves him feeling exhausted. His heavy eyelids fall shut, and after a few long seconds (or minutes, or longer, he’s not sure) he slowly opens them again and lets his eyes adjust to the dim light that surrounds him, tries to focus on the farthest thing away in his line of sight—a large rectangular shape with a smaller rectangle of light inside it—and after a few moments he recognizes that it’s a door. A door set into a white wall, the space to one side of it occupied by a dry erase board with his own name written neatly at the top in red marker and various times and notations written below it in black, blue and green.

Hospital, he thinks. I’m in the hospital. But, why?

He takes in a slow breath, as deep as he can manage before the expansion of his ribs makes him wince, and a gaze down his own chest reveals heavy gauze bandages taped over his chest and abdomen—and snippets of memory begin to play in disjointed images through his mind. Coffee, a taxi, a flash of emerald green and silver, falling, his gun, the grey…

Lucy.

Lucy Chaplain-Wallace, his old girlfriend—a woman he’d once thought he could love—had been responsible for the deaths of sixteen people, eight sets of soulmates that died because she never recovered from the tragic loss of her own. The same woman he’d thought had killed his own soulmate when he’d woken up grey on their sitting room floor, his colors stolen by the filter she’d
He vaguely recalls falling, remembers Sherlock cradling him in his arms, has a hazy memory of gazing into the endlessly fascinating colors of Sherlock’s impossible eyes, and then…darkness.

As if on cue, off to his right he hears a small snuffling sound, a hitch of breath and a soft snore and when he turns his gaze toward the noise his lips curl up in a smile at the sight of Sherlock folded into a chair, long legs drawn up against his chest, one lithe arm wrapped in a soft bandage and curled around his shins, the other set down on long arm of the chair, a hard fiberglass cast (black, John notes) encasing it from elbow to fingertips. His head is turned toward John with one cheek resting atop his knees, eyes closed and mouth slightly open, the shock of mahogany curls that falls over his forehead ruffling slightly in the breeze he creates with every sleepy breath. The chair is turned sideways, facing an identical chair turned toward him, where balanced over the arms sits a large painting that is positioned such that John can see it clearly from where he lies.

His eyes widen a bit as he takes in the subject of the work, the yellow-green mottled background against which a pair of shoulders clad in a bright blue striped garment support a large, oddly flat face painted white, an exaggerated red border surrounding the smiling mouth and painted over the tip of the nose, vivid yellow arches adorn the forehead above wide green eyes, and a fuzzy mane of bright orange hair springs out from all directions around it topped by a tiny porkpie hat out of which a large daisy-like flower dangles on the end of a long curved stem. The face stares out at him from its frame, and while John has had no unusual aversion to clowns in general prior to this point in his life, he finds himself grateful that this particular image of one wasn’t the first thing he saw upon waking moments ago. An involuntary shudder goes through him, and he lets out a groan against the pain the small movement causes.

At this smallest of sounds Sherlock’s eyes pop open and he looks immediately at the clown, his gaze intense until his shoulders relax after a moment of studying the image and he heaves out a relieved sigh.

“Sherlock,” John croaks out softly, his throat dry and cracked.

Before the first syllable has even left his lips, Sherlock whips his head around and stares at John where he lies, his eyes widening with surprise and relief as he jumps to his feet and crosses quickly to the bed—and for a moment John thinks he’s going to pounce into the air and land directly on top of him, part of him unconsciously bracing for the impact—but just as the taller man is looming over him he stops. He stares down into John’s face, his lips curving up into a smile, and slowly reaches out his right hand to cradle John’s cheek against his bandaged palm while the fingertips of his casted wrist stroke gently against John’s hand where it lies on the bed. John smiles back at him, and for a brief moment they stay just like that, each of them drinking in the color of the other’s eyes, until Sherlock leans down slowly and touches his mouth to John’s in the barest whisper of a kiss, a soft press of lips that he holds for a long moment.

“John,” Sherlock says softly, reverently, his warm breath ghosting against his soulmate’s skin.

“I just woke up,” John rasps.

“Obviously,” Sherlock says, pulling his head back and huffing out a low chuckle. “You were shot.”

“Obviously,” John repeats back to him, with a breathy chuckle of his own.
“I’ll let the nurses know you’re awake,” Sherlock says, reaching carefully over John to press the red call button inset into the guard rail of the hospital bed.

“Wait,” John says, lifting a hand and setting it gently over Sherlock’s wrapped forearm. “Just a few minutes, please?”

Sherlock nods, picks up a cup of water from the bedside table and holds the straw to John’s lips so he can take a small sip. Pulling his hand back, he kicks a foot out behind him and snags one leg of the chair he was sleeping in and drags it to John’s bedside, sits down, then reaches both hands up to cradle John’s fingers in his own, lifting them gently to rest against his lips.

“How long have I been unconscious?”

“Two and a half days.” Sherlock answers, his forehead wrinkling with concern.

John looks down at Sherlock’s wrapped and casted wrists. “Your arms?”

“Broken hand, dislocated wrist.” Sherlock explains, and when John lifts a hand to run the tip of his finger gently over the raw skin around Sherlock’s mouth, he smiles. “Duct tape is hell on sensitive skin, I’m afraid. A few other abrasions, but otherwise I’m fine, John.”

“Lucy?”

“Dead. The shot went through her abdomen and into you. She bled out within minutes.”

John considers this information for a few moments, then purses his lips and nods his head.

“Any other questions?” Sherlock asks.

“One,” John confirms.

Sherlock looks at John expectantly, tilting his head in anticipation.

“What the hell,” John asks, lifting his other hand from beside him on the bed and pointing a shaky finger toward the painting propped up on the other chair, “is that?”

“That’s a clown, John.”

“Yes, I can see that, but…did you paint it?” John asks carefully.

“No,” Sherlock says looking confused.

“Oh thank God,” John says with a sigh. “I really didn’t want to have to pretend it isn’t terrifying.”

“I admit it’s not exactly high art,” Sherlock says, looking back over his shoulder. “But I wouldn’t say it’s terrifying.”

“Well you’d be wrong, then. It’s horrific.”

“I’m rather fond of it,” Sherlock says with a shrug.

“In God’s name, why?”

“It was the first thing I saw after they took you into surgery. As long as I could see the colors in it, I knew your heart was still beating,” Sherlock explains, his eyes lowering from John’s and coming to rest on their twined fingers.
John untangles his hand from between Sherlock’s and lifts it to gently cup the side of his soulmate’s face, sliding the pad of his thumb softly over the sharp jut of a cheekbone as the seated man leans into the pressure.

“I’m so glad it was there for you, love,” John says, with an affectionate smile. “But I still hate it. Please make it stop staring at me.”

“Fine,” Sherlock says with a sigh, rolling his eyes but unable to hide the grin quirking up the edge of his mouth as he stands and leans over the bed and presses the call button. He stops to plant another gentle kiss on John’s lips before walking over to the painting, flipping the portrait side away from them, and setting it down on the floor against the wall.

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From his half reclined position propped against the raised head of his hospital bed, John peels back the lid of a reusable plastic container and smiles as the air in the room fills with the sharp tang of oranges, undercut with the heavenly scent of baked butter, sugar and flour.

“My favorite,” John says, bringing the box of marmalade biscuits up to his nose for a proper sniff and then smiling at his mother. “Ta, Mum.”

Lynette Watson smiles at her youngest child fondly. “You’re welcome, love.”

“The house smells amazing whenever you’re in town, Mum,” Clara says, smiling at her mother-in-law from where she sits on the opposite side of John’s bed. “I swear the kitchen can hear you coming and gets excited that someone who actually knows what she’s doing will be using it for a change. There’s a beef roast in the oven as we speak, you know. It was all I could do not to lick the walls before we left.”

“I’ve been stuck here eating hospital food for nearly two weeks and you get to go home to a roast beef dinner?” John says, mouth stretched open in mock offense.

“Don’t forget the buttered peas, smashed potatoes and blueberry crumble,” Clara says, a teasing twinkle in her eye. “Harry was so jealous when I told her what was on the menu for tonight she threatened to check herself out on the spot and hitchhike home.”

“I don’t blame her!” John laughs, before his tone turns a bit more serious. “How is she doing?”

“Quite well, I think,” Clara tells him. “I get to speak with her nearly every afternoon, and she sounds...hopeful. It’s nice to hear that in her voice. It’s like talking to someone I’ve not known for a very long time, someone I’ve missed terribly. She sends her love, by the way. Wanted me to tell you again that she wishes she were here, but…”

“But she’s exactly where she needs to be,” John finishes with a nod, then reaches out a hand and folds his sister-in-laws smaller one into it. “So what happens next?”

“There’s a family visitation event coming up in a few weeks, I’m going up for the weekend and after that, well—we’ll see. Until then, we’ll just take it one day at a time.”

“Very sensible outlook,” John agrees, giving her a soft smile. “I know she’ll be glad to see you, and even happier when she’s ready to come home.”

“Speaking of,” Lynette interjects, “Any word on when you’ll be discharged?”

“Shouldn’t be too much longer according to Dr. Strauss,” John says, with a shrug. “He says the
stitches are healing well and he’s happy with my mobility—or at least I’m pretty sure that’s what he says, his accent is quite thick and my German is rusty at best. But according to Mycroft he’s the best thoracic surgeon in Europe, so I’m inclined to trust his judgment. It was amazing how quickly he managed to fly him in, really. And I’m still not entirely sure he isn’t here under some kind of duress, to be honest.”

“Well for my part I think it’s wonderful that both of my children are presently being treated by such capable hands, and if Mycroft Holmes is the person who made that possible then I’m very thankful for it.” Lynette says earnestly. “And I’ll tell him so myself when he and Gregory join us for dinner tonight.”

“What? Mycroft gets a roast beef dinner as well?” John scoffs.

“Don’t worry, love.” His mother tells him, standing and then leaning over to press a kiss to his forehead and smoothing her hand gently over his hair. “I’ll send a plate for you with Sherlock.”

“Well at least I know he won’t eat it in the cab on the way over, the skinny git.” jokes John.

“Oh I wouldn’t be too sure,” Lynette says with a laugh. “He tucked into my chicken stew quite happily the other night—even had seconds.”

“We are talking about the same Sherlock, right?” John asks, lifting an eyebrow. “Sherlock Holmes?”

“Present,” a deep voice answers, and Sherlock smiles as three sets of eyes turn to see him stride into the room, followed closely by Detective Inspector Gregory Lestrade.

“Sherlock,” Lynette says fondly and steps forward for an embrace that Sherlock not only accepts, but returns. After a round of greetings, Clara gives John a careful hug and then she and Lynette leave after being assured that they’ll see Greg and Sherlock for dinner later that evening.

When they’ve gone, Greg Lestrade pulls a chair up next to John’s bedside and Sherlock takes the one opposite.

“Well,” John says, looking at each of them in turn. “From the somber looks on both of your faces I assume you’ve got some news to share.”

“It’s been a very long couple of days,” Lestrade confirms with a nod. “The eight cases of murder-suicide Sherlock identified have now officially been reclassified as cases of constructive manslaughter at the hands of Lucy Chaplain-Wallace.”

“Seems far too polite a way to describe what she did,” John says, shaking his head.

“I know,” agrees Lestrade. “But legally, it fits the crime. She assaulted those individuals with malicious intent—and even if she didn’t pull the trigger, it was her unlawful act that ultimately caused their deaths.”

“I doubt that will be of much comfort to their families,” John replies.

“The change in the classification may not seem terribly important,” Sherlock adds quietly, “but it will give their survivors legal standing to contest the non-payment of any life insurance policies due to the original assumed nature of their deaths.”

“The families of all sixteen victims have been notified, we just spoke to the last one an hour ago.” Greg tells him. “They asked me to pass on their gratitude, John. All of them. Without you and
Sherlock they’d have gone on never knowing what had really happened. So on behalf of them, consider yourself thanked.”

“I’m just glad something positive came out of this mess,” John says wearily. “I suppose there’s some paperwork I still need to fill out, yeah?”

“Maybe a signature or two, and it’ll keep until you’re healed up and back home.” Greg says, getting to his feet. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I haven’t slept worth a damn in weeks and I’m going to home to catch a few hours before dinner. Call me if you need anything, all right?”

“Ta, Greg.” John says, as the detective turns and walks out of the room, the door snicking softly shut behind him. John turns his gaze toward Sherlock then, scanning his face and taking in the slight shadows beneath his soulmate’s eyes and the weary slump of his usually exemplary posture. “You look like you could use a bit of kip yourself, you know. Are you getting any sleep?”

“A bit, here and there.” Sherlock says, waving his casted arm vaguely.


“The chairs in this room are uncomfortable,” Sherlock explains with a shrug. “And I tried sleeping back at the flat, but I can’t. Too quiet.”

“All right then,” John says, pressing himself to a sitting position and carefully scooting toward the far edge of the mattress before settling back down against the pillows and pressing the recline button while gesturing to the narrow expanse of empty space beside him. “Get in.”

Sherlock jumps up immediately, but stops at the edge of the bed hovering uncertainly as his forehead crinkles with concern. “You’re still injured. I don’t want to hurt you.”

“So you’ll be careful,” John says with a shrug, patting the mattress and extending his arm to gather Sherlock into the bed with him. “No thrashing about in your sleep, yeah?”

“Deal,” Sherlock agrees with a smile, then toes off his shoes and climbs carefully onto the mattress next to John, turning onto his side tucking his casted arm down in front of him on the bed and laying his other (now unencumbered) arm gently over John’s waist then settling his fingers around the curve of his hip through the sheets. He lays his cheek on the pillow and John turns his head so they’re nose to nose. “I’ve missed this.”

“Me too,” John says, the arm under Sherlock’s neck tightening slightly around his shoulders as he leans in and presses a kiss to the taller man’s mouth, a soft slide of lips and warm breath and gentle nips that he allows himself to enjoy for a few moments before reaching up and threading his fingers through Sherlock’s hair and gently pulling his head down to rest on his shoulder. He feels Sherlock take in a deep breath and huff out a contented sigh against his collar bone. “It must have been difficult, talking to all those families. Are you all right?”

“Mnhm,” Sherlock hums in confirmation. “All things considered, we were delivering positive news. At least they no longer think the worst of the people they’ve lost. And Lestrade was telling the truth; they were very grateful. Divya Patel’s parents kept trying to pay me, insisting I take their money in return for the trouble we’d been through. I declined, naturally, assuring them it was unnecessary.”

“That was very gracious of you,” John says, continuing to stroke his fingertips over Sherlock’s scalp eliciting a soft noise from him that sounds suspiciously similar to a purr. “They seem like such nice people, don’t they?”
Sherlock responds by huffing out a long, soft sigh that gradually changes into a gentle snore.

“Deep breath,” Dr. Strauss orders, his stethoscope pressed against John’s bare chest where the heavy gauze bandage over the bullet entrance wound and surgical incisions has been removed in order to better examine the area. “Goot. Vun more.”

John complies, and the doctor nods and removes the earpieces and hooks the binaural arms of the device around his neck. He probes at John’s incisions and scrutinizes his own stitch work again until he appears to be satisfied with what he sees, all under the watchful eye of Sherlock who hovers on the other side of the bed watching him work.

When John had been rushed into surgery nineteen days ago, the perfectly able surgeon on call that day at St. Bart’s was an hour into what would eventually be a nearly seven hour procedure when Dr. Hans Strauss strode through the doors of the operating theater and informed the trauma team that he was taking over the case. Whatever reservations the surgical staff may have had initially disappeared as it became abundantly clear that Strauss was very good at his job.

John’s case was quite a tricky one as it turned out, the bullet having passed through Lucy’s abdomen before it partially shattered upon impact with one of John’s lower ribs and nicked the inferior vena cava, but the amount of blood loss from the vessel was inconsistent with the visible injury. Dr. Strauss theorized that a small bullet fragment had entered the vessel and was partially blocking the flow of blood several inches from the impact site. More than one member of the surgical staff was of the opinion that John was alive because Dr. Strauss had trusted his instincts and kept looking until he found and removed the fragment, and they weren’t being shy in offering their praise. Which, Sherlock was quick to point out, was likely attributable to both his talent as a surgeon and his chiseled good looks, affable personality, and conspicuous lack of a wedding ring.

For John’s part, he’s found Dr. Strauss to be both able and personable, and considers himself quite lucky to have been in such good hands.

Picking up John’s medical chart from where he set it on the bed a moment earlier, Dr. Strauss page through it as he speaks. “Goot numbers in your blood verk, Doctor Watson. Ze voond is healing vell. I see no reason zat you shouldn’t be discharged tomorrow viss zee assumption zat you vill avoid strenuous activity and be seen each veek until zee stitches are ready for removal.”

“Thank you, Dr. Strauss.” John says, smiling over at Sherlock. “That’s very welcome new—”

A knock from the hall interrupts him, and the door opens just enough to allow Molly Hooper to slip into the room.

“John? I just thought I’d pop in and say hello. I brought you a few more novels from home that I think you’ll…” her voice trails off as she notices the third person in the room, then blushes with embarrassment. “Oh! I’m sorry, I didn’t realize you had company.”

“Not a problem at all, Molly.” John says warmly, beckoning her forward with a wave of his hand. “Dr. Strauss here was just telling us that I’ve been cleared for discharge. I’ll be going home in the morning.”

“That’s wonderful news,” Molly tells him with a grin, one hand reaching up reflexively to tuck her hair back behind her ear. She comes over to the bed and sets the paperback books in her hand down on the mattress and then looks up shyly at the man holding John’s chart who looks back at her, returning her sincere smile.
“Where are my manners?” John says quickly. “This is Dr. Strauss, he’s the thoracic surgeon that’s been managing my case. Dr. Hans Strauss, this is Dr. Molly Hooper, the director of Pathology here at Bart’s.”

“I’d heard you were visiting from Berlin, Dr. Strauss,” Molly tells him, extending her right hand toward Dr. Strauss in greeting. “Lovely to finally meet you.”

“And you as vell.” Hans Strauss replies, reaching out and taking her hand in his…and promptly dropping the chart he’d been holding in his other hand, his eyes never leaving Molly’s as it clatters loudly on the floor.

John jumps at the sound, but he’s the only one in the room to do so.

“Oh!” squeaks Molly, the high pitched sound of surprise escaping her lips along with a rush of air from her lungs. Her eyes go wide and she presses them shut tightly and then opens them again, and they grow misty as she looks down at her small hand where it’s enveloped by Dr. Strauss’ larger one. “It’s…I…well…hello.”

“Ach du meine Güte!” Hans Strauss says softly, his voice full of what John would describe later when recounting the event as ‘dumfounded awe’, as a broad smile settles itself over his handsome features. “Vell…let me just say zat…I mean… hallo.”

John watches the exchange from where he sits on the bed, looking between Molly and Dr. Strauss, at the wonder and surprise on their faces. He feels a large hand settle on his shoulder, the warm pressure of long fingers squeezing gently. He looks up into the face of the man standing next to him, watches his own soulmate witnessing the very moment when two other people find theirs, then raises his own hand across his chest to cover Sherlock’s where it rests.

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It’s waiting for them when they get home the next day.

A large, flat, square parcel wrapped in plain brown paper accompanied by a lovely note from Narendra and Padmini Patel expressing their heartfelt thanks for the work they did in finding the person who murdered their daughter and daughter-in-law, ensuring that she would never be able to break another family’s heart ever again—and since they have refused to accept any payment, perhaps this small token will serve as a daily reminder of their gratitude.

John had stared at the package where it was propped up on the couch, only half listening as Sherlock read the accompanying letter aloud, his stomach aflutter with the sinking feeling that he knew exactly what they’d find when Sherlock ripped back the paper to reveal what lay beneath.

And he’d been right.

They stare at it in silence for a while, John from his favorite armchair and Sherlock from his. After what feels like very long time, John takes a deep breath and speaks.

“What are we supposed to do with it?”

“Hang it above the fireplace?” Sherlock suggests.

“How about in the fireplace?” John offers, only half-joking.

“It was a very thoughtful gift, John.” Sherlock admonishes. “We can’t destroy it. It would be impolite.”
“Since when has politeness been a primary consideration in your decision making process?”

Sherlock smirks. “You’ve been a bad influence on me.”

“How on earth did they even get the idea to buy it for us?”

“Apparently,” Sherlock says as he holds up the note from the Patels, “they made a few calls and someone on the ward mentioned that we seemed to like it so much we had it moved to your hospital room for several days.”

John huffs out a laugh. “This is your fault, you know.”

“Technically it’s your fault, John.”

“How so?”

“You’re the one who got shot.”

“Yeah, sorry about that,” John replies, shaking his head and smiling.

Sherlock stares at the painting, considering their options. "We could hang it in the bedroom, I suppose.”

“Not if you want me to sleep there, we can’t,” John insists, but Sherlock isn’t listening—his eyes are narrowed, focused on the sitting room door and John hears the soft click of kitten heels ascending the stairs. A few moments later their landlady appears on the landing with an armful of ginger cat wrapped in a bright orange blanket.

“Yoo-hoo!” she calls out, poking her head through the door and beaming at John where he sits. “John, dear. So nice to have you home.”

John returns her smile. “Thank you, Mrs. Hudson. It’s good to be home.”

She bends at the waist and Basil hops down from her arms landing gracefully on the floor, then saunters over to John and leaps lightly into the space next to him on the chair and promptly curls up against his thigh. Mrs. Hudson shakes the shock blanket she’s holding by the corners then quickly folds it into quarters and walks over toward the couch.

“He’s grown quite attached to this blanket, you know. I don’t know where it came from, but I found him all curled up in it the day I returned home from my sister’s.” She’s setting the folded piece of fabric down on the couch cushion when she notices the large painting propped up there. “Well, would you look at that!”

“Yeah,” John says, with a grim nod. “It’s quite…something.”

“He’s a very merry looking fellow, isn’t he?” Mrs. Hudson says, her face breaking into a broad smile. “And such bright colors, too. Wherever did you get it?”

“It’s a gif—”Sherlock begins before John cuts him off with a look.

“Do you like it, Mrs. Hudson?” John asks carefully.

“Oh very much,” their landlady says. “It’s quite cheery, isn’t it? I’ve always adored clowns, and he looks a bit like my late husband so that’s nice as well.”

“That’s very good to hear,” John says with a sigh of relief. “Because it’s for you.”
“For me?” she asks, pressing her palm to her chest in surprise. “Whatever for?”

“For, um…” John begins, knitting his eyebrows together and pursing his lips.

“For taking such good care of Basil for us,” Sherlock finishes smoothly. “While we were out of town, and again during John’s hospitalization.”

“Oh, boys,” Mrs. Hudson says, her eyes growing a bit misty as she crosses over to where John sits and leans over to give him a motherly kiss atop his head, then crosses to Sherlock to do the same. “You didn’t have to do that.”

John smiles up at her. “Believe me, Mrs. H., we really did.”

“I know exactly where I’m going to put it!” She claps her hands together excitedly. “I’ve got just the spot. Sherlock love, be a dear and bring it downstairs and hang it for me?”

Later that afternoon, after supper, and tea, and sharing a decidedly un-sexy shower (where Sherlock helped John carefully clean and re-bandage his wounds while trying very hard not to get his cast wet in the process), John walks past the clean boxers and t-shirt Sherlock has thoughtfully laid out for him on the corner of the sink and carefully climbs into their bed, wincing a bit as he lays back against the pillows then sighing as the posh cotton sheets slip against his bare skin like silk. Sherlock watches him from the bathroom, one broad, dressing-gown clad shoulder leaning against the jamb, holding the bedclothes he’d eschewed and cocking an eyebrow at him inquisitively.

“What?” John asks with a smile. “I missed these sheets, and I want to enjoy them.

“I’m sure the sheets missed you as well, John.” Sherlock says, rolling his eyes.

“Oh don’t be like that.” John says, huffing out a small chuckle. “Come on, take off that bloody robe and keep me company until I fall asleep.”

With a smile, Sherlock shuts off the bathroom light then strips off his dressing gown, stepping over it where it falls in a pool at his feet, then walks naked around to the other side of the bed and climbs in. Slipping between the sheets, he rolls on his side and tucks his unbroken arm up under his head, and John turns his own head to the side to look back at him.

“It feels so good to be home,” he tells Sherlock, a soft smile playing over his lips. “I thought it might feel strange, after what happened here—but it doesn’t. It just feels right.”

“Mycroft sent in a clean-up crew after the police were finished. Other than the pine-fresh scent of cleanser in the air one could hardly tell anything unusual had happened here at all.”

“Remind me to thank him again when I see him next.”

“I most certainly will not,” Sherlock replies, looking scandalized. “He interferes enough as it is, if you start expressing gratitude for it we’ll never be rid of him.”

John grins. “You talk a good game, but deep down I know you love him for it.”

“He’s an officious, troublemaking, corpulent menace, John.”

“Very deep down, then,” John says with a giggle, his shoulders shaking and his bright smile melting into a more pained expression as he lays a hand gently over the bandages on his chest and squints his
eyes in discomfort. “Ouch—it hurts to laugh.”

“I’ll get you something for the pain,” Sherlock says, moving to turn over and get out of bed, but stops when John lays a hand softly on his hip to stop him.

“No, not yet.” John shakes his head. “The pills knock me out and I’d like to enjoy just a few more minutes lying here with you.”

“I’d like that too,” Sherlock says with a soft smile, then leans forward to press a quick kiss to John’s forehead before sitting up and swinging his feet to the floor. “But I’ll fetch the medicine and a glass of water now so it’s ready when you are, all right?”

“Sensible,” John agrees, watching Sherlock with an appreciative gaze as he strides naked from the room, then calling out after him. “When did you start being sensible exactly? Did that happen while I was unconscious?”

“Yes,” Sherlock answers simply as he walks back through the door and sets a tall glass of water and two small white pills next to the lamp on the night stand near John’s side of the bed. “But I wouldn’t worry about it, I’m fairly certain it won’t last.”

“Good to know,” John says fondly as Sherlock slips back under the covers and settles close to him, his warm length pressed carefully up John’s side before he tucks his nose into the space behind the shorter man’s ear, inhaling deeply.

“Pity you’re not allowed to engage in any strenuous activities,” Sherlock says, his hot breath spilling across John’s neck as his deep voice rumbles into the sensitive skin there, then smiling against that same skin as he feels John shiver.

“Tell me about it,” John says with a frustrated sigh as Sherlock lays soft kisses into his neck and sucks gently on the tender patch of skin under his jaw.

“An excellent idea, John,” he purrs, sliding one long thigh softly over his legs and rolling up onto his knees until he’s straddling John’s hips. He lays his forearms flat against the bed on either side of the smaller man’s ribs, close enough to feel the heat radiating from his belly and chest but putting no pressure on his body at all.

John lifts his head from the pillow, his lips chasing the heat of Sherlock’s mouth, but the detective pulls his face up and away as John growls in frustration. “Sherlock, please. I want…”

“Shhhh…” Sherlock whispers, and when John sets his head back down into the pillow, he smiles and slowly lowers his head, pressing his mouth firmly to John’s neck to feel the quickening thrum of a pulse against his lips, drags a wet kiss up and across his jaw, then looks down into his soulmate’s eyes. “You don’t have to tell me what you want, I already know. Your pulse…elevated. Your pupils…dilated. Your breathing…shallow. It’s written all over your face—over your entire body.”

John is already fully erect beneath him, his cock lying flushed and swollen, leaking a small, slick pool over his stomach. Sherlock drops his own hips slightly, an answering hardness brushing against John’s softly and making the man lying under him gasp, his hands lifting slowly off the bed and coming to rest on the tops of the taller man’s bent thighs. Sherlock tilts his head slightly, narrows his eyes and clucks his tongue softly at the touch. “Careful, John. No strenuous activity allowed—doctor’s orders. Oh, but if it were allowed, do you know what I would do?”

John shakes his head slowly from side to side, his gaze locked on Sherlock’s, eyes wide and lips parted as he pants shallow, shaky breaths.
“I’d take you in my hand, slick you up and stroke you so slowly it would drive you mad—bring you to the brink of orgasm and then—stop. I’d hold you gently in my palm as you tried to thrust up against me, just enough friction to remind you how much more you need. And when you couldn’t take another moment, when you begged me for release, I’d sink my arse down over that beautiful cock and ride you, hard and relentless, until you cried out my name and filled me with your come—and then I’d take my own release and cover you in mine.”

John whimpers beneath him, his body still and trembling, and a slow smile spreads over Sherlock’s lips as he slides a hand between them and runs his nimble fingers down the swollen length of John’s aching cock. He lowers himself slowly until the skin of their chests is barely brushing, then sets his lips softly over John’s and whispers:

“Stay very still.”

John huffs out a gasp as Sherlock’s long fingered hand gathers them both in his palm and begins a gentle undulating rhythm with his hips, slotting their cocks together in his grip, a slow slide of tender flesh against slick, sensitive flesh. With nothing to do but breathe and enjoy the sensation, it isn’t long before John feels a familiar crackling at the base of his spine, a coiled heat that spreads through his pelvis and he tries to remain still. He digs his fingers into the muscled flesh of Sherlock’s thighs as he comes with a sharp gasp, a strangled cry that spills into Sherlock’s mouth as he presses his lips down over John’s and licks his way inside. The tempo of his thrusts increases suddenly, and John feels his soulmate’s entire body go tense above him as a warm rush of fluid spurts through those clever fingers, followed by another, and another as Sherlock’s semen spatters over his stomach, mingling with his own.

Sherlock huffs out a long groan, then drops his head and nuzzles his face into John’s neck, breathing hard, still hovering over him and trembling a bit with the effort. John runs his fingers up the length of his lover’s lean thighs and over his hips, then softly along his waist and ribs and around to rub slow circles into the thin layer of sweat on Sherlock’s back. He lifts his head and presses a kiss to Sherlock’s neck, then lets it fall back and lies for a few moments panting at the ceiling.

“You were right, love. That definitely wasn’t strenuous.” John says, a goofy grin spreading over his face.

“Not for you, perhaps,” Sherlock says, lifting his head to smirk down at him then sliding their lips together in a slow kiss before sitting back and taking a few deep breaths. He looks down at John’s face to see him smiling up at him with tired affection, then leans over and deposits a quick kiss against his lips and climbs off and walks into the bathroom. When he returns a minute later with a wet flannel, John has dozed off and is panting soft breaths between parted lips. Sherlock looks down at him, at the bandages taped over his chest and feels sudden sympathetic pain that radiates out from the same area of his own chest, a wave of aching affection that washes through him and makes him catch his breath. After a moment he leans over and sweeps the flannel softly over John’s skin, the sleeping man stirring at the touch and opening his eyes.

“Sorry,” Johns says blearily. “I must have fallen asleep.”

“Best thing for you, really.” Sherlock says, tossing the wet flannel through the open bathroom door and sitting down on the edge of the bed and reaching behind John’s neck to help him sit up a bit. He presses the small white pills into the tired man’s hand, holds the glass of water to his lips as he swallows them down, then gently lays him back down against the pillows.

“Are you staying in bed for a bit?” John asks him.

“I am,” Sherlock says, running the back of his fingers softly over John’s cheek and then getting up to
He pulls the covers up over them both before lying down next to John and pressing himself carefully against him where he lays on his back.

“Can you reach the lamp from there?” John asks.

“I’ll turn it off if you’d like.” Sherlock says, then pauses before adding, “Will you be able to sleep with it on?”

“I could sleep through just about anything right now, I think.” John replies. “I may sleep for a week.”

“Go ahead,” Sherlock says with a smile, raising his head to brush his lips softly into John’s sandy hair. “We’ve got plenty of time.”

“We do.” John says sleepily, nuzzling his nose into Sherlock’s neck. “We’ve got forever.”

For a long while, Sherlock stays awake looking at John in the soft light of the bedside lamp. At his short golden hair peppered with soft grey, the contrast of mink brown lashes against the honeyed skin of his cheeks, the pale pink of his lips that part slightly to reveal deep magenta within.

He watches him long after the last bit of light disappears outside the window, after the evening traffic noises begin to wane, after four paws leap gently onto the bed and settle into a soft lump of orange fur in the narrow space between their tangled legs under the blanket. He watches until at last his own eyes close, finally lulled to sleep by the rhythmic sound of John’s breathing, and the deep, soft rumble of a purr.

Chapter End Notes

So I’ve read a lot of Johnlock fic. An embarrassing amount, one might even say. There’s a rather extensive spreadsheet detailing said obsession, and I’d apologize for being such a nerd…if I was at all sorry. But it turns out I’m not.

There are an astonishing number of wonderful works in this fandom—juggernauts of fanfic that are so well known for their fabulousness that they have earned single word nicknames: Performance. Progress. Bravo. Paradox. Ollie. Eugenia. And the list goes on. There are countless others—long, short and somewhere in-between—that I love just as much.

But if I had to pick my very favorite, I know what it would be.

So in this final installment of my ongoing series “Seriously, Sara? Do you read ANYTHING else?” my parting gift to you is my heartfelt recommendation of Todesfuge’s brilliant post-fall epic: Be Here Now. Written in post-series 2/pre-series 3 headspace, the story picks up six months after Reichenbach and reunites our boys with the help of Mycroft Holmes and Irene Adler. Forced to deal with the fallout from Sherlock’s jump and what it all means for their future, the emergence of a new enemy sets each of them down a solitary path that they must walk alone if they ever hope to come back together.

Beautifully written, impressively cannon-compliant, superbly plotted, perfectly
characterized, and ingeniously crafted—this fic is the equivalent of having an alternate series 3 beamed directly into your brain. I adored it the first time I read it. And the second time. Etc...

I hope you will too.
Lying back on the wooden bench swing with his legs stretched out before him, ankles crossed and heels propped up on the ledge of the railing that encircles the wide porch of the cottage, John Watson wakes up slowly to the salty sea breeze playing through the wind chimes hanging from the roof, to the cry of gulls overhead, to the soft lap of the afternoon tide against the shore. Opening his eyes, he reaches down and sets aside the book lying open on his chest, then stretches his arms wide and huffs out a yawn.

Sitting up, he looks out over the sand until his gaze finds the tall figure in the distance—wide brimmed hat pressed down over dark mahogany curls (shot through now with the barest hint of silver), khaki trousers rolled up to reveal long, pale legs nearly knee deep in the waves just off shore. He watches the man drag the long handled net slowly through the water, occasionally bending down to examine something in it before repeating the process, un-tucked shirttails blowing in the breeze.

From behind him he hears the creak of the screened door swinging open, followed by the soft footfalls of bare feet over the wooden boards of the porch.

“Hi Papa,” a small voice says, and John looks to his right at the little boy it belongs to crossing from the door of the cottage to where he sits.

“Hey, Jack,” he says with a smile. “I thought you were helping Dad sift for crabs?”

“I was,” the boy replies. “But Gran needed me to help her with the pie crust, and Daddy said I already helped him for a long time so I should go and do that.”

John looks at the smudge of flour over his young son’s freckled cheek and nose, and smiles at the sight. “What kind of pie is she baking?”

“Blueberry,” Jack answers with a toothy grin. “Because it’s my favorite.”

“Mine too,” John agrees, then looks down at the battered brown box the boy is clutching against his chest. “What have you got there, love?”

“Treasure,” he tells his father, coming to stand beside him. “I found it under my bed in your old room. I showed it to Gran and she said I should ask you about it.”

John reaches out to grab the boy under the arms and lift him onto the swing, his gangly limbs not yet coordinated enough to make it himself, especially with his arms full. When he’s settled, Jack holds the box out toward him and John takes it from his small hands. He looks down at the dusty lid with a smile, runs his palms over the smooth surface to reveal the inscription scrawled in his own childish
“Now this is something I’ve not seen in a very long time,” John tells him.

“What’s in it?” Jack asks, his eyes lit with curiosity.

John regards his young son—the mop of sandy curls falling over his tanned forehead, the prominent cheekbones beneath pale, intelligent eyes. He taps a finger against the lid then crooks it at the boy encouraging him to lean in closer.

“This box,” he says, “Is full of colors.”

“It is?” Jack asks, his eyes widening.

“Yes,” John confirms. “Inside are all the things I used to collect from the shore when I was your age, and my mum would tell me what color they were.”

Jack looks thoughtful, brows drawn together. “You couldn’t see the colors, because you hadn’t met Daddy yet.”

“That’s right,” John says, grinning with pride. “So I would show them to your Gran, and she would tell me how the colors felt.”

“Will you show me?” Jack asks, sliding closer to his father as John lifts off the lid. The boy’s eyes light up at the contents, and he considers his choices carefully before reaching in and pulling out a small shell. “What color is it?”

“That one,” John says, reaching out a finger and tapping it against the end of his son’s nose, “is pink.”

“Like a whisper, right?”

“Exactly,” John says, smiling fondly. “Pink is soft, and warm—like a whisper, or the tip of a cat’s nose.”

Jack reaches into the box and fishes out a rusted bottle cap and holding it up for John to inspect. “How about…this one?”

“That one is green.”

“Green,” Jack repeats with a nod of his head, then scrunches his nose up in thought. “What does green feel like again?”

“Green is cool, and fresh,” John reminds him. “Like walking over grass in bare feet, or a cold drink of water after a hot day on the beach.”

“What color is this?” Jack asks, holding out a small coin that’s mostly dark with oxidation, but gleams brightly along the edges.

“That one is gold.”

Jack reaches out and runs a small fingertip over the band on John’s left hand. “Like your ring, and Daddy’s!”

“Just so.”
“Cool,” Jack says with a broad smile, then goes back to examining the contents of the box. “What about….this?”

John looks at the shining piece of sea glass in his son’s fingers, at the smooth worn edges and the warm glow of the late afternoon sun shining through it.

“That one is red. If pink is warm like a whisper, then red is something even warmer…like a kiss!” John reaches out and pulls his son into a hug, pressing his lips to one freckled cheek and giving him a loud, wet smooch.

Jack giggles against him, and John peppers his cheeks with more kisses until the boy is breathless with laughter, slumped against his side. John tightens his arm around him and holds him close, and they sit quietly for a few long moments staring out at the sea.

“What color is the ocean?” Jack asks, “What color is the ocean?”

“That’s a tough question, Jack,” John tells him. “The ocean is so many colors. It’s cool green, and soft grey, and sometimes even glittery gold. Some days it’s stormy indigo, and others it’s fiery turquoise—and then sometimes it’s the most peaceful blue you can imagine, the kind of blue that makes you want to wrap yourself in it and sleep for hours. The day I knew your dad was my soulmate, I saw all the colors of the ocean for the first time…in his eyes. And on the night you were born I saw them again, in yours. It was the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.”

Jack sighs and leans more heavily against his dad’s side. John sifts his fingers gently through soft, sandy curls and looks out over the waves; at the yellow ball of the sun sinking low in the azure sky, the striated clouds in shades of lemon and coral shot through with rays of glowing bronze light as it sinks beneath the cobalt edge of the deep blue water that churns and runs white with surf over the tan expanse of the beach.

“Someday,” Jack whispers (pink) against his father’s shoulder, “I want to see all the colors in the ocean.”

“Oh Jack,” John says as he kisses (red) his forehead. “You will.”

~the end~

Chapter End Notes

Aaaaaaaaaand that’s all she wrote.

Thanks for coming along for the ride.

As ever, comments and feedback 100% encouraged and appreciated.

NOTE: Chapter 17 is a consolidated and updated list of fic recs, not a continuation of the story. FYI.

If you enjoyed Colors, please feel free to give it a shout out and pass on the love. Thanks!
FIC RECS

Chapter Summary

NOTE: Not a continuation of the story.

A collection of all the end of chapter Fic Recs in the original end notes, along with 6 bonus recs for the chapters that didn't include them.

Chapter Notes

One of my favorite parts of writing this little tale was being able to share the love with some of my other favorite Johnlock fics, and my only regret is that it didn’t occur to me to start doing it until Chapter 8.

Over the weeks I published this fic and in the few since, I’ve received several emails asking for additional fic recs, and some requests that I consolidate my end of chapter recommendations into one place for easy clicking.

And so, dear readers, your wish = My command.

Below are the original links (and text) cut and pasted from the end notes in Chapter 8-15, and six new bonus recs that I would have gladly shared during Chapters 2-7 if it had occurred to me that it wouldn’t be a super weird thing to do in the first place.

Rest assured this is not an exhaustive list—I am an equal opportunity fic lover and my bookmarks are full of other stories I adore. And if YOU have recommendations for stories I should be reading and loving, drop me a line!

CHAPTER 2 BONUS REC: Are you in the mood for a delicious entrée of super lava-hot post case sex with a slow burn appetizer? Then do I have a fic for you!

Author bittergreen’s wonderful The City of Dreams finds our boys in an assumedly established relationship traveling to Vienna for a case, attending the opera and attending to each other when the suspect is finally apprehended.

Hot, sweet, well written, and fabulous, this is 13K words of Johnlock not to be missed.

CHAPTER 3 BONUS REC: As a sucker for all things Potter!lock from way back, if someone happened to write a gorgeous little imagining of our boys in Auror training as contemporaries of Harry Potter’s Eldest son James, there was absolutely no chance I wouldn’t read it. And if it happened to be so well written that I wish it was about 20 times longer than its just under 10K words of perfection, so much the better.

When the wizarding world and 221B collide, you get thisisfouryou’s lovely Expecto Patronum, and it is magical indeed!
CHAPTER 4 BONUS REC: So it’s hardly a secret I have a thing for Soulmate AU’s, and I ran across a precious little 1200 word beauty that I’m including here because it was an inventive twist on the “soulmate’s name mark” meme—and I offer my kingdom to the author (or any other brave soul) for a longer imagining of the premise.

Read JohnLockDivision’s The Beauty Of It and see if you don’t agree.

Fair warning: my kingdom includes two late model sedans, a modest Midwestern home, two grumpy old cats, one lanky high strung giant dog, and a human or two that are negotiable in the package.

CHAPTER 5 BONUS REC: Series 3 changed everything in terms of cannon compliant Johnlock.

Author naughtyspirit’s Cracks In the Pavement imagines how it could still happen—and it does so without complicated conspiracy theories or outlandish action movie confrontations.

It’s 35K words that are true to character and really quite lovely. Truly enjoyed, hope you will too!

CHAPTER 6 BONUS REC: I love it when a fic surprises me—when the title or premise intrigues me enough to give it a cautious look, and I end up adoring it. Accomplished author suitesamba’s The Sexual Awakening of Sherlock Holmes and Dr. John Watson fits that bill.

When Mycroft calls in a favor and offers Sherlock’s consulting detective services in an auction, the boys pack up and head out to a Murder Mystery Weekend. In a lovely bit of meta, their roles mirror reality and hijinks (and feelings!) ensue. 25K ish of fun, fluff, and feels!

CHAPTER 7 BONUS REC: This particular rec already has had a ton of traffic, but I ended up loving it so much I could barely stand to see it end.

Even if magical realism isn’t your bag, Teumessian’s How To Build a Heart out of Ashes is a gloriously conceived epic that imagines a world where a certain portion of the population are Changelings, humans who have the innate ability to turn into a specific animal form. When John Watson realizes he’s one of them, he’s sent to the Baker Institute, a school that specializes in the unique needs of Changelings. It’s there that he meets another Student named Sherlock Holmes…

It’s beautifully conceived, cleverly plotted, gorgeously written and all around delicious. It’s a world I lost myself in, and would do so willingly again.

CHAPTER 8: Now that you’re all caught up, if you’re wondering what to do with the rest of your week, might I offer a totally unsolicited recommendation?

I admit that my obsession with Johnlock fic borders on the pathological (there’s a spreadsheet involved, for heaven’s sake) but every so often I find a fic so glorious that I can’t help but shout about it from the mountaintops, and OTP221B’s wonderful MURDER IN THE FAMILY is just such a fic.

A post series 3 fix-it project that’s deftly written and perfectly paced, the story is original, clever, heartbreaking, joyous, and smokin’ lava-hot all at the same time. Why it doesn’t have like 3 gajillion bookmarks and a quadrillion hits is beyond me. So if you’re looking for something to read, go forth and devour it. You won’t be sorry.

CHAPTER 9: And in this week’s installment of Fic Recs Nobody Asked Me For, may I humbly suggest that if you’re looking for 3500 words of classic Johnlock perfection, look no further than His Favourite Four-Letter F-Words by the incomparable cathedral_carver.
A lifetime together spelled out in sparse, poetic vignettes each inspired by a different four letter word beginning with the letter “F”, this fic was one of my Johnlock first loves—and one I’ve returned to multiple times.

Clever, touching, artfully structured and damn near perfect--give it a few minutes of your life. You’ll be glad you did.

CHAPTER 10: In this week’s issue of “Read This Or Don’t: But Really Do, Because It’s Awesome”, I present for your reading pleasure the 1,800 words of gorgeousness that is The Water Where I’m Wading by the terribly talented DoubleNegative.

Poetic and sexy and downright lovely, this little beauty enchanted me so much that I want to dive through the screen and live in it—you know, just kind of loiter in the corner of the bedroom watching. Like a total creep.

If you share my appreciation for Johnlock smut that manages to be as breathtakingly beautiful as it is scorching hot, give it a whirl. I did. Not a regret in sight!

CHAPTER 11: In this week’s installment of “Quit telling me what to read, Sara—YOU’RE NOT THE BOSS OF ME!” I submit for your reading pleasure the teenlock epic Cracks in the Wall by the wonderfully talented sweetcupncakes.

If there was a “creepy literary groupie” button next to the “kudos” option, I would totally click it for her. Read anything she writes, it’s all fabulous. But if you’ve somehow NOT yet read this fic, crawl out from below that rock you’ve been living under and get reading, already.

It’s hot, and sweet, well crafted, brilliantly written, perfectly paced, and all around amazing. Other than that...it’s just ok. ;)

And it turns out that if you’re reading MY fic, then you should read hers—because it was that little masterpiece that convinced me there were still new stories about our boys out there waiting to be told. Which kind of makes “Colors” her fault. So consider that buck passed.

“Cracks in the Wall” by sweetcupncakes. Read it. Love it. And try not to sprain your finger getting it into your bookmarks.

CHAPTER 12: For this week’s edition of “OH MY GOD IT’S SO GOOD I’M MAYBE GOING TO DIE!” I submit for your approval PoppyAlexander’s oh-so-beautiful period piece Art and Nature.

Have you ever wondered what might happen if Sherlock was the head butler at a Downton Abbey-esque manor house and John Watson came to work there as a gardener? If the answer is YES, then do I have a fic for you! And if you haven’t wondered that, read it anyway—because it’s just that good.

I stumbled on this little beauty when reading through the author’s tags made me giggle like an idiot, and I figured that anyone who added the tag “My ongoing subconscious making of John Watson into the ideal man” to her fic was someone I would want to hang out with—and reading her fic seemed like the next best thing.

Stunningly romantic, breathtakingly hot, superbly penned and all around delicious, this is 7600 words of AU gorgeousness that you won’t want to miss. And it has SEQUELS! Which I mention because I just realized that RIGHT THIS VERY MINUTE, so if anyone is looking for me tonight tell them “Too bad! She’s reading hot turn-of-the-century servant porn with feelings--so many, many
CHAPTER 13: Welcome to the part of this little adventure where I continue to list some of my favorite Johnlock fics in the name of spreading the fangirl love.

Ever read a fic and love it so much that you wish it was alive so you could hug it, and snuggle up to it, and maybe follow it to work and try to imagine what it’s doing right now while you can’t see it?

No one? Really? Just me? Hm. Ok then. But for the record, that’s how I feel about this fic.

So in this chapter’s installment of “Love this as much as I do. I DEMAND IT!” may I heartily recommend (and by “heartily” I mean “with the fiery heat of a thousand burning suns”) emmagrant01’s beautiful post-fall fic Nothing To Make A Song About.

This wonderful work imagines a post Reichenbach world where John couldn’t forgive Sherlock when he returned home, and a decade long separation ensued. When John returns to London, it isn’t long before Sherlock returns to his life. They’re both a little older, a little wiser, and yet still essentially the same. After all that time apart, can the men they are now finally admit what they mean to each other? Read and find out. And then swoon. SWOON I SAY!

CHAPTER 14: In week’s installment of “I SAID I Was Sorry--Now Here’s Something To Cheer You Up” I offer you my apology via not one but TWO wonderful fics that I hope will distract you while you wait for the final chapter and epilogue.

First up is a poetic little beauty that I ran across purely by accident the other day consisting of 2,435 words and I love EVERY. SINGLE. ONE. OF. THEM. Author cwib’s Of Velvet and Silk, Cotton and Cashmere is a gorgeous little imagining of Sherlock’s lifelong obsession with all things sensory, and how loving John allows him to embrace and express it. I’m not even going to try to explain it any further because you’ve got to let your own senses devour this little piece of magic in order to understand just how delicious it is.

And then if you’re still depressed go and sink your teeth into the big old pile of cotton candy that is allfinehere’s wonderful little AU tale Learning Curve. John is a kindergarten teacher, Sherlock is a single Dad of a precocious five year old, and this is the softest, fluffiest, cuddliest little bunny of a fic ever written and I want to hug it, and kiss it, and pet it, and name it Bluebell.

CHAPTER 15: So I’ve read a lot of Johnlock fic. An embarrassing amount, one might even say. There’s a rather extensive spreadsheet detailing said obsession, and I’d apologize for being such a nerd…if I was at all sorry. But it turns out I’m not.

There are an astonishing number of wonderful works in this fandom—juggernauts of fanfic that are so well known for their fabulousness that they have earned single word nicknames: Performance. Progress. Bravo. Paradox. Ollie. Eugenia. And the list goes on. There are countless others—long, short and somewhere in-between—that I love just as much.

But if I had to pick my very favorite, I know what it would be.

So in this final installment of my ongoing series “Seriously, Sara? Do you read ANYTHING else?” my parting gift to you is my heartfelt recommendation of Todesfuge’s brilliant post-fall epic: Be Here Now.

Written in post-series 2/pre-series 3 headspace, the story picks up six months after Reichenbach and reunites our boys with the help of Mycroft Holmes and Irene Adler. Forced to deal with the fallout
from Sherlock’s jump and what it all means for their future, the emergence of a new enemy sets each of them down a solitary path that they must walk alone if they ever hope to come back together.

Beautifully written, impressively cannon-compliant, superbly plotted, perfectly characterized, and ingeniously crafted—this fic is the equivalent of having an alternate series 3 beamed directly into your brain. I adored it the first time I read it. And the second time. Etc...

I hope you will too.

And now THAT is the end. And this time I mean it.

For now. :)

Works inspired by this one: Colorblind by Sphealrical, Illuminate by randombitsofstars, You Will Find Me in a World of Black and White by sea0fseren1ty, PODFIC: COLORS (Chapter 2) by maxxdegree, [Cover] Colors by allsovacant

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!