A Question of Order

by Aelia_Weasley

Summary

It begins with insomnia.
It's 3 o'clock in the morning and Sherlock Holmes can't sleep because of the five foot six and a half inch distraction sleeping blissfully unaware in the upstairs bedroom.
Chapter 1

It was three o'clock in the morning and Sherlock Holmes couldn't sleep. He had spent the last 40 minutes laying on his left side, willing his mind to stop whirring but on it went. He groaned, flipped onto his right side and punched his pillow twice before flopping back down again. He tucked his right hand under his cheek, closed his eyes and breathed slowly in and out through his nose. He peeked one eye open. It was only five minutes past three. The long shadows on his walls danced in the light from the lamps outside and the occasional headlights from a vehicle making its way down the street.

He growled and closed his eyes again. He started to recite the Greek alphabet backwards to himself while he breathed slowly. It was admittedly a rather pedestrian sleep tactic but Mycroft had taught him to do it when they were boys.

*Omega, Psi, Chi, Phi, Upsilon, Tau, Sigma…*

Somewhere on Baker Street, a neighbor's dog began to howl. A beagle from the sound of it. Sherlock heard the dog howling and decided he needed to have his water bowl filled – the animal was loud but sounded hoarse.

Sherlock cleared his throat and resumed.

*Rho, Pi, Omicron, Xi, Nu, Mu…*

A car backfired just outside his window. He grunted again and rolled to his back. His mind diagnosed the car backfire (faulty catalytic converter) while he tried to concentrate on his breathing.

*Lambda, Kappa, Iota, Theta, Eta, Zeta, Epsilon, Delta, Gamma, BETA, ALPHA!*

He realized he was reciting them out loud and decided to give up on the entire enterprise. He sat up and eyed the clock.

Ten minutes past three.

"That's it. I'm done." He stretched his arms above his head. He considered frivolities like sleeping and eating to be wastes of time anyway. He was also pleased that Mycroft's go-to insomnia remedy didn't work on him. Smaller minds such as his brothers' were susceptible to easier methods.

His stomach gurgled as if begging for attention. What was it? Tuesday? Wednesday? He'd last eaten a real meal on Saturday. He and John had taken afternoon tea with Mrs. Hudson and later that same evening he ate John's leftovers taken home from his birthday dinner Friday night.

His stomach gurgled again. With so much going on in the life of the only Consulting Detective in the world, he could hardly be expected to remember inconvenient minutia like eating every day. Stretching again, he placed his bare feet on the floor and rose carefully. His stomach protested loudly, perhaps a nosh was in order.

It wasn't until he tried to stand at his full height that he noticed the other bodily inconvenience that plagued him. He adjusted himself and threw his blue silk dressing gown over his shoulders to block the pre-dawn morning chill. His stomach and member both throbbed as he shuffled his feet to the kitchen. First a cup of tea, a piece of toast, or perhaps a slice of the strawberry rhubarb pie Mrs. Hudson has sent up for John's birthday. Once his hunger was abated, Sherlock could attend to his other problem.
He knew perfectly well the cause of his insomnia. The cause was about five-foot-six and a half inches tall and sleeping in the upstairs bedroom. Sherlock had been instantly attracted to his flatmate the moment he saw him enter the laboratory at St. Bart's with Mike Stamford. When John agreed to move into the flat on Baker Street and Sherlock found how truly keen John was to assist him in cases as well as how adept he was, Sherlock felt as though he ought to send Stamford a gift.

He didn't know what manner of gift was appropriate for that sort of thing and since the only person Sherlock had to ask was John himself, he merely sent a text:

*John is proving to be a more than adequate flatmate. If you're ever in need of services, please do stop by. SH*

He supposed he could have asked Mrs. Hudson but then he'd have to explain exactly why he felt the need to thank the man who'd introduced him to John and he was sure the dear old woman would immediately see through his subterfuge.

She'd come up to the flat the previous evening about an hour and a half after John and the new woman he'd been seeing left for their date.

"I thought you could use the company." She simply said holding up a carton of raspberry ripple and an ice cream scoop.

He snarled, "What makes you think I want company? I don't. There's far too often one person too many in this room." He gestured to the sitting room.

Mrs. Hudson's voice took on a scolding tone, "Really Sherlock. You mustn't speak that way of John. Where would you be without him?" She made her way past him and entered the kitchen.

"I don't mean John!" Sherlock shouted louder than he meant to. Mrs. Hudson's face suddenly expressed that she understood.

"I meant, her." Sherlock snarled. "Julia. She's no good for him. She can't make him happy, not like I…" He'd gone too far, said too much.

Mrs. Hudson said nothing. She carried two heaping bowls of ice cream to the table in the sitting room. She avoided sitting in John's seat and patted the arm of Sherlock's chair, bidding him to sit with her.

"I think Julia is rather pleasant, dear." She offered.

Sherlock rolled his eyes like a petulant teenaged girl.

"You're missing the point, Mrs. Hudson." He said dramatically flopping into his chair. He took a spoonful of ice cream and spoke in spite of having his mouth full.

"I never said she wasn't pleasant." He wrinkled up his nose as if the word itself smelled rank.

"John needs more than 'pleasant'. He needs adventure - danger, even. He ought to have a partner that challenges him intellectually and morally. John's a war hero for Christ's sake. He can't be satisfied by weekly jaunts to the cinema or boring candlelit dinners at the same boring Indian restaurant. Julia doesn't even know that he hates Indian food. It wreaks havoc with his digestion. At this rate, he'll eat himself halfway to esophageal ulcers by the time she tires of him and he'll go all to pieces."

Sherlock was standing on his chair, half-empty bowl of ice cream in one hand, spoon in the other. Melting ice cream was dripping down his arm. He realized where he was, gave a sheepish look to
Mrs. Hudson and sat again.

Her careworn face sported a pitiable expression.

"I thought as much," she said after a few silent moments.

"Thought what?" He shoved a spoonful into his mouth.

She cocked her head at him, "Oh, my dear Sherlock. You're in love with John." She motioned to place her hand on his arm, but seemed to think better of it.

Her words stunned him momentarily and his jaw went slack. He hadn't considered it would be obvious to anyone else. He'd only recently admitted it to himself. Clearing his throat, he shoveled more raspberry ripple into his mouth.

"You can tell?" His voice had wilted to that of a wounded child. He sighed heavily and dropped his chin to his chest.

Mrs. Hudson's heart ached for him. She crouched next to him and gripped his forearms. She watched as his shoulders shuddered as if he were trying to suppress a sob.

"Sherlock, you are the most brilliant man on the planet, how can you be so utterly ignorant on matters of the heart?"

He sniffled and took a drink of air that made him cough slightly. He dug his nails into his palms to drive the tears away.

"What do you mean?" he asked, narrowing his eyes at her. She paused thoughtfully and wet her lips.

"Sherlock, it is not my place to share any confidences I happen to keep; with you or with John." She paused and looked away briefly but when she looked back at him she held his pale eyes as she spoke.

"You ought to tell him how you feel. His reaction may not be what you think."

Sherlock coughed again and it turned to a sardonic laugh.

"Oh, yes. That is a truly brilliant plan, Mrs. Hudson. I should tell my friend – my best friend, my flatmate and my business partner, as it were, that I'm sexually attracted to him. He'll no doubt swoon and leap into my arms. We'll spend three weeks in bed together, dash off to City Hall to get married and retire to a coastal hamlet to raise purebred Yorkshire terriers and a menagerie of adopted orphans. You really should be the Consulting Detective and I the landlady, your plan is so remarkable I can't see what could possibly go wrong besides EVERYTHING!" He bellowed. Mrs. Hudson went back to her seat and nervously stirred the remaining ice cream in her bowl.

Sherlock paced as continued to rant at a frantic pace. He paused only to point at her or at the ceiling to emphasize a point.

"Do you know what will happen if I tell him? I'll tell you. He'll stumble adorably through a few sentiments: 'it's fine that you're gay. My sister Harry's gay. But I'm not. I enjoy our relationship as it is, let's remain friends.' Then, slowly…" Sherlock hugged himself. "Everything will change. A wall will form between us. Brick by brick every time there's an uncomfortable silence, or if he catches me looking at him or if I touch him in a friendly way he'll retreat and slowly but surely, the wall will be built until the day comes that it's so high, I won't be able to see him over it. There'll be nothing left of us and he'll move out." Sherlock sighed, deflated. "He'll promise to keep in touch, to call or get
together but we won't. Our entire dynamic will cease to exist and I'd rather pine after someone I can't have in close proximity rather than lose him bit by bit."

He finally collapsed into his chair, exhausted. Mrs. Hudson put her hand on his and squeezed.

"Or, you could tell him and see what he says."

They sat there looking at each other in silence until they heard keys turning in the lock. Sherlock’s eyes snapped to the door and leapt from his seat to feign looking out the window upon seeing John and Julia enter.

"Oh, hello Mrs. Hudson." John said pleasantly. "You remember Julia." The two women exchanged friendly smiles as Mrs. Hudson stood and collected the bowls. John saw the ice cream carton on the kitchen counter.

"Ooh, raspberry ripple! My favorite."

Mrs. Hudson put the bowls and spoons in the sink and picked up the carton.

"All out I'm afraid, John." She gave him a peck on the cheek and waved to Julia as she went to slip out of the flat.

"Sherlock, think about what I've said." He snorted in reply and looked away. In that moment, she knew an actual rabid raccoon would be elected PM before he would take her advice. She stepped out the door and they heard her footfalls fade away as she went down the stairs.

"What did I miss?" John asked suspiciously.

"Oh, erm – Mrs. Hudson just wanted to talk about a case. Her case." Sherlock said nervously. He shoved his hands in his pockets and crossed back over to stand behind his chair.

"She has a case?" John asked, gesturing over his shoulder in the direction of the front door.

"Hmm? Oh, yes. A case, a very complicated case…involving her…son," Sherlock lied. He was trying to appear casual so he plopped down sideways, dangling his long legs over the arm of this chair.

"Her…her son?" John looked over his shoulder. "She hasn't got a son." He knit his eyebrows together – why would Sherlock lie about something like that?

"Ah, yes. Um…as I've said, very complicated. Her son was never born. There. I've solved it." He hopped to his feet and made toward his bedroom.

"Goodnight, John. Julia, always a pleasure." He slammed his bedroom door and left them agape without a backward look.

"What in the hell was that about?" Julia asked laughing.

"That," John said flourishing his arms in the air like the Ring Master at a circus, "was the great Sherlock Holmes. Welcome to my world." Dropping his arms by his side, he shook his head and laughed. As usual Sherlock couldn't behave himself and left John annoyed, amused and apologetic.

Julia entered the kitchen and took a bottle of white wine off the rack.

"Care for a glass?" she asked.
"Oh, ta. Yes," he replied smiling. He fished the corkscrew out of a drawer and handed it to her before retrieving two glasses from the cupboard.

"John, why do I feel like we've interrupted something?" Julia asked pouring the wine.

"Because we've interrupted something." He said simply. He nodded with a smile as Julia handed him a glass. Turning to look at Sherlock's closed door, he pursed his lips together and absentmindedly swirled the wine glass in his hand. Julia tucked her feet under herself as she sat in Sherlock's chair and switched on the television. She awkwardly stared at the back of John's head, waiting.

"Excuse me a moment, will you?" He asked politely. "I've got to ask him a question," he gestured towards Sherlock's room. She gave him a knowing smile and nodded.

John rapped his knuckles on the door.

"Sherlock, it's me. Erm – may I?" There was no response but John turned the knob and peeked the door open.

Sherlock was sitting on his bed in a meditation position with his eyes closed but he didn't seem to be wandering the halls of his Mind Palace.

"Erm – Sherlock? Mate, are you alright?" John asked as he closed the door behind him.

"Ah, the most banal of questions." Sherlock replied.

John clicked his tongue in annoyance and rolled his eyes. The room was quite dark and there was a warm, inviting smell in the air that he recognized as Sherlock's aftershave lotion.

"Banal or otherwise, I know you better than you think. Raspberry ripple? You're upset about something so what's going on?"

"Just having some dessert with Mrs. Hudson. That's all." Sherlock steepled his fingers under his nose, his forefingers pressed against the Cupid's bow of his lips.

John narrowed his eyes at him. "You only eat that flavor when something is bothering you. You told me that the first time I brought some home. I told you it was my favorite and you remarked that I had the palate of a teenaged girl," He smirked at the memory. "It's your favorite too but you don't eat it unless you have a problem – that's how you console yourself."

"Isn't it rude to abandon your girlfriend during a date?" Sherlock stretched his legs out in front of him.

"Sherlock, you're deflecting." He took a step closer to the bed and crossed his arms over his chest. "And I haven't abandoned her, I came in to talk to you."

Sherlock saw the wine glass. "White wine? You hate white wine. You've told me many times. You only drink red wine and you hate Indian food. It gives you horrific heartburn and makes you outrageously flatulent."

John sighed and put his glass down on the dresser. "Never you mind my flatulence!" he shouted, instantly wishing he hadn't said it quite so loudly. Regaining his composure he began again.

"This is madness. I have a perfectly nice companion for the evening out there waiting for me, yet here I am with you," John spat.
"Then go. Go. I had no intention of distracting you from your carnal pursuits," Sherlock replied coldly.

John pulled a surprised face. "Carnal purs – Sherlock you almost sound jealous!" He put his hands on his hips.

Sherlock turned from him and stood staring out the window.

"For your information – not that this is any of your fucking business – but Julia and I have not slept together. I haven't got off with anyone since I moved into this flat – to the point that I'm beginning to think it's cursed." His face was red and his eyes were fiercely blue.

"Oh please John. Why would you lie to me? She's spent the night. I've pulled long hair from drain in the shower." Sherlock retorted.

"That doesn't mean anything," John grit his teeth.

Sherlock laughed sarcastically. "So these chaste sleepovers of yours – what do you do all night? Play cribbage?"

"We…talk and go to sleep." John said after a pause. The flush in his face was slowly retreating back down below his collar.

"How quaint."

"Quite." John sighed. "Julia is Catholic, ok Sherlock? She's traditional. And it's fine with me," he defiantly took a sip of the almost forgotten glass of wine. Sherlock caught him wincing at the taste.

"So, let me get this sorted." He began taking steps across the room towards John. "You are eating food you hate which exacerbates a medical condition that you are very well aware of and it gives you painful acid reflux. You're drinking wine you do not like for no reason other than she likes it and you're too timid to tell her that you simply prefer something else. She bores you to tears and can't carry a stimulating enough conversation and to top it all off, you're not even sleeping with her? John, I do not claim to be any authority on human interpersonal relationships but something is not quite right here…"

They were only a few steps apart. Sherlock laughed at John's reaction. He was slack jawed and confused as if he'd never put all the pieces together. John very much wanted to argue to the contrary but he couldn't find a single reason to defend his relationship with Julia. She was a perfectly nice person but she was boring, as much as he hated to admit it. The longer he thought about it, the fewer commonalities he could come up with.

"My dear John." Sherlock said laughing. He wrapped his arms around him and hugged him tight. When he let go, their faces were a breath apart. Sherlock could smell the white wine on his breath and John made no attempt to pull away.

Sherlock clapped his eyes on John's face and he swore he saw him wet his lips in anticipation. He still hadn't moved a single muscle until Sherlock cleared his throat and it was as if a spell were broken. John ran his hand through his hair.

"You…you are a…" John said sighing.

"I know," Sherlock replied with a smile.

"I walked in here with a sodding girlfriend," John said laughing.
Sherlock smiled "Always happy to help, John." Soon he too was laughing.

John shook his head in disbelief but Sherlock could see the relief written all over his face.

"You know…" John began before leaving. Sherlock looked up.

"If anything is wrong, you can talk about it."

Sherlock nodded. "I know."

John looked up at the ceiling and sighed.

"I mean it. If you have a problem, all you need do is talk about it."

Sherlock nodded. John turned for the door and just as his hand grasped the knob, he turned back.

"Out loud. You can talk out loud about any problem you have."

"Thank you, John."

John pursed his lips together and opened the door, quickly shutting it again.

"And just so we're crystal clear – you can talk about anything that's bothering you out loud to me. All you need do is open your mouth while I'm within earshot and speak." He stared at Sherlock to make sure he'd made his point.

"Much obliged." Sherlock thought he'd leave but it appeared that John had something else to say. Or do. He stood there patiently waiting with his hands in his pockets, rocking on his heels. After a few moments, it was clear that he was waiting for Sherlock to speak first.

At last, John simply smirked at Sherlock and walked out of the room shaking his head and he pulled the door shut behind him. Sherlock placed his ear to the door to eavesdrop on the upcoming exchange between John and Julia.

"Bloody thick door…" he complained, the voices were muffled. He quickly searched for a drinking glass to aid in his eavesdropping but clearly Mrs. Hudson had been in and cleared all of them out of his room. At that moment, the conversation on the other side of the door grew progressively louder, so he jumped back to the door to listen.

"I didn't know you didn't like it! Why didn't you tell me? We could have gone somewhere else!"

"I tried to tell you! I didn't want to hurt your feelings. I suggested ten other restaurants – you insisted! You kept banging on about it being 'our place'!"

"It was our place!"

"Well our place gives me extreme digestive distress!"

Sherlock heard the distinctive sound of a slap and suddenly his door was flung open. Julia stood there fuming. Her nostrils flared, her hair was tousled and her cheeks were bright red. He moved to speak but her hand flew across his face, delivering a hard slap.

Without another word, she turned on her heel, grabbed her purse from the sitting room table and left the flat with a slammed door. Three pictures fell off the walls and the glass shattered.

John and Sherlock looked at each other rubbing their left cheeks. They began to laugh.
"I'm not certain I deserved that." Sherlock said.

"I am." John laughed "If not for this, for something else." Sherlock watched as John downed the entire glass of wine Julia had left on the table in the sitting room. He grimaced.

"Bloody awful stuff." That is when Sherlock saw John do the thing that was keeping him awake. John licked his bottom lip, untucked his dress shirt and pulled it over his head. He winked at Sherlock, and called him a git. His undershirt had partially lifted up over his chest and John pulled it down again.

"Thanks for that, by the way. My ulcer thanks you, too." John playfully tossed his shirt in Sherlock's face before saying good night. Moments later Sherlock heard John's footfalls climbing the stairs up to his own bedroom.

Now, several hours later, Sherlock had been laying in his bed trying not to look at John's shirt, which he'd draped over the chair at his desk.

"Why would he do that?" He pondered as he made himself some tea.

He clearly wasn't loaning Sherlock the shirt, the sleeves would be far too short. It smelled heavily of John; his cologne, whatever that product was he used in his hair and the most arousing scent of all – John's skin. Sherlock often inhaled the earthy scent John exuded when he was sweaty. It was that scent which truly aroused him at the beginning of their relationship. Back when they first met, John's psychosomatic limp kept him walking two steps behind Sherlock but he never complained or asked him to walk slower, John would walk faster to compensate. As a result, Sherlock grew quite accustomed to the scent of John sweating.

Sherlock poured the hot water from the electric kettle a split second (by his count) before the kettle would whistle and possibly disturb John. He opened the fridge and smiled to see the strawberry rhubarb pie. John had cut it in half and stuck a note to the cling film over one half of it:

_Sherlock-

_As this is my birthday pie, all I ask is that you only eat your half. Failure to leave me half of my own pie will result in my putting my foot up your skinny, posh arse.

_John

Sherlock grinned wider, removed the glass pie plate and thrust a fork into it. He grabbed his tea and went back to his room.

He toed the door shut and sat on the edge of his bed eating the pie as the tea went cold on his nightstand. He was finishing the half that John had claimed as his own while staring at the blue dress shirt.

"Why would he throw this at me?" Sherlock pondered. "Does he want me to wash it? It's too small for me to wear and anyway, he looks better in this shade of blue that I do." He balanced the pie dish on his knee as he leaned forward and pulled the shirt from the chair, feeling the soft cotton against his palms.

He took a sip of the now tepid tea and scowled. Unsure of how long he'd been eating and contemplating, Sherlock checked the clock, it was a quarter to 5. He lifted John's shirt to his nose. He inhaled the intoxicating aroma of the older soldier who was distracting him from his usual routine. He closed his eyes and breathed in John's scent down to his toes. The butterflies in his stomach sent
pleasurable tingling sensations further south and he was once again, erect. Sherlock stared down at
the bulge in his pajamas. He puzzled, trying to recall the last time someone – anyone - of any sex or
gender caught his attention in this way.

Sherlock Holmes was not the sort of man to have a particular "type" in a sexual partner. He found
certain people attractive, alluring; even fascinating. The Woman, for instance. Irene Adler. She'd
cought him so off guard and was so aggressive in her flirtations Sherlock was certain he was the only
man or woman who'd ever turned her down. The sex would have been wild and exciting, he was
certain but like any other past time, Sherlock was also certain the excitement would fade with time
and he'd rather be able to think of Irene and have the fantasy unspoil. And of course there was dear
Molly Hooper, who was clearly harboring a crush on him could be his in an instant if he chose to flirt
back. But Molly was far too sensitive a person to become involved with. John wasn't afraid to call
Sherlock out on his bullshit, Molly would go along with whatever lunacy Sherlock sank to. Molly
wouldn't have been able to handle Sherlock at his worst the way John could. And thus, it all circled
back to Dr. John Hamish Watson, the unconventionally handsome and uncommonly brave (even for
a soldier) man Sherlock found himself infatuated with.

Sherlock always viewed sentimentality as a weakness. It was a burden not worth bearing.
Sentimental people sometimes made sentimental choices that got their hearts pulverized, or worse.
John had opened Sherlock's eyes to the positive side of that emotion, even if it diluted one's
judgement and ability to make the otherwise cold, plain, obvious deductions.

He took one final bite of the pie and lay back on his bed holding John's shirt to his face. His head
went foggy with arousal and he was about to give in to his human condition and pleasure himself
when he heard a hard thunk from above his head. Then there was another. The fantasy about John
was going to have to wait. He took only a moment to selfishly stow the dress shirt into his pillowcase
before he dashed across the sitting room and up the stairs. He took two stairs at a time climbing
swiftly and quietly to John's room. He heard John grunting through the closed door so he thrust his
shoulder into it and flung it open, hoping to catch the assailant off guard. Instead, he heard John's
familiar voice and knocked him on his arse.

"Sherlock Holmes what the bloody hell are you doing? Couldn't you have knocked?!!" John jumped
up to his feet.

Sherlock didn't know what to say. "Oh – I – I'm terribly sorry John. I heard a noise and I thought – I
thought…"

"What? That I was being attacked?" John asked sounding angry. Sherlock nodded and John's face
became less angry.

"Well, erm, thanks." John rubbed the back of his neck. "Sorry I woke you. I was doing my usual
morning exercises. You've never told me you could hear me before. I'll go for a run or something
instead."

"You didn't wake me. I haven't been to bed. Well I have – I've been in bed, just not…sleeping."

John's face was a mixed up expression of annoyance, amusement and confusion.

"Yes. Well. Sorry to hear that. I'll just go for that run, then." John took a step back. Until that
moment, Sherlock hadn't noticed John uncommon state of undress. His chest was bare and the tight
joggers he was wearing left very little to the imagination. The star-shaped keloid scar on his shoulder
stood out; an angry pink against his pale chest. John watched Sherlock's Adam's apple rise and fall as
he swallowed slowly.
Sherlock fixed his eyes on John's gold chain bearing a round, gold medal displaying the image of St. Michael. It bounced lightly off of John's pale chest as he walked to his dresser and pulled on a t-shirt. John never took that chain off, which pleased Sherlock immensely.

He'd searched for weeks to find exactly the right image of the saint on a medal for John's birthday the previous year. He finally found it just three days before the birthday dinner in a small shop in the East End. The medal showed the archangel, wings spread wide, wearing armor, carrying his shield and holding his sword aloft as if to warn his enemies that there was still time to turn back – that only defeat and death awaited them if they proceeded with their attack. Most of the other depictions Sherlock found showed St. Michael in the midst of battle with the Devil. The angel stood above the demon ready to strike a deathblow to evil with his sword.

Sherlock had the reverse side engraved:

_Sancte Michel : cum homo hoc custodire non_

Sherlock didn't actually go to the birthday dinner of course but Mrs. Hudson promised to give John the gift and take the credit.

The morning after the dinner, Sherlock caught sight of the chain when John dropped his keys and the medal fell out from under his t-shirt as he bent over to retrieve them. He had also taken to fiddling with the medal when he was thinking, as if it were a talisman capable of bestowing wisdom on its owner.

John was pulling his trainers on when Sherlock realized he'd been saying something but he had no clue what it was.


Sherlock coughed. "Sorry, I was elsewhere. Thinking." He then mumbled something barely comprehensible about being tired.

John's face shifted into Dr. Watson mode watching the light flash in and out in Sherlock's eyes. He took his wrist and felt for his pulse, keeping an eye on the second hand of his watch. He then placed the back of his hand to Sherlock's forehead and used a small pocket light on his keyring to check his pupils.

"Is there a bed chamber in your Mind Palace?" John asked teasingly.

Sherlock was too tired to retort but whenever he'd retreated to that particular corner of his Mind Palace, John was always there waiting for him and there was never any resting involved.

"You need sleep mate. Honestly. Do you want to have a lie down here?" John gestured to his bed.

Sherlock began to mumble a protest but his knees were shaking. This really began to worry the good doctor.

"Sher-Sherlock?! What have you taken? Tell me, are you on anything? Don't lie, this is important." John caught his friend before he could tumble to the floor and half-carried, half-dragged him to the bed. John checked Sherlock's arms for marks and used his fingers to pry open his friends' eyelids to look at his pupils again.

"Just sleep…need to sleep." Sherlock mumbled. "I'm fine. Go run. I'll be fine by the time you get back."
John frowned at him. "Are you certain?" he asked but got no reply. His friend was sleeping.

He felt at Sherlock’s neck for a pulse and put his hand down the front of Sherlock's shirt to feel his heartbeat. John pushed the wild curls from Sherlock's forehead and was surprised to see the twitching eyelids indicative of REM sleep. He exhaled deeply and decided that it was extreme fatigue and not some self-inflicted drug addled chaos Sherlock had succumbed to.

He pulled a set of earbuds from his coat pocket and plugged them into his phone while pulling up a playlist. He selected a song and pushed the earbuds into place. He cast one last look at Sherlock before closing the door behind him.
Sherlock never heard the banging on the front door but he heard his name being called from the sitting room when he opened his eyes. There were two voices. Mrs. Hudson's shrill and familiar squawking reminded him so much of when his own mother would commence her caterwauling to get him out of bed on a holiday home from school. He couldn't identify the male voice calling for him, as he was still half asleep. He knew it couldn't be John; there was no doubt John would have skipped the step of calling for him from the sitting room and would have kicked in his own bedroom door in the case of an emergency. Mycroft was also immediately eliminated from the list of possibilities as Sherlock had rarely seen his elder brother riled enough to yell; cold stares and sneering sarcasm were Mycroft's forte. He yawned and pushed himself up on his elbow. He has been initially confused to wake up in John's bed but he slowly remembered what had taken place in the wee hours of that morning. As the recollection swept over him, he lowered himself back down to the mattress and pulled the duvet up to his ear.

"Sherlock?! SHER-LOCK?" Mrs. Hudson sounded panicked.

"I'm HERE! UP HERE!" He called in reply, making no effort to get out of the bed. The scent of John had enveloped him like a cocoon and he'd been having a decidedly pleasant, albeit non-erotic dream. He buried his face back into the pillow and tried desperately to return to the gentle embrace of sleep. He inhaled the perfume of John's bedclothes as deeply as he could but it was no use, his temporary reprieve from the drudgery of consciousness was over.

Frantic footfalls climbed the stairs, getting ever-nearer. The door swung open dramatically causing Sherlock to sit up in bed. There stood Mrs. Hudson, her spare keys to the flat still in her hand. Beside her was DI Lestrade.

Lestrade was breathing hard, he bent over and placed his hands on his knees struggling to catch his breath.

"Ah, Gavin. You look peaky, do you need to sit? I'm not comfortable with my personal safety as a citizen of this city; a Detective Inspector gasping for air after running up a few stairs doesn't exactly inspire confidence. Luckily for me I happen to be quite safe with a live-in army Captain –" Sherlock paused his critique when he saw the blanch on Lestrade's face at the mention of John.

"What's going on? What time is it?" Sherlock rubbed his eyes and squinted at the clock. It was 1:37. He was momentarily confused and looked out the window. The daylight confirmed that he had been sleeping for nearly 9 hours.

"John…hospital…accident." Lestrade said still panting.

"Sherlock, do get up – why are you sleeping in John's bed?" Mrs. Hudson inquired. She also noticed that Sherlock was still wearing the same clothes she'd seen him in the night before. What was once crisp and precisely ironed, was now rumpled and wrinkled.

"Hospital? What happened?" Sherlock leapt to his feet and pushed past him down the stairs in a panic. He slipped his bare feet into the first shoes he found and was out the front door before Lestrade and Mrs. Hudson were down from John's bedroom.

"Hurry up Gordon…Gary…Grendel…"Sherlock shouted from the main floor.

Lestrade was soon trailing behind him out the door and the pair hopped into his police car and sped
off to Bart's. Sherlock's annoyance turned into a fury when Lestrade couldn't answer any of his questions about what had actually happened.

"I don't bloody know, Sherlock. I heard it on my radio, there was static. I heard John's name and Bart's and I raced over to Baker Street." The detective pursed his lips in a scowl, he needed information and context; being told he'd have no option but to wait would simply not suffice.

Although cars were yielding the right of way as they heard Lestrade's siren blaring, Sherlock shouted abuse at him for not driving fast enough.

"If I have to stop the car to scrape some poor sod off the bonnet, it'll delay us even further. I can't drive over people, for fuck's sake Sherlock! We're nearly there!"

"'Nearly there' and 'there' are two drastically different things, or doesn't your miniscule understanding of object permanence extend that far?" He was anxiously hammering the palms of his hands on his knees and subconsciously pressing his foot hard down on the floor mat as if he had a second accelerator pedal.

With his peripheral vision, Lestrade saw the beads of sweat forming at Sherlock's temples and his upper lip. He'd never seen Sherlock so keyed up. He was doing his utmost to remain inscrutable but the seasoned policeman had seen that look on many faces in his tenure with New Scotland Yard. He feared that his passenger was on the verge of a panic attack.

Sherlock patted his trouser pocket and found his mobile. There was a missed call from John and two from a number he didn't recognize. Seeing the icon indicating a voicemail message, Sherlock pressed the series of keys allowing him access to his inbox. The message had been left hours ago while he slept wrapped in John's sheets. A calm voice spoke to him through the phone.

"Yes, Mr. Holmes – this is St. Bart's hospital. We understand that you are the primary emergency contact for Mr. – erm Doctor John Watson? I'm calling to let you know that Dr. Watson was brought in via an ambulance a short time ago. Please return this call. We have a secondary contact listed so we will reach out to them if we do not hear from you…" The caller left a phone number and hung up.

Sherlock felt numb. He'd missed a call from John and two from the hospital. He didn't have time to sort out all of the many rushing thoughts he had about being John's primary emergency contact. He leapt out of the vehicle as soon as it was at a reasonably slow enough speed to do so. He ran into the trauma unit and began bellowing at nurses and staff.


"Oi sir, keep it down please!" he said.

"My left bollock will keep it down! Where's John Watson?" Sherlock exclaimed. He forced his way through the double doors and began pushing curtains aside in each of the private cubicles calling for John. He could hear his pulse throbbing in his ears as he tried to keep the anxiety out of his voice. Lestrade followed behind, holding his badge up apologizing for Sherlock's behavior and asking the nurses to cooperate.

Finally Sherlock came to a body in a bed covered in a sheet. Nothing was visible except the patient's feet. One was bare, the other was wearing a trainer, which he recognized as John's.

Sherlock sank into a chair next to the bed with his head in his hands, feeling as if he were about to be
sick. The seconds stretched out wide before him until time seemed to stand still. This was the end; he’d never get to speak to John again, never wind him up or bicker with him and never get to say any of the things he’d been holding back, waiting for the right moment.

"John…" He let loose a sighing noise as the air was stolen from his lungs. He raked his fingers through his sweaty mop of curls.

"Hmm? Sherlock? Is that you?" John's voice made the hair on the back of Sherlock's head stand on end.

He looked up and saw John peeking at him from under the sheet as he removed the earbuds that had prevented him from hearing the commotion. He pushed the sheet off and swung his legs over the side of the bed and looking at Sherlock intently.

"You're…not dead." Sherlock said.

"Now that is probably your most brilliant deduction yet. No, I am not dead." John teased, a grin hinting at his lips. Right at that moment, Lestrade walked by still searching for Sherlock. Catching a glimpse of them, he doubled back. He appeared very confused to see John sitting there mostly unscathed.

"But…what…Lestrade told me you'd been in an accident." A bubbling infusion of temper mixed with relief was brewing in his stomach.

"Oh. Nope, not me." John replied kicking his legs and hopping off the bed. He wasn't putting any weight on his bare foot. Sherlock looked perplexed which John found sort of endearing as it wasn't an expression he saw very often at all. He retrieved his discarded sock and trainer from a plastic bag that was hanging on the back of Sherlock's chair. He lifted himself back onto the cot where he'd been resting.

"I went for a run and stopped at a cafe for breakfast. While I was out, I ran a few errands," John indicated towards three shopping bags from Tesco tucked into the corner of the room. Sherlock also spied a woman's black handbag and was able to deduce that she was in her mid-thirties; about five foot four, right handed and lived less than five minutes' walk to a Caffé Nero. Whoever she was, she had long brown hair and had a casual but distinctly put-together style of dressing.

His attention snapped back to John, who started to explain, "When I was headed back to Baker Street, I saw a man get clipped by a car in a zebra crossing. I dialed 999 and went over to help but I wasn't looking where I was going and stepped into a sewer grate, twisted my ankle and fell down; I'm sure I looked a proper knob. I'm sure all the cans are dented to shit now but at least I didn't buy any eggs."

John showed Sherlock and Lestrade his bandaged forearm. Sherlock reasoned the injury was sustained from a fall of less than six feet, concluding John had tumbled down face-first while holding his mobile up to his lips and broke his fall on his arm.

"I had a missed call from you…" Sherlock said pulling his own mobile from his pocket.

"Yeah, I called when I was at Tesco – to see if you wanted me to pick anything up for you."

John groaned in discomfort as he pulled his sock on over his tender ankle. "Anyway, they gave me some pain killers – no, it's not morphine and no you bloody cannot have any –" John directed a look at Sherlock from the corner of his eye. "I was just resting here a few minutes before they discharged me."
Relief washed over Sherlock like a warm bath but the sensation was fleeting; he angrily turned to Lestrade.

"You told me he was hurt…" he growled at the Detective Inspector.

"Well…yeah, to be fair he is hurt…" Lestrade gestured toward John's arm. "And I was only telling you what I heard on my radio. Someone reported a pedestrian getting hit by a car and mentioned John's name, I only concluded…"

"What only a prize idiot might conclude." Sherlock barked.

"Glad you see you on the right side of the dirt, John." Lestrade exhaled and turned to leave, waving over his shoulder.

"Yeah, thanks Greg, sorry for the trouble." He called back as he pulled his trainer on. He gave Sherlock an admonishing look. Clearly the 'trouble' John had referred to was standing before him wearing yesterday's clothes.


"Do you always have to make everyone feel like a tit?"

"Have to? No. But if that's the result of them being so utterly useless, so be it." John smiled in spite of himself and looked away, playfully rolling his eyes.

"I didn't mean to be so cross with him. It's just…I was concerned for your safety." Sherlock addressed John's trainers and cleared his throat.

John smirked briefly, he'd never heard Sherlock express that kind of remorse for his general dickheadish behavior before. "I appreciate your concern. You had me worried earlier. Did you manage to get much sleep?" John grimaced as he applied pressure to his sore ankle and Sherlock extended his arm so John could steady himself.

"Hmm? Yes, I did. Thanks. Your bed is much more comfortable than mine." Sherlock remarked. "Borrow it any time you like." The words came out before he could suppress them down his throat and into his belly. John swallowed hard, the idea of Sherlock spread out in his bed was neither unwelcome nor unpleasant. "You really did worry me you know. I thought for a moment you were on something."

"Ridiculous. I haven't in ages." Sherlock replied, with a graceful, dismissive wave of his hand.

"It's actually not that ridiculous, nor has it been all that long. I found a used syringe in the bin two weeks ago, Sherlock. Honest to god with a mind like yours…"

"If you had a mind like mine John, you'd want a reprieve from it, too. Sometimes I envy you your feeble thought processes."

John raised an eyebrow at him and tensed his jaw. "Charming. Do you even know when you're being an unbearable prick?" Sherlock shrugged, indicating the conversation was over.

As they stared at each other a moment, a five foot three and a half, 34 year old brunette woman carrying a bottle of water and a packet of Hobnobs in her right hand entered looking slightly suspicious. She wore a tailored, dark blue tunic-style silk dress which fell just above her knee with a long black cardigan sweater over it. Her toned legs were bare and her simple black ballet flats
showed definite signs of wear at the sole. Her long hair was swept over her shoulder in a neat plait which fell to her bust line. She wasn't wearing makeup on her olive-toned skin. There was just a touch of a pressed powder and a gloss on her full lips.

"Sorry I was so long – only I couldn't find my way back from the bloody – oh. Oh, so you're Sherlock Holmes." She handed John the items she'd purchased from a vending machine. He tore into the packet of biscuits, thanking her.

"Clara Watson, I presume." Sherlock addressed this to John directly, who nodded.

"Interesting. So while I am the primary, you've chosen your former sister-in-law over your closest blood relative to be your secondary emergency contact?"

"Don't pretend it's terribly mysterious, Sherlock." John said, shoving another biscuit into his mouth. "Harry isn't exactly reliable and I've always liked Clara." He smiled, held the packet out to her and she accepted one.

"John and I get on like a house on fire," she said, taking a bite of the biscuit. "He's almost all the best parts of his sister, without the penchant for blackout drunkenness." Smiling, she put a hand on John's shoulder and took a sip of water.

"Thank you for coming, Clarrie. I told them it wasn't necessary to call anyone. I'm truly sorry to bother you." She waved him off and went to retrieve her handbag.

"You don't have to apologise, John; I'm just glad you're alright. But maybe next time we get together we'll meet in a restaurant rather than here?" John smiled and nodded.

Clara draped the strap of her handbag across her chest and kissed John on the cheek. "Ring me, ok? Next week?"

"That's a promise." He replied.

She turned to Sherlock before she left. "It was nice to meet you." The mysterious smirk on her face and the look she and John shared before Clara departed puzzled him.

"Let's get home then." Sherlock said as he scooped up all of the shopping. Shortly thereafter, they exited the trauma unit where John blinked hard in the light. Sherlock hailed a taxi to bring them back to Baker Street and they rode in silence, each man pushed as far from the other in the back seat as possible.

When they stepped out onto the pavement in front of the familiar maroon awning of Speedy's, Sherlock unexpectedly took him about the waist as John reluctantly wrapped an arm over Sherlock's shoulders and together they climbed the stairs. Their height difference was proving to make this trek awkward so Sherlock stooped a little. John was pleasantly surprised at the thoughtful gesture, it was more considerate than he'd have given his flatmate credit for.

John tried to ignore the nagging feeling in the pit of his stomach. As they climbed the stairs, their hips and outer thighs were rubbing each other and Sherlock was gripping him with a startling strength. While they ascended, John felt his t-shirt start running up his side; a few more steps and Sherlock's hand would be on the bare skin of his torso. John became grateful when the pulsating pain in his ankle returned halfway up the stairs – the discomfort was a much-needed distraction from the confusing thoughts Sherlock's pseudo-intimate proximity was bringing forward.

"Well, aren't you going to carry the bride over the threshold?" John joked when Sherlock let go of him at the top landing. He quickly smoothed his shirt back into place and casually wiped his sweaty
palms on the back of his thighs.

Sherlock half-smirked at John as he retrieved his keys from his jacket pocket.

"Oh stop it. If either of us is the bride, it's clearly me." Sherlock did a melodramatic toss of his curls for effect. He carried the shopping bags to the kitchen and began putting the groceries away.

John pouted his lower lip and nodded in agreement as he considered the point. "No argument from me on that."

Hobbling slightly to his chair John whinged, "This sodding ankle hurts. Can I have some ice in a tea towel, please?"

"Oh, erm- here." Sherlock tossed an ice pack at him while he removed his trainer and his sock.

"When did you buy these?" John asked, pleasantly surprised as he put it on his ankle.

"Hmm? Oh, I didn't buy them. Molly sent them over from the mortuary. She delivered a cooler full of tongues three days ago, I unpacked it last night and I kept them just in case."

John cringed looking at the ice pack knowing what it had previously been keeping cool. "Tongues?! What are you, the bloody Bratva now? What do you need to know about tongues?"

Sherlock laughed his deep-throated chortle. "I kept one or two for experimental purposes – by the way, the container at the back of the salad drawer, don't open it. The rest are earmarked as a little present for Mycroft. This'll teach my dear brother to tell our mother about my last chemical indiscretion."

After a brief pause, John took a fit of laughter and wiped his eyes.

"Poor Mycroft."

"You must be joking," Sherlock deadpanned.

John coughed and sputtered from laughing. "No, no I'm sure your course of action is best." He put his hand to his chest and took deep breaths as he gained control of his laughter, then he got to thinking.

"He's just…worried for you. He's an insufferable, pompous twat but he is your brother and on some level he does care for your wellbeing. I can't control my sister's drinking any more than Mycroft can control your substance abuse but that doesn't stop either of us from caring."

"Mmm." Sherlock said in his non-committal way.

John shook his head and resisted the impulse to punch his friend's lights out. He had flown to his sister's rescue more times than he cared to recall before he joined the army. There was a time that he thought every bartender in London knew his mobile number by heart. He'd gotten out of bed in the middle of the night, called to go down to whatever hole in the wall Harry had chosen for the evening, scooped her into a cab and gotten her home safely countless times. Before they divorced, he'd helped Clara choose a rehab facility for her. When Harry continued to drink after being discharged, John swore he was done; there was nothing else he was willing to do. He loved his sister but nothing he did would make her want to change. A pang of guilt struck him in the chest. He was not going to give up on Sherlock.

"I'm speaking as your best friend, Sherlock. You've got to give it all up for good. Calling it a
'chemical indiscretion' doesn't change the fact that it's a drug habit and it's incredibly dangerous. I've seen good men come home from active duty and they turn to smack to numb the pain. I know what I'm talking about. I'm not going to let that happen to you, you're too important to me – erm, to us. To all of us."

John sat forward in his chair and twisted around to look at Sherlock, who had obviously tuned him out. He had apparently finished unloading the food John had purchased and was intently examining something with the antique Bausch and Lomb microscope he refused to use anywhere but the kitchen table.

"Fine, ignore me. What would I know, I'm only a bloody doctor and someone who loves you." John lifted the ice pack from his ankle and pushed himself up from the armchair. He was able to put more pressure on his ankle and he walked steadily towards the bathroom. "I'm going to have a shower and a lie down."

Sherlock looked up in time to admire John's backside in the tight joggers. If he only knew how to tell John that part of the reason he felt the need to use drugs was to mask the pain of being hopelessly stuck on someone he couldn't have.

John avoided being in the same room with him and they barely spoke for the rest of that day and all of the next. Only the most essential words were spoken when a client came to see them about a case. It would be bad for business to let on that they'd had a row.

In truth, the longest conversation they had outside the presence of a client was when John was tearing through the medicine cupboard in the bathroom.

"Sherlock – where the fuck is the fucking bottle of fucking paracetamol I just fucking bought?!" Sherlock replied as he sat in his chair, pretending to read.

John limped back to the corner of the sitting room where he and Sherlock kept their joint collection of record albums. Sure enough, the bottle of pills was sitting there. John took it in his hand and limped back down the hall.

"Well, ask a stupid question. Good thing you put it in a logical fucking place." Sherlock heard John going up the creaky stairs to his bedroom.

Eventually, Sherlock found himself feeling remorse. He knew his drug use was problematic and he further knew that he could stop any time he wanted to, if he wanted to. If he had something else to concentrate his energy on when he got bored.

Upon hearing John stomp up the stairs to his bedroom after a shower, Sherlock decided to extend an olive branch. He collected the rest of the raspberry ripple from Mrs. Hudson and brought it up to his room. He hesitated briefly before knocking.

"If you're coming up to ask about taking that case involving the porch pirate Sherlock, my answer is once again 'no'. All we need is for a newspaper to get a photograph of you in another silly hat." A rather eccentric woman had come to them about the packages being stolen from her front stairs. She told them that if they took the case she'd prefer it if they hid in her bushes wearing fancy dress, complete with plastic swords, eyepatches and pirate hats.

"I still think it would be a fun case, John. You know how I like pirates." Sherlock said. He traced a fingertip down the wood grain of John's door, hoping against hope that he'd open it and face him.

"Sod off, will ya?" John sounded cranky.
"It would be easy money, it's obviously the boy who delivers her groceries. The size of the footprints in the mud at the bottom of the stairs belong to a boy of about 12. A delivery boy wouldn't look odd pulling packages in a wagon around a neighborhood where everyone minds their own business. And besides, that John – *pirates.*" Sherlock said, suddenly realizing how cold his hand was from holding the bowl of ice cream.

"Sherlock did not you hear me say 'bugger off'?” John said, still through the closed bedroom door.

"John, I have a peace offering, will you permit me? Please?" He tried to keep from sounding desperate.

He heard John grumble something that very well could have been "peace offering my arse, you git" and then the sound of bare feet on the hardwood floor. The door opened with a creak.

"I'm sorry." Sherlock said plainly. He held the ice cream up to John, who pursed his lips together in a frown, took it and motioned with his head for Sherlock to enter.

"Ta." John said while a reluctant, forced smile teased at the corners of his mouth as he took the bowl. As upset as he was, he still recognized how huge the gesture was coming from Sherlock. He sat back on his bed, with a towel around his neck. Small rivulets of water dripped from the ends of his damp hair. His dressing gown was open revealing his bare chest and loose fitting cotton boxers.

"I know you're right. About the drugs. I know where it leads, I'm not stupid." Sherlock said with his hands clasped behind his back.

"I know you know you're not stupid. I'm worried you may think that you're invincible. That's what scares me, Sherlock." John took a spoonful of raspberry ripple.

"Oh, Christ that's better than sex," he said savouring the taste.

The two men locked eyes and John grinned, "Well, at least from what I vaguely recall of sex."

"Mmm." Sherlock grunted in agreement. He wondered just how long it had been for him. At least the twenty four months since he moved in, according to what he'd said earlier.

John had some more ice cream and eventually realized Sherlock was still on his feet, looking tall and awkward.

"Oh, sorry." He said, placing the bowl on the nightstand. He got up and lifted a stack of books off the chair at his desk and motioned for Sherlock to sit.

"Thanks." Sherlock began nervously drumming his fingers on the desktop. Pulling the towel from his neck, John ruffled his hair, getting as much moisture out with it as he could. He then ran his fingers through his damp hair, pushing it into its usual style without needing a mirror. He tossed the towel into a hamper by the door. Sherlock watched intently.

"I am a bit invincible, John. I've been indulging myself for quite a while, I know my limit. I'm not a common user who's going to overdose in a drug den."

John let the spoon drop noisily into the bowl. "Sherlock, you do realize that no drug addict thinks it can happen to them, yeah? You're no bloody different just because you're smarter than they are. Actually, you're so much smarter than they are, it makes you a complete sodding moron for even using drugs to begin with. That's my official diagnosis: the patient suffers from an acute and potentially terminal case of being so smart, he's an idiot."
"I'm sorry to be such a disappointment to you." Sherlock said, a hint of a snarl at his lips.

"A disappointment? You're not a disappointment. You're human; as flawed and imperfect as any man I've ever known. But you're also...the best man I've ever known and I'll be damned if I let you go down that destructive road." John turned away and placed the bowl on his night stand. When he turned back to Sherlock he had the St. Michael medal pinched between his fingers, dragging it back and forth along the chain as he thought.

"Mrs. Hudson gave me this for my birthday last year." Sherlock feigned indifference.

"It is possibly the most thoughtful gift I've ever received and I'm never taking it off. St. Michael – the patron saint of doctors and soldiers. Saint Michael the Archangel protects the good from the wicked and escorts the faithful departed to the gates of Heaven." John paused, still holding the medal.

"She even had it inscribed, see?" John closed the distance between himself and Sherlock. He crouched down, maintaining his balance with a hand on Sherlock's knee and took the taller man's hand as he placed the medal in his palm. Sherlock only gave the medal a cursory glance, he fixated on John's blue eyes which were burning into his own. He felt his pulse quicken and his skin warmed where John's hands made contact. The tips of his unruly curls lightly brushed John's forehead.

"Sherlock," John began again. "Now, I've no doubt that Mrs. Hudson holds us both in high regard. I've heard her call us 'her boys' to her lady friends on their bridge night; but this engraving – Cum homo hoc custodire non – "

Sherlock's face betrayed him. John saw his friend was taken aback by his pronunciation of Latin. John straightened his legs, rolled his eyes and laughed with his arms across his chest. Sherlock was instantly regretful, his skin now feeling deeply bereft of John's warmth.

"Yes, Sherlock – I may not have gone to some posh private academy, chock full of toffs but I did study Latin at school. I don't profess fluency but this roughly translates to "Protect this man when I cannot."

They held each other's eyes, neither daring to make the first move. In the end, it was John who closed in, his blue eyes piercing through Sherlock's hard exterior shell. No one looked at him like that. No one could ever make Sherlock Holmes feel vulnerable the way John could with a single, withering glance. Sherlock stood slowly, willing his knees not to shake. They were a mere breath apart when John finally spoke.

"Mrs. Hudson didn't buy this for me. You did."

Sherlock's nod would have been imperceptible to anyone not standing as closely as John was. They both felt stuck in place as if frozen to the spot. John felt Sherlock's breath on his face.

"Say it." John said, his voice a whisper.

"It was me."
All at once, John's hands were gripping Sherlock's face, pulling him down into a passionate kiss. Their lips crashed into each other over and over again. Sherlock eagerly returned John's kisses and held him in place with both of his hands at the small of his back. In an instant, John was certain that nothing he'd ever previously experienced could be compared to the exquisite bliss of Sherlock's mouth on his. Before his brain went out of focus with desire, he wondered if anything he'd already encountered could even be classified as kissing anymore – this was redefining the whole bloody thing for him, second by second. Longing to feel more of Sherlock's skin John untucked his pristinely tailored shirt, and dug his fingertips into the soft flesh on either side of his spine.

Their hearts pounding in their ears, John took Sherlock's bottom lip in his mouth and gently sucked, eliciting a soft moan from the detective. Sherlock jerked his head back and nudged John's cheek to one side with his own, exposing his neck. John feverishly travelled the contours of Sherlock's jawline with his mouth. Sherlock watched the soldier's pulse throb near his carotid artery and gave in to the overwhelming desire to taste the salt of his skin. How many times had he looked down at John while on a case and thought about the delightfully inviting indentation of his clavicle? When Sherlock's tongue made contact, John grabbed a fistful of dark brown tendrils and pulled. Sherlock's fervor only grew listening to John's breathy groans humming in his ear as he further explored his neck. John loosened his grip on Sherlock, certain that if he continued to hold on that tightly, he'd unintentionally bruise the detective's pale skin.

It was all happening too fast for John's brain to compute. Every one of his nerve endings was screaming like hell; he couldn't tell if his body was beseeching Sherlock for attention or warning him to stop. He felt his legs begin to wobble and he leveraged himself using Sherlock's hips to stay vertical. A momentary thrust forward revealed to them both just how alive they were when their mutual erections brushed against each other. There were all at once too many and too few layers of fabric between them. John dared take a step forward, pushing his thigh between Sherlock's legs, allowing even more of their bodies to touch. Sherlock countered by cupping the considerable bulge in John's boxers.

"Oh Jesus Christ…" John moaned and it was all he could do to stop himself from grinding his groin against Sherlock's hand. Taking another fistful of the detective's hair, John pulled Sherlock's attention from his neck, back to his mouth. He felt Sherlock's fingers undoing the button securing his fly. He could only take short anticipatory breaths while he explored the inside of Sherlock's mouth with his tongue. John felt Sherlock's thumb slip between the folds of the fabric and brush against him for a moment, then retreated.

It was enough to drive John to despair. While he would eventually appreciate Sherlock's qualms about going too far, too fast but in the moment, John was nervous and wanted Sherlock to take the lead.

As the detective pushed his tongue past John's teeth, he eagerly groaned and doubled down on his grip of Sherlock's hips with both hands. Sherlock ripped at John's dressing gown and it fell to the floor. He moved his mouth back down John's neck and nestled in his collarbone. Fumbling with the buttons on Sherlock's shirt, he eventually gave up and tugged the last two buttons open. He proceeded to lick his collarbone and kissed down his chest, daring to flick a nipple with his pointed tongue. He felt long fingers in his hair and short fingernails scrape against his scalp.

Around the time he was registering the feeling the soft down of Sherlock's sparse chest hair rubbing on his face, John realized something very real and thoroughly terrifying – this wasn't a fever dream
or a fantasy in the shower – this was real. He and Sherlock were giving in to the tension that had always existed between them, mutually acknowledging what they’d never spoken about. Regardless of where this went, things would be forever altered between them.

John swallowed back hard against the sudden lump of fear in his throat. It was too real. An alarm bell that was commanding him to retreat, escape; to run like hell and take cover began to sound so loudly in his ears, his temples began to throb. He squinted his eyes against the pain and his hands began to tremble. As if Sherlock were able to hear the resounding panic alert that was taking over John's body against his will, he put both of his hands on John's face, his thumbs gently brushing the short, slightly greying sideburns. John was able to center himself by staring into Sherlock's eyes. He saw the full spectrum of color in Sherlock's swirling irises – several nuanced shades of pale blue, gold and seaglass green.

"It's ok, breathe. We'll slow down. Stay with me. Please…” His lips parted and pull him in for a deep, tender kiss.

John pressed his forehead to Sherlock's and he exhaled heavily. "I will."

They were both panting, chests heaving with anticipation. John touched the tip of his tongue to the delicate Cupid's bow of Sherlock's lips. The detective groaned softly.

John swallowed hard and after a brief period of hesitation, began to rub the back of his fingers along Sherlock's zip. He teased by changing the pressure and speed of his hand, enjoying the gradation of arousal on Sherlock's face. John's hand was so close, yet so far. He chewed his lower lip, working up the courage to unfasten the button on Sherlock's trousers.

"Yoohoo! Boys!" Mrs. Hudson's voice called them from downstairs. Sherlock and John broke apart as if doused with ice water.

"Fuck me." John said grabbing the footboard for leverage.

"I had every intention…” Sherlock said panting.

A choked moan escaped John's throat and he wiped his brow on the back of his arm.

"Boys? I've brought tea! And the Vicar is here, there's been vandalism at the church and he'd like you to investigate…”

Sherlock bit his lower lip as his mosaic eyes examined John's naked torso. John pulled a t-shirt out of a dresser drawer and slowly lowered it over his head as if doing a reverse strip-tease.

"Good thing I didn't rip the buttons off…I was about to." He touched his fingertip to Sherlock's chest.

"That would have been an entertaining thing to explain to the Vicar." Sherlock replied, a smile hinting on lips, still swollen from John's passion. He began doing the buttons back up, starting at the bottom. John could almost trace where his mouth had just been, trails of pink flesh stood out against Sherlock's paleness.

"Sherlock – we've going to have to figure this out." John flicked his wrist between them. "You and me. If this is a thing that's going to happen…”

"Don't you want it to?" Sherlock said sounding wounded.

"Yes – No, yes of course I do!" John said lifting his hand to Sherlock's cheek. "This is all very…"
new to me. In more ways than the obvious. I don't have the first clue what I'm doing- I mean, I know but...shit."

Sherlock grinned and kissed John tenderly, the shorter man's eyes were still closed when Sherlock pulled away to speak. "It's ok. I know what you mean. We've all the time in the world."

John licked his lower lip. Pandora's Box had been ripped open; the wall separating friends from lovers had been all but demolished and there was no going back now. He'd thought about this moment more often than he cared to recall. His heart pounded against his ribcage so loudly he was sure that Sherlock would be able to hear it. He used the middle finger of his left hand to brush a curl out of Sherlock's eyes.

"I think the Vicar needs to sod off so I can have you all to myself." John said bringing a wry smile to Sherlock's face. He took a gentle hold of the back of Sherlock's neck and pulled his mouth down to his own. They kissed again, slowly, deeply. John felt a tingling sensation erupt in his aching groin when the detective dared to let a whisper of his fingers dip beneath the band of John's boxers.

Sherlock's tongue found its way past John's teeth again and together they moaned hungrily, each fighting for dominance. This was what marked the difference between kissing Sherlock and kissing any woman he'd ever taken to bed. The strength, the need, the desperation he felt every time their mouths met. When Sherlock began to softly suck on his lower lip, John grabbed Sherlock by the hips and pulled him, walking backward until he felt the mattress hit the back of his knees.

Noticing that he had John at a distinct disadvantage, Sherlock twisted John's wrist behind his back and gave him an unexpected, forceful shove by the shoulders and they collapsed backward onto the bed. John tried to scramble out from underneath but Sherlock had trapped him under his weight. John spread his legs in a flood of lustful longing for even more contact and he began to rut against him.

"I want...fuck...Sherlock...I want..." John begged.

Sherlock's hand reached between them and suddenly there were strong fingers wrapped around John's shaft, stroking him from the base to the head. John pushed his head back into the mattress, moaning. The sensation was just as familiar as it was alien. Sherlock's skilled violinists' hands knew exactly how much pressure to apply.

"Wait...wait..." John moaned and he tugged at his boxers. Sherlock yanked them the rest of the way down and tossed them off the side of the bed. That done, Sherlock picked up where he'd left off sliding his fist up and down John's length, stroking his thumb over the glans. John's cheeks burned pink and he began thrusting his hips in time with Sherlock's rhythm. Due to the combination of the heat of the moment, Sherlock's unexpected proficiency and the fact that no one had given John a handjob in longer than he could remember, he was certain he wouldn't last long. Keeping a steady pace, Sherlock relished every last sound that escaped from John's throat. Feeling himself about to climax, he gripped Sherlock by the back of his knees.

"I'm going to cum..." His voice was almost a whisper.

"I certainly hope so."

Sherlock tightened his grip and stroked him faster, hot streams of milky precum flowed freely over his fist. John's breathing quickened further. He wrapped his arm around Sherlock's back and held him closely. He buried his tongue in Sherlock's mouth, teeth clashing while desperate, gasping moans erupted out of him. Various muscle groups all over his body were contracting as John attempted to delay what was turning into the most intense non-intercourse he'd experienced in his
life. Sherlock's frantic pace sent him over the edge and he came spectacularly all over himself and the
detective, who kept stroking him gradually more and more slowly as John rode out the wave of his
orgasm. His moan softened to a whimper and he released his vice-like grip on Sherlock.

"John, what a mess you've made of us…" Sherlock said in a mock-scolding tone. John grinned and
chuckled with what little energy he still had. Looking down, he realized that Sherlock was quite
right, there was an astonishing amount of semen all over Sherlock's black trousers, the bed and
himself.

Sherlock indelicately wiped his hand on the bedsheets. He caught John's eye and as a smirk hinted at
the corners of his mouth and he licked each one of his fingers.

"Ooooh you are a bad, bad man," John laughed.

"John? Are you in there? I can't find Sherlock." Mrs. Hudson was suddenly knocking.

"Not a convenient time, Mrs. Hudson!" Sherlock yelled, sitting up. "Tell the Vicar to come back. In
a month or so." John chuckled and tweaked Sherlock's nipple, eliciting both a yelp of pain and a
delightful deep-throated laugh from Sherlock.

"Sherlock? Oh – I…" The pregnant pause gave John the collywobbles – the chances that she'd heard
what was going on were slim. If she had heard them, she'd have hardly proceeded to knock. He
sincerely hoped that the Vicar hadn't heard – John wouldn't be able to look the man in the eye ever
again. Sherlock nipped and sucked at his neck which was making it increasingly difficult for him not
to moan obscenely.

Mrs. Hudson's voice returned in a conspiratorial whisper. "Well it's about bloody time, you two. Not
to worry, I'll get rid of him." They held on to each other as Sherlock turned his eyes to the closed
doors, intently listening as her heels clip-clopped back down the stairs and a short time later, the front
doorknob clicked shut.

They both snickered and Sherlock tilted John's chin up for a soft kiss. He saw the faint worry lines
around John's eyes wrinkle and he nodded, somehow he was usually able to tell what John was
thinking.

"It's fine. She sort of…spoilt the moment for me." Sherlock frowned, Mrs. Hudson's jarring voice
was the ultimate hard-on repellent.

"I want to though. Are you going to let me?"

"I'm disinclined to stop you, John. Just not at this moment."

He felt a little bit guilty for not reciprocating straightaway but at the same time he highly doubted his
personal masturbatory practices had prepared him sufficiently to get another man off, particularly one
as intimidatingly perfect as the one he was staring at. He was out of his depth and he knew it.
Sherlock nuzzled the tip of John's nose with his own and they smirked at each other. John knelt up
on the bed and moved back, giving Sherlock room. They positioned themselves to face each other
while laying on their sides. They both leaned up on their elbows.

"I've wanted this."

"So have I. Very much."

Pressing his palm to John's face, Sherlock leaned in and kissed him. He used his thumb to caress
John's throat and John could smell his own sweat and semen on his hand.
"Have you…ever… Before now, I mean?" John asked. Even as he asked, he wasn't thoroughly convinced that he wanted the answer. His own nudity in contrast to all of the clothing Sherlock was still wearing was beginning to make him self-conscious.

"Yes, but not like this. Minor, awkward, teenaged fumbling with classmates at school. Slightly less awkward encounters with men and women at university, no one serious. Nothing worth mentioning lately. As I've said, I'm married to my work and until I met you, my work was my only passion." The corner of his mouth curled into a grin and he arched an eyebrow. "You?"

John quickly looked down at the mattress and lifted his eyes back up again, he seemed to be making an effort not to make eye contact. "No. I mean, women, obviously, yes but…" Sherlock saw some secret lurking behind John's eyes and he ventured a deduction.

"You're lying."

John blenched and his jaw went slack, he never had much of a poker face when it came to Sherlock. He cleared his throat and swallowed hard. He felt small beads of sweat beginning to form at his temples. He suddenly felt the need to defenestrate himself.

"Yeah. I am…a bit." He became deeply interested in the thin grey pinstripes in his navy sheets.

"Who was it?"

John felt the blush rise in his cheeks and he smiled. Sherlock studied him with intensity.

"It was nothing, really."

"Surely it was slightly more than nothing." John cleared his throat again. "Who was he?"

Still avoiding Sherlock's eyes at all costs, John was beginning to squirm. "I am far too sober for this conversation," he joked.

"I can fix that." Sherlock was on his feet in a flash and halfway down the stairs before John could call him back.

He flopped onto his back and exhaled deeply, wiping the sweat from his forehead on the back of his arm. "Ok. Well, shit. This is really happening," he thought to himself. While waiting for Sherlock to return, he tugged his t-shirt up over his head and wiped off quickly before tossing it to the floor.

"Pants…I need pants…" He thought to himself. He leaned over the edge of his bed and saw the boxers he'd been wearing on the floor. He retrieved them and pulled them on quickly. He was still attempting to gain composure when Sherlock reappeared, barefoot in his heather grey cotton pyjama bottoms with a bottle in one hand and two glasses in the other. He was carrying them in a pincer grip, his fingers inside the glasses, each of which held one single, solitary cube of ice.

John shook his head, "Could you possibly put your spunk covered fingers any deeper into my glass?" he joked.

Sherlock scoffed, "I washed my hands." He plopped the glasses down on the night stand and cracked the bottle open. He poured two fingers' worth of rust-colored liquor in each glass, replaced the cap and carefully placed the bottle on the floor next to the bed.

He handed John his drink and laid back down on the bed. John dipped his nose into the glass and breathed deeply. The aroma made him slightly dizzy. His nostrils burned as the various scents mixing together set his olfactory sense ablaze. Sherlock held his own glass in front of him but hadn't tasted it
yet.

John felt an excess of saliva in his mouth and took a sip, the warmth smoothly spreading over his tongue. He was detected a hint of chocolate and vanilla in the amazingly complex scotch Sherlock had brought him. Appropriate, considering the complexity of the man himself.

"Glenmorangie Single Malt." Sherlock offered, without being asked. "18 years old. Sebastian sent me the bottle after that business at the bank."

"It's...erm- it's good." John coughed as the liquor warmed him from the inside. Sherlock settled next to John on the bed, glass in hand.

"I know you probably prefer a g and t, but I've been saving this. Besides that, we're out of that Earl Grey syrup you're so fond of. " Sherlock dipped his nose in his own glass, breathed deeply and took a long drag of his drink.

John cocked his head to one side, "You know how I take my gin and tonic?"

Sherlock grinned. "Obviously. If I may confess, I used to take it an entirely different way until I took a quick taste of yours. It's delicious; bergamot and juniper are a perfect pairing."

Still slightly confused but nonetheless astounded John spoke again, "But when did you taste it?"

Sherlock took another sip and John delighted in the bob of his Adam's apple as he swallowed. "That case with the...the...you know, the severed...damn...what clever name did you call it on your blog?" He thought a moment with his eyes closed and John took the opportunity to study his long, thick lashes as he delighted his palate with another taste of scotch.

"The Tumultuous, Tortuous, Trickery of Thomas." Sherlock said at last opening his eyes wide, signaling he'd had a successful visit to his Mind Palace.

"Oh, right. Right." John nodded, remembering. The assailant found out that the famous detective from the newspapers was tracking him and he began taunting Sherlock and John by dropping severed body parts at their door each morning. The night they caught him in the act of breaking into the mortuary to collect more limbs, Lestrade insisted on treating them both to drinks at the Black Horse, a pub not far from the center of the West End theater district. Sherlock had nursed a beer for most of the night and it wasn't until this moment that he confessed to getting curious and sampling John's cocktail when he went to the gents.

John pouted his lower lip out and nodded, impressed.

"I had no idea you paid attention. There's a bit of fresh lemon juice and an orange peel garnish in the recipe too, but yea. Bergamot and juniper belong together. Just a tick," John pointed a finger at him. "I believe you just called me clever."

He grinned and took a larger sip than the previous two. It burnt his chest but wasn't entirely unpleasant.

"So I did. You can be quite clever, John. I freely admit that I rather enjoy some of the case names you've come up with. I can see why the plebeians read the blog."

John rolled his eyes, he knew the compliment would only stretch so far. "And by that comment, you fancy yourself of the patrician class then?"

"Obviously."

John smiled and shook his head. "What have you been saving it for?"
Sherlock's eyebrows came together asking a question that his voice didn't need to participate in.

"The bottle of scotch – you said Sebastian sent it to you and you've been saving it. Anything in particular?"

Sherlock looked away and downed the rest of what was in his glass. He squeezed his eyes shut and sucked air in between his teeth. He reached behind his back and felt around for the bottle. Once he retrieved it, he poured two more fingers and held it up to John.

"Top up?"

"Sure, why not?" John's drink was nearly gone anyway. Sherlock grinned and poured, then placed the uncapped bottle back on the floor. He cleared his throat, appearing to be carefully selecting his words.

"For this." He said simply.

It was John's eyebrows' turn to ask a question. Sherlock chuckled.

"This." His touched his forefinger to his own chest, then John's chest and then let it come to rest on the bed.

"You knew this would happen?" John dared to ask before taking a drink. He was starting to feel lightheaded and he knew it wasn't entirely due to the liquor.

"I…hoped."

John felt his mouth run dry. His heart started pounding again against his rib cage, rattling his bones. He switched the glass to his opposite hand and he reached out to Sherlock and as they stared into each other's eyes, they pressed their palms together. Sherlock's fingers were thinner and longer, his cuticles were red and raw from gnawing on them. John's hands were softer with slightly stubby fingers. It was, in many ways, more intimate than either of them planned.

"Palm to palm is Holy Palmer's kiss." Sherlock quoted.

"My thoughts exactly." John said with a smirk. There was a brief pause while they let their fingers stroke each other, gently interlacing and caressing.

"That was my first foray into acting when I was at school." Sherlock reminisced.

John chuckled and interlaced his fingers with Sherlock's, the heels of their hands still touching. "Oh? Do tell..." He leaned forward and took a long sip. He wanted to know every last detail about the man lying in front of him.

Sherlock nodded. "I was very young. I played Capulet Number Six. I was firmly relegated to the background; a skinny, awkwardly lanky 12 year old, too shy to speak."

"So, not Juliet, then?" John joked and lifted his glass to his lips.

"No indeed. The Board of Governors voted against a boy playing the female lead so the Headmaster's daughter was given the part; she went to a co-ed academy not terribly far away. It caused quite a stir at the time. She was the one female on the school campus young enough to have a functioning uterus. It was a feeding frenzy, every heterosexual male was trying to get in her knickers."
He grinned at another memory. "Mycroft played Juliet's nursemaid. He didn't need padding to have tits back then."

It was a comment he didn't expect, nor was he ready for it. John struggled to keep the burning liquid in his mouth and not permit it to spray from his nose. He choked it back, desperate to avoid spraying it in Sherlock's face. He sputtered slightly and coughed as some of the scotch found its way down his windpipe. He beat his fist against his own chest. His laughter eventually broke through and together they shook the entire bed laughing at Mycroft's expense. John pulled his hand from Sherlock's grip to wipe his eyes.

"I believe our mother has photographs in a box somewhere. I've often considered blowing one up and sending them out as Christmas cards." He smirked to himself and took a drink. His eyelids were growing heavier by the minute.

"Now I'd love to see those someday," John said laughing. "So you were in other plays then? You said Romeo and Juliet was your first."

Sherlock nodded. John watched him dip his finger in his scotch and trace around the rim of the glass before he took another sip. "Yes. Again, minor roles without any lines, until I was 17. I worked up the nerve and got the lead in Henry the Fifth."

John snapped to attention. "You played Henry the Fifth?!!"

"Obviously."

John gulped down the remainder of the scotch left in his glass, which left him feeling woozy. "So you did that speech? The St. Crispin's Day speech?!!"

Sherlock grinned and nodded. He took what was left of the ice in his glass into his mouth and crushed it between his molars.

"Then do it! Do it now! I know you must still remember it!"

"John I never knew you were so theatrically minded." Sherlock grinned and drained his glass. He took half a pour more for himself and John before they spoke again.

"I always liked Shakespeare. He wrote about death and murder and sex and war – what's not to love? But the Henry Five speech Sherlock – please…I kept a copy of it folded inside my helmet when I was in Afghanistan…"

Sherlock cleared his throat and began.

"By Jove, I am not covetous for gold…"

As Sherlock delivered a tempered and passionate rendition of the speech (which of course he remembered as clearly as if he'd just performed it with the Royal Shakespeare Company,) John was enraptured. He mouthed the words to the sections he could remember and closed his eyes from time to time, relishing the words that made his soldier's heart thrive. He was gulping his drink down far too quickly and felt his arms and head get desperately heavy. Sherlock grinned wide when John began to recite it with him, even if he was slurring:

"This story shall the good man teach his son;
And Crispin Crispian shall ne'er go by,
From this day to the ending of the world,
But we in it shall be remembered—
We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;
For he today that sheds his blood with me
Shall be my brother…"

Sherlock leaned over and kissed John deeply and they came apart again.

"You didn't finish..."

"Another time, perhaps.″ Sherlock waved him off.

John smiled and rolled over. He tucked his hand behind his head and crossed one ankle over the other. He rested the bottom of his glass on his bare chest and sighed contentedly.

"Have we avoided the conversation long enough?″ Sherlock asked.

John sighed again and sipped. "I suppose."

The detective finished his drink and unceremoniously dropped the glass by the side of the bed. They heard it roll on its side underneath them. He then shifted onto his stomach and pulled his torso partially up on top of John's, the skin of their chests created friction that made John's inebriated brain temporarily short circuit.

Exhausting the liquor in his glass for supplemental bravery, John cleared his throat and gingerly set it to rest on the nightstand between the bed and the wall.

"So. Who was he?″ Sherlock asked as he tucked both of his hands under his chin.

"A friend, Simon. His father was the Head of Sixth at our school.″ He frowned but didn't turn away.

"And?"

"Well, it was like you said, 'minor fumblings with classmates'. That's all it amounted to, really. We were mates, we revised for exams together, traded comics. I went fishing with him and his grand-dad once or twice."

"Until?″ Sherlock was struggling with balancing his impatient curiosity against letting John recount his story at his own pace.

"We…well. Shit. This is hard.″ John sighed. "We kissed, just a couple of times. He had a really nice back garden where we would set up a tent and a telescope - he was mad about the stars. He most definitely knew the earth goes round the sun.″ He winked at Sherlock, grasping at any and all straws to avoid the inevitable discomfort of the rest of the story.

"We were sleeping rough one Friday night – there was supposed to be a meteor shower – and one second we were laughing about something, the next second he kissed me. I didn't know what to do. I just sort of froze, until he did it again..." his voice trailed off as if he was watching his younger self in his mind's eye.

Sherlock thought sensed where the story was going so he took John's hand in an attempt to mimic the most supportive manner he could muster.

"And that was it. A few kisses in the tent. We stayed up reading comics with torches until 2 in the morning, watched the meteor shower and fell asleep. When we woke up, it was like it never happened.″
Sherlock studied John's face, he could see there was more to be said.

"And then…?"

John coughed. "You have to understand my father, Sherlock. He was not a nice man. Not a warm man. He was a drinker and well, he didn't like Simon from the start. He said he was 'too soft'. He called him names. I mostly ignored it."

"How old were you at this point?"

"15, 16. Not long after the night in the tent - about a month later, Harry got caught making out with a girl at school and dad was…less than pleased about it. Our mother kept silent while he ranted and raved about her being an embarrassment to the family and she'd better 'get over this whole phase'. By that point, any part of me that ever wanted to, or was curious about kissing Simon again crawled into the fetal position and turned to stone. I stood up to him – god, he was so angry. I was afraid he was going to hit my little sister. I screamed at him to leave her alone and I put myself in between them. Dad was also military man. I'm bigger and stronger now than I was and I know how to fight, but at 16, I was…nothing. He backhanded me and said 'and don't ever let me hear that you're a faggot!'" John grit his teeth and tightened his jaw before swallowing hard. Sherlock closed his eyes and exhaled deeply. If he could bring John's father back to life, only to kill him again straightaway, he would have done it.

"I knew I wasn't really gay. I knew I fancied girls but from then on, even the memory of kissing Simon made a guilty, hollow place inside my chest hurt. If I was ever going to explore any sort of bisexual curiosity, I certainly wasn't after that. "

He took a deep breath and pushed the air from his lungs hard. Sherlock sniffled slightly and placed a soft kiss on his stomach.

"I'm sorry, John. Truly."

"It was a long time ago." John was actively avoiding eye contact now.

"Yes but…it hurts you to talk about it."

John nodded. "I've never told anyone that story. Not my therapist, not anyone. Harry and I never even talked about that night. It's why she drinks, you know. Self-loathing on behalf of our dear, old dad."

"Well…thank you for trusting me." Sherlock whispered.

John's lips curled into a smile, "If I can't trust you, who can I trust, eh?"

"Rhetorical question?"

John chuckled. "Yes, god dammit. Rhetorical as all get out." He leaned forward and kissed Sherlock on the mouth with a handful of his messy curls.

They lay there in silence, looking into each other's eyes. Sherlock was tapping out a musical rhythm on John's bicep.

"It's late." Sherlock finally said looking at the clock on the nightstand. John turned to look.

"Oh, yeah it is."
Sherlock didn't move, he waited for instructions though he wasn't completely positive they'd be forthcoming.

"Don't…don't go. Please stay." John said at last.

"Obviously."

John's shoulders shuddered with a laugh and he wiggled under the duvet. Sherlock stood and slid in between the sheets.

"So how's this meant to go?" John asked.

"Hmm?" Sherlock had closed his eyes, burrowing slightly into the pillow.

"Am I the big one, or the small?" He asked sleepily.

"Pardon?" Sherlock opened one eye. John laughed again.

"The big or the small spoon, you git."

"I'd go either way."

"It seems we have that in common." John quipped and they both chuckled a bit. "Come here," John lay on his side and held his arms open. Sherlock nodded and turned over. He moved backward until his back was flush with John's front and a strong arm was tucked under his head. He lightly kissed the inside of John's elbow. John slid his thigh between Sherlock's legs and rested his hand on his hip.

He burrowed his face in the back of Sherlock's neck and gently kissed along his hairline. Their breathing was in unison and it slowed as they drifted off to sleep locked in each other's arms.
Chapter 4

The following morning, John woke facing the opposite direction. He reached behind him to feel for Sherlock and was disappointed when he found the other side of his bed cold and empty. He squinted, checking the clock and discovered that he'd slept late. He wasn't quite hungover but he decided then and there to skip his usual morning exercise routine. The thought of his steadily advancing age catching up to him and his days of late nights with untroubled mornings coming to an end wasn't pleasant. At his last physical exam, his own GP had suggested he cut back on caffeine and start taking a multi-vitamin.

"A…a what?"

"Come now, John. You're over 40. You've got decades ahead of you but you aren't 21 anymore. You know as well as I do that you need to take care of these things and I'm giving you the exact same advice you'd be giving a patient your age."

John had clenched his jaw and repressed the urge to call a respected colleague a pretentious spunktrumpet, instead he assured him that he'd drink less coffee and drop by the chemist and purchase the suggested vitamin tablets. He didn't do either of those things. In fact, he met Clara at the Caffe Nero by her flat later that day and ordered two double espressos; as if adding more caffeine to his body would somehow spite his physician. It was a terrible idea of course and he was jittery and unable to focus on the case they'd been chipping away at when he got home. He was tapping his fingers nervously on the arm of his chair and bouncing his knee. It irritated Sherlock something fierce.

John stared at the ceiling for a few minutes. The presence of the empty glass on his nightstand and the distinct scent of Sherlock still clinging to the other side of his bed told him the events of the night before weren't imagined.

He sucked his cheek inward and clamped down on the soft flesh between his back teeth. He hoped that Sherlock had merely risen before him and he hadn't retreated in the middle of the night; afraid to confront a disastrous mistake in the light of the morning. John feared the worst; that Sherlock had deduced that any physical or romantic entanglement between the pair of them was ill-advised and bound to go tits up. Or worse yet – that John hadn't lived up to Sherlock's expectations and he was facing both a deadly uncomfortable conversation and devastating rejection.

He felt a cold sweat come over him. Once Sherlock's mind was made up there'd be no undoing it, he knew that for certain. He didn't want to think about what it might mean for them. John wanted more, at least enough to sort out how he actually felt about his newly uncovered sexual awakening. He'd been vacillating between denial and suppression of his feelings for Sherlock for ages. He hoped that he would have more of an opportunity to make some sense of a deeply befuddling state of affairs.

He exhaled and decided to act casually as if the events of the previous evening hadn't occurred. He resolved to gauge and observe Sherlock's behavior to interpret the meaning of his waking up alone. If he asked his flatmate directly, he risked hearing a patented Sherlock Holmes unapologetic and soul-crushingly blunt dismissal.

Moreover, the thought had occurred to him that the deviant and socially oblivious man he'd just been in bed with might even be conducting an experiment and none of what transpired between them had any deeper meaning for him. It could have very well been all an act; though to what purpose John couldn't imagine. His face flushed and he rapidly felt irate. If what happened between them was in any way an experiment for Sherlock's own twisted amusement – if that's why he didn't permit John
to go past a certain physical point – he was certain his reaction would land him in handcuffs. He sat up in bed gripping the bedsheet so tightly in a clenched fist he got a cramp in his forearm.

Given how ardently Sherlock eschewed sentiment and emotion, it was not difficult at all to conceive of a scenario wherein Sherlock was able to divorce himself from his own predilections to engage in homosexual behavior as an experiment. It was not outside the realm of possibility. The more John considered it, the more likely it seemed. With his eyes closed and trying to exhale calmly, John resolved not to get ahead of himself. He couldn't make assumptions about what anything meant, the situation was complex enough without borrowing trouble. He twisted the St. Michael medal between his fingers as he thought.

Once he'd regained a level head, he pulled on a pair of pyjama bottoms and made his way down the stairs to the bathroom. He emptied his bladder, washed his hands, and then casually leaned on the sink while he brushed his teeth. He bent over to spit out a mouthful of toothpaste and when he stood up straight again, Sherlock was standing behind him. It gave John a start but he smiled at him while he continued brushing.

"Morning." Sherlock crossed his arms and pushed his back against the doorframe. He was still wearing the grey pyjama bottoms and had put on a white t-shirt and his dressing gown.

"Hey." John said, toothpaste dribbling down his chin. He spat again. "Have you been up long?"

Sherlock nodded. "I've been thinking." A small but distinct cramp pulsed in John's stomach.

"John…may I pose a question?"

"Yep." He rinsed his toothbrush and put it back in its usual place next to Sherlock's. He ran the tap and caught some water in his cupped hand. He swished it around and spat it into the sink. He wiped his mouth on a towel and hung it back on the rack.

"Where do we stand now?"

"Hmm?" John turned around.

"I mean…is this…adult bisexual experimentation or…"

John smiled wide and laughed. "Why Sherlock Holmes, are you asking me if I'm your boyfriend?" Sherlock's expression hardened and John stopped smiling.

A lump formed in his throat as Sherlock spoke. "I'm asking if this is something real, something that you want or if in six months' time, I'm going to have to sit in my chair and watch you go on a date with another insipid girlfriend while I pretend not be dying inside."

He wasn't expecting this but it was entirely preferable to the "this was a complete mistake" conversation he was fearing. John crossed and uncrossed his arms. He chewed on the inside of his cheek again.

"Sherlock," he paused to find the right words and when he wasn't able to, he shrugged a shoulder and spoke. "I'm not a psychic. I don't know what's going to happen in the next ten minutes, never mind the next six months."

Sherlock was looking him in the eye but his attention darted away for a split second.

"But, I do know that…no one has ever, ever made me feel this way before." He tapped his finger to Sherlock's chest. "And I am not sexually inexperienced."
The detective looked away again, the tops of his ears were burning red. John was staring right at him but Sherlock was actively avoiding his eyes.

"No, listen to me." John turned Sherlock's cheek towards him. "I've had a lot of women. At uni, medical school, the army. When I first started at Bart's I think I fucked every single student nurse in the program. Every last one. Two at a time. I fucked a female drill instructor at basic training and then when I was deployed..." Sherlock interrupted him throwing his hands up in the air, knocking John's hand from his cheek in the process.

"Is there a reason you're telling me this? Should I have been honored to be in bed with John "Three Continents" Watson?" There was a distinctly venomous tone in his low growl. John frowned and took Sherlock's hand.

"I'm not saying it to big myself up, I'm not even particularly proud of it."

"Yes, you are." Sherlock pulled his hand away from John's grasp.

"I didn't give myself that nickname." John straightened his back and crossed his arms defensively.

"You do very little to stop anyone using it. I've heard you bragging about it with certain parties."

"So you want to hold that against me? Am I the only man in the entirety of the world who got more than his share of clunge?"

Sherlock pushed his fingers through his curls and rubbed his throat before crossing his arms over his chest.

"What I mean to say is, it all meant nothing. It was empty. I always felt like I was chasing something and never quite got it. No one ever made me feel like I feel right now with you and we haven't even... I can only imagine what...what the rest is bound to feel like." He took small steps toward Sherlock, who finally looked him in the face again of his own volition.

"So. That's my answer. I don't know what this is," he flicked his wrist back and forth between them. "But I want to find out. You're not an experiment." He snaked his arms around Sherlock's waist under the silk dressing gown, taking hold of the hem of his t-shirt. He tucked his hands under it and lightly stroked his skin with his thumbs.

"It might not be a satisfying answer, but it's all I've got in this moment."

Sherlock draped his arms over John's shoulders and smirked slightly. He leaned down and kissed him. John's minty breath starkly contrasted his own, which still vaguely tasted of the scotch from the night before. John suspected that Sherlock had drunk more of it after leaving the repose of his bed.

"Would you like me to tell you what I think?" Sherlock asked him.

"I'm not sure I'd be able to stop you."

"I think you were trying very hard not be who you are. You might be attracted to women – I'm attracted to women from time to time -"

"Yeah, if they straddle you naked with a riding crop-"

"Indeed. You have spent your life jumping from woman to woman without making a meaningful connection. The first meaningful sexual connection you've made is -"
"You." John nodded. "You're right. As per usual, you are right Sherlock." John cleared his throat and the corners of his mouth turned down. "I will further add that I'm truly terrified."

"What?"

"I'm scared, Sherlock." John's voice turned into a whisper, he swallowed hard. "I'm more scared now than I have been before and I've…" He scowled and looked away. "I've looked into the eyes of men who knew they were dying and had to tell them everything was going to be ok. When I got shot, I thought I was going to die; the wound got infected and…it was touch and go. There was only so much they could do with an infection in a field hospital. This is scarier than the Taliban, scarier than IEDs and snipers. I knew what to do in Kandahar and Helmand; I had confidence and training. It's this shit that scares me."

"What are you afraid of?" Sherlock's baritone quavered slightly.

"Of…this going to shit. Whether we're together for now, or forever," The phrasing sent a jolt straight to Sherlock's chest. "You're my best friend. I can't picture my life without you. I don't want to picture my life without you Sherlock. If this goes badly, I mean if we really, really muck it up, I don't want to lose you."

"You couldn't lose me if you tried, John." Sherlock placed a kiss on his mouth. John took Sherlock's lower lip into his mouth but abruptly pulled away a second later.

"Seriously. As badly as I want you…" John held Sherlock at his hips, the pads of his thumbs stroking gently under the waistband of his pyjamas.

"Shhh…" Sherlock stepped in closely and held John's face in his hands. "I know. I feel the same. I'm…I'm scared too." John shot him an expression that very clearly said "do not placate me" and he pulled Sherlock's hands from his cheeks.

"I mean it. I am scared, John. You are the only person I would ever choose to spend any significant amount of time with. You're the only person I've ever fancied having a proper relationship with, whatever that means. I know I irritate normal people as much as they irritate me."

"'Normal people'? Are you winding me up?" John cocked an eyebrow. "Define 'normal' for me, please."

"'Normal' meaning people who wouldn't have jumped at the first chance to go examine a dead body with a man they'd just met. 'Normal' meaning people who don't enjoy traipsing all over creation with an unendurable, unpleasant prat like myself. 'Normal' meaning people who couldn't get used to or tolerate my eccentricities. 'Normal' meaning…"

"Ok, I got it." John grinned and bit his lower lip.

"What I'm trying to say is, I got very used to being on my own and I was fine on my own."

"If you call not eating or sleeping, being an overall pain in the arse to everyone you came across and slamming heroin into your veins to circumvent boredom 'fine'."

"I managed."

" Barely."

"After the last two years of us living and working together, I'm quite sure I'd never manage without you; not just with our work, but..." his voice trailed off.
"With life. Generally. I don't think I'd make it in the world without you by my side. I'd have no reason to. You've made yourself as essential to me as air. Saying it out loud, I'm aware of how completely self-serving it sounds but...there it is."

John took a deep breath, processing all he'd just heard. He knew it was the truth straightaway, Sherlock only lied to make himself look better. This confession laid him bare and made him susceptible to pain so John knew it must be the truth.

"So, what you're saying is, you'd be lost without your blogger?" John gave him a half smile.

Sherlock chuckled. He used his thumb to trace the delicate looking smile lines that began at the outside corner of John's left eye. His hand moved behind John's neck and he leaned in to whisper in his ear. "I'd be lost without my John."

Feeling his hot breath so close sent a wave of arousal down the length of John's body and he felt the gooseflesh erupt all over. John turned his head slightly and kissed Sherlock's cheek.

"Your John. I like the sound of that."

"Obvious."

"Know what I'd like now?" John took the lapels of Sherlock's dressing gown in his hands and Sherlock circled his arms around him.

"Cup of tea?"

"For a start."

"And after that?"

"Toast with jam."

"And after that?"

"You, back in my bed."

Sherlock cocked an eyebrow. "I think that can be arranged." He pressed his lips against John's tenderly. When they came apart, Sherlock lead him by the hand to the kitchen. John sat in his usual spot at the table and Sherlock set to work making tea. John rested his cheek on his fist and watched.

"You've never made me tea before."

"I'm sure I have."

"No, I'd remember that."

"Well, until last night you hadn't shot your semen all over me so cheers to us both for new experiences, John."

John went beetroot and grimaced. He caught sight of a grin spreading across Sherlock's face before he turned back around. The morning paper was folded neatly on the tabletop and John proceeded to skim through it.

"Anything interesting? Anything we ought to look into?" Sherlock asked without looking back.

"Mm, not really. All the standard stuff, nothing catching my eye. You've read it already, haven't
you?"

"Obviously, I just thought I'd ask and then tell you why you were wrong."

John looked up with the intention of telling him to get stuffed but he saw Sherlock replacing the lid of a small glass jar and slipping it into the pocket of his dressing gown.

"What's that you've got there?" He folded the newspaper back up. Sherlock spun on his heel holding two mugs of steaming tea.

"Tetley's Original for me, Kenyon Gold for you." He placed the mugs on the table and slipped into his seat across from John. John pursed his lips together and squished them over to the right. He wrapped his hand around the mug and stared at it.

"And I'm supposed to drink this knowing that you've a random jar in your pocket?"

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean." Sherlock took a sip from his mug, breathing in the steam.

"Do you think I'm an idiot?" Sherlock moved to speak but John stopped him, holding up a finger. "No, don't try to be cute."

"It's terribly difficult for me not to be…don't you agree?" He gave John a wink and received a glare in return.

"Show me what's in your pocket." John enunciated each syllable precisely and pushed the palms of both of his hands into the tabletop. Sherlock took a longer sip and grimaced as the hot liquid scalded the back of his throat.

"It's sugar."

John shook his head. "No, that's the sugar." He pointed at the glass bowl next to the kettle. "Want to try again?"

"You'll over-react." Sherlock said quietly. John slammed his palm down and some of the tea spilled from his mug.

"Damnit, Sherlock! Show it to me."

Sherlock sighed heavily and pulled the glass jar from his pocket and held it up. John saw that it was more than half-way filled with white powder. He sat back in his chair and felt his heart beat against his rib cage.

"Sherlock – is that cocaine?! Who the fuck do you think you are? Tony bleeding Montana?"

He scoffed, "Of course not." Sherlock slid the jar over to him across the table with the tips of his fingers. John snatched it and ripped the lid off. Upon closer inspection it did appear to be plain, crystallized table sugar.

"So help me god, Sherlock if there is anything untoward about this sugar, I will rip your lungs out." Never taking his eyes off the smug face sitting across from him, John sucked on his finger and pushed it into the contents of the jar. He pulled it out and examined his fingertip before hesitantly rubbing it on his gums. Sherlock watched him with bemused interest as John flicked his tongue across his teeth.

"It's just sugar." John concluded, shaking his head. He replaced the lid of the jar and set it on the
edge of the table.

"Obviously it's just sugar. I wouldn't just leave that much cocaine laying around."

John shook his head and groaned in frustration. "Explain."

"I'd rather not." Sherlock reached his hand out, expecting him to return the jar. John had no intention of doing so.

"Why are there two..." He intended on asking why there were two separate supplies of everyday sugar when the sickening thought crept into his consciousness. He swallowed hard and squeezed his eyes shut as he clenched his fists.

"Sherlock, I will only ask you this once." He felt his face begin to sear and his pulse thumped in his neck and at his temples. "Is there anything funny with the other – with my sugar?" His teeth clinched down on his inner cheek so hard he thought he might bleed.

Sherlock looked at John's chin rather than his eyes. "No."

John went wide-eyed and slowly thumped his thumb against the table, a metronomic warning of his flaring temper. "Christ. What is it this time? You've dosed me with something again."

"Well, John – you can be quite stubborn and at your age..."

"At my age?!” John raged. As he jumped from his seat, the chair flew backward to the floor. "What do you mean at my bloody age? I'm not that much older than you, you arrogant tosspot!"

"You ought to calm yourself, John." He looked thoroughly amused as he casually leaned back and sipped at his tea calmly. "It's not good for your blood pressure."

"Hang my fucking blood pressure!" he shouted. John looked from Sherlock's smirk to the sugar bowl and back again. The realization made his blood boil. "Did you spike my tea with Viagra? Is that why you're winding me up about my age and my blood pressure? I'll fuck you right here and right now Sherlock Holmes. Maybe I'm not 21 anymore I have not lost one single ounce of virility."

Sherlock's shoulders began to shake as his laugh exploded from his belly. "That's not a bad idea actually. I'll bear that in mind for the future." The infuriatingly smug look on his face made John even angrier. He stalked around the table and placed one hand on the back of Sherlock's chair and the other on the table in front of him.

"What the devil are you grinning at, you prick? You look like the bloody Cheshire Cat." His chest was heaving. He was incensed but strangely aroused at the same time. He was fluctuating between wanting to throttle Sherlock and wanting to drag him to the bedroom in a fit of passion.

"John, I did what I've done because of your age. It's nothing to be ashamed of..."

"I'm 42, not 82 – thank you very much. And I didn't have any trouble whatsoever getting it up last night, did I? I came all over you then and I'll do it again right bloody now!" His nostrils flared as he yelled. He'd be damned if his prowess was going to be called into question.

"You complained to me that your doctor instructed you to cut back on caffeine and take a multivitamin. I knew you'd be too stubborn to follow orders – doctors make the worst patients. So, I took the liberty of mixing pulverized vitamins in with that supply of sugar. I calculated how much you routinely add to each cup of tea and coffee you drink and had to estimate the overall dosage but I think you'll find it's close to a few milligrams."
John cocked his head and squeezed his eyes shut while his mind raced. He pressed his thumb and forefinger to his temples and massaged in towards the bridge of his nose. When he opened his eyes again, Sherlock was still grinning, seemingly proud of himself, his hands steepled under his nose. John turned away slightly and scratched his head, digging his nails into his scalp and then coming to rest at the back of his neck. He knew he should be angry – he ought to be furious. What the detective had done was a clear violation of trust. A cry of protest erupted from John's belly but it suffocated and died in his throat. It was entirely in character of Sherlock to use duplicitous methods of getting John to do something he didn't want to do. However, Sherlock stood to gain nothing from John taking a daily vitamin supplement. It seemed that while he was a sneaky bastard, Sherlock had done it only out of concern for him.

"You're welcome." Sherlock smirked at him and rose from the table. He grabbed a loaf of bread from the countertop and slipped four slices into the toaster.

"John, you might want to sit down, so much thinking all at once is bound to make you faint." He gestured with his hand, his fingers fluttering.

"Fuck you." John laughed and rolled his eyes and returned to his seat. "So, you have been giving me supplements without my knowledge for…" he calculated silently how long ago he'd had his physical. "Six months?"

"Six and a half." Sherlock replied, pulling the jam and marmalade from the fridge.

John covered his face with his hands. "And you didn't consider for a second that maybe it was wrong to do that?"

Sherlock scoffed. "Not for a moment. You take care of me, even when I resist your efforts. You've made me eat; you remind me to stay hydrated and have all but tied me to a mattress to sleep. When my-"

Sherlock paused and cleared his throat, "black moods and addictive tendencies get out of control, you keep me in check. I was merely trying to return the favor. Aside from waiting until you slept and administering the vitamin in liquid form via an eyedropper, I concluded that mixing it in with your sugar would be the most consistent delivery system."

"So you considered doing that? The eyedropper? That's creepy, mate."

"I more than considered it. As you don't always sleep on your back, it proved to be a decidedly inefficient method after a week."

"Jesus," John sighed.

This was what it would be like to be in a relationship with Sherlock Holmes. Nothing would be as John would expect and none of his previous relationships could have possibly prepared him for it. John had to admit that in his own ludicrous way, Sherlock had made a concerted effort to take care of him. If any one of John's girlfriends had done that, he'd have run for the hills. Knowing Sherlock as well as he did, John knew this was a very different situation. The way he went about it was obviously extreme, but the usually unsentimental, unmindful detective did what he thought was reasonable. Sherlock had challenges in dealing with people, the fact that he cared enough about John to go through the trouble of tricking him into taking his GP's advice represented something massive to him. It was romantic in a thoroughly bizarre, Sherlockian way.

"If you promise to take the tablets, I promise not to trick you again." He opened a drawer and pulled out a bottle of vitamins. He shook two into his palm and handed them to John.
"I promise. Thank you." He popped the tablets into his mouth and swallowed them dry.

"May I add one final thought?"

"By all means…"

"Can we please get back to bed as soon as possible? I have more than a minor case of blue balls."

John snorted and nodded. "I'm sure I can help you sort that out."

Sherlock offered him a plate with two pieces of toast layered with an excessive amount of jam – just the way he preferred it. John took the plate and their fingers briefly brushed each other. He gave Sherlock a lopsided smile and shook his head lightly. Tossing his unruly curls from his forehead, Sherlock sat across from him with his own marmalade covered toast looking very much the prideful peacock with his chest puffed out.

They munched in silence but some rather intense eye-fucking commenced when John started absentmindedly licking jam off his fingers. Sherlock was holding a slice of toast near his mouth but forgot all about it as he watched John's tongue trace across his lips. John enjoyed seeing Sherlock squirm, knowing he was pent up. His pulse quickened in anticipation and he had a much easier time quashing his worries about his lack of experience with anyone else's penis.

He smirked and went to sip his tea but stopped when he felt the mug had gone cold. Sighing, he stood and dumped it out in the sink, resolving to make a fresh cup. He switched the kettle on and crept up behind Sherlock. Without a word, John kneaded his fingers into Sherlock's shoulders. Sherlock moaned softly and abandoned the slice of toast he was at last about to eat.

"You're so tight." John remarked increasing the pressure he was applying with his thumbs.

"I sincerely hope that's not the last time you say that today…"

John attempted to hold onto his laughter but he failed miserably. He collapsed, leaning his head onto Sherlock's shoulder as they both laughed heartily.

The water for his fresh cup of tea was ready. John kissed Sherlock's cheek and wiped his eyes. As he poured the hot water over the fresh tea bag, John spoke to Sherlock over his shoulder.

"Sherlock?"

"Hmm?"

"You didn't really crush up vitamins and put them in the sugar bowl, did you?"

"Of course not."

"You were just trying to trick me into taking the tablets?"

"Obviously."

"You could have just told me to stop being a self-ageist idiot and follow my doctor's instructions."

"And you would have ignored me. At least now you have agreed to take them."

"You ignore your doctor's orders."

"I think you'll find me increasingly more compliant when we're both naked."
John groaned and sucked on his lower lip. He clenched his buttocks and felt his semi forming. He resolved to finish his cup of tea while making Sherlock as hungry for him as possible. It was rare that he had any control over the man he lived with, he was going to enjoy taking full advantage of this opportunity.

He sat at the table and drank slowly while Sherlock squirmed uncomfortably.

"Can we talk about one thing?"

"Sure." John answered as he took a long sip.

"Are you comfortable with...penetration?"

John sputtered and coughed, managing not to spill the entire contents of his mug into his lap.

"My, erm - penetration of you or vice versa?" John cleared his throat, the word on its own made him uncomfortable.

Sherlock's lip twitched indicating amusement. "Either, or."

He cleared his throat again. "Well, I hadn't thought too much about that part. If you're a – uhm, what do they call it – "

"I believe 'bottom' is the term you're searching for." He spoke while taking a bite of his previously abandoned toast.

"Yes, that."

"You've done it before, obviously. With some of your women."

John rolled his eyes but chose to ignore the implications of Sherlock's tone and nodded. "If I'm being honest, it was never my first choice given the option, but yes."

"Not your first choice, eh?"

John shrugged a shoulder and a blush coloured his cheeks while a mischievous smile crept up on his lips. "Sometimes they asked for it. Gentleman that I am, I obliged."

"And when it comes to the vice versa?"

John exhaled through his nose and took a gulp of tea while he thought.

"I won't lie and say that I'm not a little curious. Put me down for a 'maybe'."

There was a very loud silence for an uncomfortably long time. John drank the last dregs of his tea. He shifted in his chair and Sherlock's hands were shoved deep into the pockets of his dressing gown.

"John?"

"Mm?"

"May I confess something without you getting upset?" Sherlock took slow steps towards him and gently pulled him to his feet.

"I can't make any promises."
"You've been drinking decaffeinated coffee for six months."

"Sherl-"

"You have an ulcer, caffeine isn't good for you."

"I hate you," John chuckled.

"Once again John, I can tell when you're lying."

"I know. Just – don't trick me into any more lifestyle changes, please."

Sherlock's eyebrow raised and John snaked his arms around his waist.

"This is completely different. You didn't trick me. I believe I kissed you first."

He leaned in and drew a circle on Sherlock's neck with his tongue. He lightly sucked on the alabaster skin feeling slight stubble scrape on his cheek. A low rumbling moan echoed in Sherlock's throat and John felt the vibrations on his lips. He kissed his way up to Sherlock's jaw. Pushing his leg between Sherlock's thighs, he felt strong hands gripping his arse. John's tongue found a small residue of marmalade in the corner of Sherlock's mouth and he licked at it hungrily while Sherlock began to rut against him.

"Can we go back to bed now? I'm not quite sure our first time ought to be in the kitchen...though I admit it is a very interesting idea for the future."

"After you."

John was painfully hard as they climbed the stairs together, Sherlock leading the way. He felt a nervous knot forming in his stomach. He knew he wanted this but it didn't do much to alleviate his reservations.

"Don't be nervous John."

"Eh?"

"Your gait changed. You started moving more slowly, indicating that you're nervous. We'll go at your pace. We'll take as long as you need."

"How is it that you can always read my mind?"

They reached the top of the stairs. "Don't be a simpleton. Extra sensory perception is merely deductive reasoning. I know you exceedingly well so I have insight into your thought processes. Forgive me, but you're quite easy to read. One might find your mind in the children's section at the public library."

For the second time that morning, John's lips pursed and went off-center in a scowl.

"You know, in spite of the profoundly condescending tone of that last statement, I do still want to shag you so you should shut up. Better yet, I'll shut you up myself."
Chapter 5

"Better yet, I'll shut you up myself."

John pushed Sherlock roughly against the door jamb, crushing their lips together. He opened his mouth slightly and moaned to feel Sherlock's tongue against his soft palate.

Taking the detective thoroughly off-guard, John grabbed Sherlock's arse and yanked him up off his feet causing the normally unflappable, stoic man to yelp and scramble to wrap his arms around John's neck to keep from falling backward. Sherlock crossed his ankles behind John and their tongues ravenously licked against each other as Sherlock was carried across the room and unceremoniously dropped down onto the mattress. He scooted his body towards the middle of the bed and got himself to a seated position where he wiggled out of his dressing gown and pulled the t-shirt up over his head.

John swallowed hard when he saw several light purplish blue marks on Sherlock's chest – he hadn't realized he'd sucked on that remarkably soft, pale skin hard enough to leave a trail of hickeys. In his opinion, it was tantamount to haphazardly splashing blue and purple paint on a Da Vinci – he'd marked up the work of art that was Sherlock's lean, toned torso. He climbed up on the bed and sidled in towards him. The detective chewed on his own upper lip as John positioned most of his upper body on top of him. John's leg pushed in between Sherlock's and the sweet friction from their bare chests rubbing against each other got them both breathing heavily while they kissed in a furious haze of lips, tongues and teeth.

John pulled away and placed his hand across Sherlock's throat and squeezed softly, making Sherlock shiver. John stroked the other man's neck over his Adam's apple with his thumb. His thumb traced up to Sherlock's jaw and to his lips. Dipping his chin down ever so slightly, Sherlock shot John a scathingly provocative look as he took it in his mouth up to the first knuckle. He stroked his tongue against the pad of the digit and then swirled it all the way round.

John's jaw slackened. "Oh, fuck…"

He rocked his hip into Sherlock's groin making them both moan. Sherlock released John's thumb from his mouth and very quickly thereafter it was replaced by his tongue. It was the sloppy, wet kind of kiss that had their lips smacking loudly and breathy moans came out of both of them. John began rhythmically rutting against Sherlock's thigh and Sherlock's hand was kneading John's arse under the fabric of his boxers. John's arousal was such that he had to force himself to stop and push away slightly, it was nearly enough to send him over the edge.

John drew a line with his tongue up Sherlock's jaw to his earlobe when he felt the detective's short nails dragging across his back.

"We should have done this ages ago," he whispered into Sherlock's ear. "Can you feel what you do to me?"

He buried his face in Sherlock's neck, tasting the salt of his skin. John's mouth began working its way down towards his chest. He circled his tongue around one nipple, then the other. He proceeded to lick and suck downward even further, he was resolved to taste as much of the milky skin as he possibly could. He dipped his tongue into Sherlock's navel and cupped his groin over the grey pyjamas; provoking a husky baritone moan from Sherlock's throat that in and of itself could have been considered a sex act. Sherlock lifted his pelvis off the bed and John grinned, shifting his hand slightly lower, gently adding pressure to Sherlock's testicles.
"John…" he whinged with his eyes squeezed closed. "Please…"

"Oh not on your life Sherlock. Not any time soon. Suffer. Beg for it, see where that gets you." He replied grinning and squeezing slightly harder. He nipped the taut flesh just to the right of Sherlock's navel and sucked on the spot, this time doing so purposely hard enough to burst capillaries. He wanted Sherlock to be able see that mark days later, after the marks he'd accidentally left had faded.

He pushed up to his knees and with a dexterous move that surprised even him, John yanked Sherlock's pyjamas down to his mid-thighs. A second flourish of his hands pulled them the rest of the way off and they were discarded on the bedroom floor.

It was hardly the first time he'd seen Sherlock naked, the man was not exactly body-conscious and would think nothing of strutting to the kitchen after a shower in the buff while he towel-dried his hair to retrieve an apple or a glass of water before heading to his bedroom to dress. However, it was most definitely the first time John had seen his flatmate's penis up close and erect. He took a deep breath and forced his anxiety out of his nostrils as he exhaled.

John pressed his lips to Sherlock's hip and continued kissing and perusing with his tongue. Sherlock's stiff muscle was only a breath away from John's cheek. He licked up and down the crease between his groin and thigh. As he did, he looked up and watched Sherlock arch his back against his mattress, his halo of curls glowing from the light coming through the blinds. His eyes were closed, his cheeks pink, his jaw slack and his arms were above his head, gripping the slats of John's headboard.

"Jesus Christ he is beautiful…" John thought to himself. With his elegantly Romanesque nose and sharp cheekbones, the disarming, piercing eyes that changed colour with his mood and the way his lower lip pouted out so invitingly, John knew with all certainty that no Renaissance master could have crafted a more perfect rendering of a man.

Sherlock's physical stature was longer and leaner than John's and he observed that the same could be said when comparing their sexual anatomy. John slid his index finger up the length of the shaft, tracing up the dorsal artery and around the head. He gently smoothed Sherlock's foreskin back revealing the slick pinkness beneath just as a small bead of precum escaped. Sherlock tensed his thighs and cooed a soft "aaah". John looked up at him. He was still gripping the headboard, more arousal splotches coloured his face and his chest. His breathing was shallow and John watched his Adam's apple bob up and down.

John wrapped his fingers around the shaft and began to stroke it up and down, painfully slowly. He stared at Sherlock who was whimpering and arching his head back against the pillow. John saw his biceps flex as he tightened his grip on the headboard. His eyes were still closed and his tongue darted out of his mouth, wetting his lower lip.

Sherlock's eyes shot open wide revealing pupils so dilated they no longer appeared to be any colour other than black. He made a weak languorous noise when John released his grip in order to reposition himself. He lay next to Sherlock and planted a kiss hard enough to bruise their lips. Sherlock wrapped one of his arms around John's shoulder, pulling him in closer and John grabbed for him again, this time stroking faster with more confidence. Sherlock's moaning vibrated into John's mouth as they kissed fervently.

"It's so good…so…good…fuck…John…" he said between kisses, barely able to keep his hips from bucking up off the mattress. "I want…oh god, I want…"

"Tell me…anything you want…I'll do anything…"
"I want to cum in your mouth…"

"Fuck…" Hearing Sherlock curse was a very rare event, (if he did curse, it was usually at or about his brother.) Hearing Sherlock utter phrases such as that in his melted chocolate baritone made John lightheaded with desire. Even the sound of his own name sounded better when Sherlock said it.

John let go of Sherlock and adjusted his own erection to stop himself from cumming right then and there. He planted a final, brutal kiss on Sherlock's mouth before shifting his position yet again. He pushed Sherlock's legs apart and situated himself between them. He kept a closed fist around him and tentatively took the first three inches into his mouth. Sherlock's pelvis jerked unexpectedly upward at the new sensation of John's hot, wet mouth on him. It effectively forced the rest of his length into John's mouth for a moment.

He coughed, feeling his gag reflex engage but to his ultimate shock, it only made him more desirous. He proceeded to pump his hand while he licked and sucked on Sherlock with increasing enthusiasm, making sure to curl his lips over his teeth. He felt the head hit the hollow of his throat again and again. His jaw was starting to ache, and he ignored the choking sensation whenever it cropped up. He tried to think back to the greatest blow job of his life (Danielle Rosario – 20 year old student nurse at Bart's, circa 1992) in order to mimic it. However, his all-consuming concupiscence for Sherlock wouldn't let his mind be distracted from the present, even for a moment.

"Don't stop…don't stop…Please…I'm so close…don't fucking stop…" Sherlock's fingers were in John's hair, pushing his head downward, and pumping his hips upward.

A loud, animalistic grunting noise erupted from Sherlock's throat and John tasted a rush of warm, salty cum in his mouth. Grabbing Sherlock's narrow hips with both hands, John pinned him down to the mattress, taking all of his length into his mouth one final time. John was unable to fully avoid making a slurping sound as he let Sherlock slip out of his mouth. As he swallowed, he rolled his lips inward and wiped his mouth on the back of his arm. The not terribly unpleasant, earthy taste lingered on his tongue.

He straightened his back and placed his hands on the tops of his own thighs, staring at Sherlock in his beguiling post-orgasm glow. No longer holding onto the headboard, his arms fell limp; one stretched out to the side, the other draped over his head. The stains of pink were slowly fading from his chest and face, returning his pale complexion to normal. John's lips parted as he watched this Adonis-like form, utterly debauched and reclining against his pillows.

"You…you are…” Sherlock pointed a finger at John and wiggled it, beckoning him. "Come here, now."

John smirked and crawled up the length of Sherlock's body, eventually straddling his waist. Sherlock took his face in his hands and kissed him sweetly.

"That was alright then?" John nuzzled the tip of his nose against Sherlock's right cheek.

"I don't have an appropriate word for what that was…”

"Not bad for a novice." John said, kissing Sherlock's temple. He let his hips fall to one side and he curled into Sherlock's body.

The back of a slender and slightly bony hand brushed against the front of John's boxers. He'd almost forgotten all about his own erection in the frenzy of delivering his very first blow job. Tiny, buzzy jolts of electricity surged in him. He burrowed his face into Sherlock's neck.
"You didn't cum yet…" Sherlock said quietly, sounding faraway; on the verge of sleep.

"Well spotted, Detective." John mused, sucking on the skin behind Sherlock's ear.

Without another word, Sherlock freed John's cock from the constraints of his boxers and began working him up and down in his fist. John rolled to his back and dug his fingers into Sherlock's bare thigh. Sherlock leaned in to kiss him and spoke in his ear.

"So, what do you say, Doctor?"

"What?" John was having a great deal of difficulty putting any cogent thoughts together other than "holyfuckingshitSherlockHolmesiswankingmeoffagain".

"Do you want to shag me or don't you?" Sherlock touched the very tip of his tongue to John's lower lip, entreating him for entrance. John grabbed him by the back of his head and sucked on his tongue hard. When they came apart, Sherlock quickened his pace with his hand. They pressed their foreheads together and John's chest was heaving as he panted.

"Oh Christ yes…" John pulled away from Sherlock's grip on him and found reserve strength in his legs to stand up next to the bed, letting his boxers fall to the floor and he stepped out of them.

Sherlock reached over to the drawer in the nightstand and felt around a moment until he found the bottle of lubricant. He pulled it out and motioned to hand it over.

John put a hand on his hip, "How did you know that was in there?"

"If you think there is an inch of this room I haven't explored John, you're fooling yourself."

It didn't even occur to him to be upset about it. John snorted, rolled his eyes and took the lube from Sherlock. He crawled back up on the bed between Sherlock's legs. His bones were rattling from the pounding of his heart, his stomach was in nervous knots and his cock was positively throbbing for attention.

In spite of his caveman instinct commanding him to immediately entomb himself inside Sherlock, John knew from past experience and his understanding of anatomy that it wouldn't be at all wise. Sherlock spread his legs slightly and John saw the younger man was already sporting an impressive semi so soon after his first orgasm. He grabbed for one of his pillows and pushed it underneath Sherlock's hips.

"If it hurts, tell me."

"You won't hurt me John."

"Not on purpose, but just please tell me. It doesn't have to hurt…"

He hitched one of Sherlock's legs up over his hip and squeezed a generous amount of lube onto his fingers which he then carefully applied, coaxing Sherlock to relax. Without looking, he traced circles around the opening and watched an array of enthralling expressions dance across Sherlock's face. The viscous oil-based lubricant felt cold at first. It quickly warmed up to match his body temperature and John felt Sherlock's muscles start to relax.

"Ok, breathe…" He carefully slid his middle finger in up to the second knuckle. Sherlock squeezed his eyes shut and sucked air in between his teeth. He slid it out and then back in again, daring to insert his entire finger. Sherlock keened and grabbed for the headboard again making a gasping noise so erotic it made John slightly dizzy. The burning and pulling sensation was almost too much. A
weak yelp escaped his lips that John took for a cry of pain.

"Shhh…relax…I'll go slow…relax…you ok for more?" he stroked Sherlock's abdomen with his free hand. Sherlock nodded his permission.

He slid his finger out and back in again, this time joined by the index finger to stretch Sherlock a bit more. He went slowly but didn't hesitate once both fingers began to enter. Sherlock tensed his thighs on either side of John's waist and was breathing heavier, his eyebrows knitting together in a glorious expression of pain and ecstasy.

"You've got to tell me if it hurts. Is it ok?"

Sherlock simultaneously shook his head and rocked slowly into his probing fingers, which didn't clarify much for John. With his palm facing downward and it was proving to be a slightly awkward, uncomfortable position for his arm. Still inside his partner, he twisted his wrist around so his palm was face up, the act of which made Sherlock slam the headboard back against the wall with great force.

"Oh fuck…that…more of that …please do that again…fuck…please…"

"I can't resist when you beg." John smirked and thought to himself "Take that, Irene Adler."

John twisted his wrist around again and slipped his ring finger into Sherlock's hole. The detective arched his back and whimpered. His eyes rolled back while one hand still clung for life to John's headboard, and the other tangled in his own hair.

"You ok? Does it feel good?" John pumped his three fingers in and out slowly.

"More…"

Once again, John twisted his wrist, letting his palm face upward. Sherlock's arm shot out in front of him and grasped John's shoulder as an undefinable primal sound escaped his mouth.

Licking his lower lip, John flicked his wrist around again. There was more resistance this time, Sherlock was clamping down tightly on his three fingers but he was definitely stretched open enough. From his late teens John had observed that his fully erect penis, while a modestly average length, was the width of his three fingers across – several woman told him he was much thicker than average and he proudly took them at their word.

"John…please…” Sherlock whimpered and his eyes rolled backward. He'd begun to petulantly rock his body slowly into John's fingers again.

"Patience, Sherlock. Patience."

John pulled his fingers out, applied more lube to his middle finger and pushed it in easily but quickly, causing Sherlock to yelp; caught off guard by the sudden icy chill entering his body. John crooked his finger slightly and as soon as it stroked the walnut sized erogenous zone inside him, Sherlock filled the bedroom with moaning so obscenely loud he might have been heard all the way up and down Baker Street.

"There it is. Feels good, does it?" John stroked it again moving the pad of his finger left to right.

"Fuuuck…” Sherlock's hips bucked off the bed.

John's temples throbbed as he continued fingering Sherlock's prostate. The detective thrashed against
"There is nothing in the entire world hotter than a posh boy with a dirty mouth." John said it out loud; though it was unlikely that Sherlock heard him as by that point he was too busy explicitly begging for John to fill his arse with his fat cock.

Confident that Sherlock was sufficiently prepared, John took the bottle back into his hand and applied some lube to his palm. He stroked himself until the substance warmed to the touch. He pulled Sherlock's legs up and pressed the head of his cock to his hole. He snapped his fingers a few inches from Sherlock's eyes, commanding his attention as if to say "watch what I'm doing to you."

He pushed inside inch by inch slowly, gasping as Sherlock tightened up around him. He leaned forward and rested his forearms on the mattress as Sherlock's ankles crossed behind him.

Sherlock kissed him hungrily, each kiss lead to the next punctuated by what could only be described as a hungry groaning sound in an epic poem that went on and on.

"Oooh shitthatfeelsfuckinggood…" He moaned once he was fully sheathed. Adjusting Sherlock's hip slightly higher off the bed, John began pumping steadily into him. Each time one of his strokes hit Sherlock's prostate John felt him buck and the volume of his feral moaning increased. Quickly adjusting to a pace John covered every inch of Sherlock that he could reach in kisses.

Just as he had changed John's perception of what zealous kissing actually was, the act of sex was being redefined with every thrust of his hips. It was as if Sherlock had finally turned on a blinding light in a dark room. It was nothing he'd experienced before; there was not a single part of his body not being set aflame by passion, so much so that John feared it would fully consume him and he'd cease to exist; leaving only a collection of jumpers in a pile of smoking embers. The thought troubled him because if he vanished in an inferno, he wouldn't ever be able to make love to Sherlock again and that quite simply would not do.

"You're…so…fucking…tight…Jesus…Jesus…" He moaned as his nipped at Sherlock's neck. Seemingly rendered incapable of speech, Sherlock could only gasp and moan while clawing at John's back. The friction of John's stomach against his erection was blissful torture.

"Sherlock, I'm gonna…oh fuck oh fuck…" John licked his palm and reached between them to wrap his fingers around Sherlock's shaft.

"JohnJohnJohnJohn yes…yes…don't stop…" Sherlock cried out.

Five strokes of John's hand later and Sherlock erupted, spurting cum up between their chests. Feeling him clench up as he came pushed John straight over the edge of oblivion. He spilled himself into his lover and collapsed in a shuddering heap on top of him; too weak to move another muscle. His knees and back ached, he was a jiggly-legged, semen-soaked, sweaty mess of a human being and John Watson couldn't recollect a time when he had ever been happier.

Sherlock nudged John over to his side and they kissed lazily, both chuckling a bit and completely satisfied.

"You're right you know." Sherlock whispered in a rasp as he placed soft kisses on John's eyelids and the tip of his nose.

"Right about what?"

"We really ought to have done this ages ago."
"Mmm." John slipped his arms around Sherlock and pulled him close.

"I have a confession."

"Oh you do, do you?" John chuckled. "Pray tell, what might your confession be, eh?"

"I haven't done that before."

John cocked his head. "You…but you said…"

"I said 'minor awkward fumblings' and then 'less awkward encounters'. I never said it went beyond that or specified what I'd actually experienced."

A smile crept across John's face. "So, how was I?" he teased with a cartoonishly lascivious lift of his eyebrows.

"Worthy of your nickname." Sherlock closed his eyes and grinned.

John wound his fingers in Sherlock's drenched curls, brushing them off his forehead and kissed his eyelids. "Why didn't you tell me? I could have…"

"I didn't tell you and indeed, I suppose I specifically omitted some details of my sexual history so you wouldn't be more nervous than you already were. I wanted to have intercourse with you. You were sufficiently gentle and it was greatly appreciated. I knew that if I told you, you'd be too worried about hurting me to go through with it."

"Well now, I'm sure I would have managed it…" John laughed quietly. "I, perhaps, would have gone more slowly."

"I'm not a fucking china doll, John. Please don't ever treat me as such," the tone of his voice was slightly sharper than he'd intended it to be.

John nodded, "Ok, noted." His eyes darted away, somehow the mood had shifted and John wasn't quite sure how to get back on track.

"Sorry. That came out wrong."

"No, I understand. I'm not upset that you didn't tell me. I love that our first time was with each other – it makes it all the more special."

"I could stay here forever. Pull the shades, lock the door and let's just lay here together." Sherlock sighed.

"You say some wonderful things to me when no one else can hear you."

"Well, you're wonderful." Sherlock tilted John's chin up and kissed him softly. "You deserve ever so much more than I have to give."

"There you go, being wonderful again. You're risking your reputation of being a cold-hearted bastard if word of this got out. Fortunately for you, my silence can be bought with sexual favors." John quipped. Sherlock's lips twitched up into a pleased grin.

"I don't want to see any clients today. I want to do some experimenting."

John cocked his head. "What sort of experimentation d'you have in mind?"
"I want to know, by process of elimination, what makes you moan the loudest."

John groaned and bit his lower lip. "If only we could."

"Why can't we?"

"Don't you remember what day it is? You're supposed to go to your parent's place for the weekend. You've got to pack, Mycroft is sending a car for you at four."

"No…Not going." Sherlock proceeded to suck on John's neck.

"You have to. It's your Dad's 74th birthday, Sherlock. You can't not go."

"He'll have another one next year." Sherlock reached for John's groin but John pushed his hand away and leaned up on his elbow, glaring at him seriously.

"That's not guaranteed."

Sherlock realized what he'd said and he frowned. "Well you're coming with me, then."

John shook his head, "I dunno about that Sherlock. It's your family."

"You're my family." Sherlock interlaced his fingers with John. "Please come with me. I'd want you to be there even if the last 24 hours didn't happen." He closed his other hand around John's and pleaded with pouted lips. He looked at John and batted his long thick eyelashes. His pupils had slowly shrunk down to their normal size and his beseeching blue eyes bore a hole into John's heart.

"I can't say no to that face. You sure your Mum won't mind?" John kissed the back of Sherlock's hand and brushed it against his own cheek.

"She won't. She'll fawn all over you rather than me. And if we're lucky we'll be able to find that photograph of Mycroft in Elizabethan drag from school."

John laughed, "All right, you've convinced me. One thing though -"

"Anything you ask."

"I can't very well turn up at your parent's place empty handed and covered in cum. So you have to tell me your Mum's favorite flowers, your Dad's favorite booze and I need a bath. I should probably change these sheets too or they'll crack in half when we come home on Monday."

Sherlock grinned and adjusted his head on the pillow, he cleared his throat. "Sarah Bernhardt peonies for my mother. I already sent Father a case of 1996 Château Léoville; I'll add your name to the card."

"I'll pay you for half."

"That'll be £1200 please."

"I'll let you pay my half."

Sherlock laughed and kissed John's forehead. They slowly regained full control of their extremities and began to notice the unmistakable odor John called "man smell"; sweat, scotch and semen. Sherlock retreated to his own room to collect fresh clothes and shower. They decided to bathe separately – the thought of Sherlock's body covered in soap was enough to spark such amorous thoughts in John that he knew they'd fuck the day away even after the water went cold.
John stripped his bed down, tossing the sheets and duvet into his hamper. He normally would have left them, albeit with a guilty conscience, for Mrs. Hudson to launder but he couldn't allow his dear friend and landlady to wash this particular load of washing. He checked the clock and resigned himself to the fact that he'd have to trudge down to the launderette before the car arrived to collect them. He pulled crisp, fresh smelling sheets onto his bed and opened his window to let some fresh air circulate.

He gathered up the scant clothing he and Sherlock had discarded and added it to the overflowing hamper. He pulled on his own dressing gown, tying the belt tightly and went down to the kitchen. He desperately needed a drink of water. When he passed by the bathroom he saw the Sherlock had left the door wide open. Coils of steam flowed out and John felt his pores opening. From the corner of his eye, he caught sight of Sherlock. He'd also conveniently left the shower curtain open. John found himself pressed against the wall, staring at Sherlock's mesmerizing form dripping wet, covered in soap suds. He didn't seem to know John was watching, at least he made no indication of it. He squirted some shampoo in his hand and massaged it into his scalp with his eyes closed.

He moved to let the full blast of the showerhead rinse his hair face first and John realized he was twisting the belt of his robe around his hand. The suds from his hair retreated down his back and over the curve of his arse, down his legs to the circle the drain. Sherlock used his fingertips to ensure all of the shampoo had been washed away and shook his head to get the excess water out. His saturated curls clung to his forehead and he opened his eyes to find John watching. One side of his mouth curled up to a smirk and he pulled the shower curtain shut, never taking his eyes off of his admirer.

Instead of going to the kitchen for a glass of water, John ambled to the liquor cupboard in the sitting room. He reached in and pulled out the first bottle he touched, which to his dismay turned out to be a slightly dusty bottle of Patron.

"Sod it." He removed the stopper and took a swig directly from the bottle. His tastebuds recoiled in horror when the shocking taste hit. He felt it burn going down and he sputtered before wiping his mouth on his sleeve. He replaced the stopper and shoved the bottle back where he'd gotten it. He couldn't believe that in his younger, wilder days he actually preferred the taste of tequila. After rugby matches he and his team mates would pass around bottles of the stuff and drink until they were numb all over. It all felt like a lifetime ago.

He heard the water stop in the shower and a few moments later, Sherlock emerged from the bathroom, a towel wrapped around his hips. His chest and back glistening clean He smelled of soap, shampoo and deodorant. To John's surprise, Sherlock walked straight to the liquor cupboard and removed the same bottle of Patron, took a mouthful of liquid death and swallowed. Without a single word, he grabbed John by the waist and pulled him in for a slow kiss.

"You'd better take your bath soon. That washing is going to take a while and Mycroft will never let you hear the end of it if you keep him waiting." Without another syllable, he returned to his own bedroom and shut the door.

Every surface of their shared bathroom was covered in condensation from Sherlock's steamy shower. The tiles were deadly slick, covered in puddles and there were no fewer than three sopping towels on the floor. John patiently wiped up the floor and kicked the towels into a pile.

He didn't expect there to be much hot water left so he opted for a shower instead of the bath he'd been hoping for. Perhaps the Holmeses had a large luxurious tub he could spread out in for a soak at some point during the weekend.

He started the water and rubbed himself all over with the bar of soap. Somewhat reluctantly, he
scrubbed off whatever residual saliva Sherlock had left on his chest and neck. It occurred to him to pay extra attention to his privates. He opened the shower curtain intending to slink out of the tub quickly to collect the scissors from his toiletry bag. Before he stepped out, he saw the scissors laying on the top of the toilet tank. Shaking his head – would Sherlock ever clean up after himself? He gave himself a quick trim up. He rinsed the soap off and quickly shampooed his hair, trying to remember if he had enough cash for the washing machines and dryers at the launderette. As he scraped his nails across his scalp he made mental notes of what he needed to pack in his overnight bag. While rinsing his hair, John took a fit of laughing.

Just a few days ago when he was truly hacked off with Sherlock he was looking forward to a quiet weekend alone in the flat. Now, not only were they lovers and was he going away with Sherlock, he was going to meet his parents for the first time. It was like he'd entered an alternate universe; there was a crack in the space-time continuum worthy of either a Hawking essay or a Douglas Adams novel. He couldn't remember the last time he'd made the trip with a woman to meet her parents. Uni, maybe? Charlotte Russell. He'd spent the Christmas holidays in Bristol with her and her family and what a mistake that was. They split up a week after returning to school.

Sherlock knocked on the door. "John?"

"Yeah, give me a second..." He turned the water off and opened the shower curtain. He grabbed a towel and had barely gotten it wrapped around his waist when the door opened.

"Mrs. Hudson took the washing, so no need to go to the launderette. I called for takeaway, I thought we'd eat before Mycroft arrives."

"You ordered takeaway? You did? Sherlock, have I told you recently that you're wonderful?" John stepped out of the tub and let the towel fall away. He pulled it up around his back and dried himself. Sherlock found his eyes following John's swaying flaccid penis as he shifted his weight.

"It'll be here soon. I got you your usual." John made a kissy face at Sherlock as he backed out and closed the door with a grin.

There very well might be a crack in the space-time continuum but unless Christopher Lloyd kicked in their front door looking for a supply of uranium, John wasn't going to do fuck all to return things to the way they had been.
Chapter 6

While John finished showering and went upstairs to change and pack his overnight bag, Sherlock padded around the kitchen area taking out plates and napkins; setting the table in anticipation of the arrival of their meal while humming an aria from Turandot. Doing a repetitive, menial task didn't do anything to stop his brain from humming like a beehive to a greater extent than usual. For as long as he could remember, he had spent most of his waking hours (as well as many of the hours when he ought to be sleeping) with his mind hurdling from subject to subject to subject and back again. All manner of facts, figures, and observations buzzed through his thoughts at lightning speed. The only way he was able to stay sane was to construct his Mind Palace and file everything away in each room in the event that he needed to recall it.

This afternoon was somewhat different. He was processing an entirely new, encyclopedia series' worth of information he had gathered in the last 24 hours; all other thoughts were dismissed as baser matter and had vanished. Everything was replaced with a single topic that all centered on the man in the upstairs bedroom. While he showered, he had constructed an entire annex to the already expansive imaginary grey-bricked, ivy covered manse in his head. He hung mental photographs of John all over the walls. John laughing, John shouting, John sleeping, John cumming and every one of his facial expressions in between. He catalogued every moan, every kiss; every last detail of their lovemaking.

He wanted to remember the taste of his skin, the feeling of John's fingers in his hair and the way he forced himself to keep his eyes open so as not to miss one single expression of pleasure on his partner's face. John's eyes used to be blue but now Sherlock had matched them to the exact Pantone hue of each eye; for one had more of a blue-green appearance than the other. He could draw a map of each tiny freckle on his torso. He was so busy filling room after room with observances of John, the ringing doorbell barely registered. He went down to collect the food and John was waiting for him in the kitchen when he returned, wearing jeans and a checked green button down shirt with the sleeves rolled partway up his forearms. The top two buttons were undone, revealing his white undershirt and the St. Michael medallion was safely tucked in underneath it. Sherlock handed him one of two big paper bags of food.

"Hungry?"

"Starving. Thanks for ordering."

Sherlock nodded. They sat at the table and unpacked the bags of takeaway. John dug into the vegetable spring rolls first, just as he always did. Sherlock smiled and tried to ignore the nagging feeling in his gut telling him something was going to go catastrophically wrong.

How did he get so lucky? Nonsense. There's no such thing as luck. He and John were attracted to each other and their coming together was only a matter of two deeply stubborn people admitting that mutual attraction. But still, after lusting after his flatmate for the better part of two years, he didn't have to hide his true feelings anymore and it felt like he'd won the pools.

As he watched him eat – John had found the chow mein by then – Sherlock couldn't justify what had attracted John to him. Who was he, after all, when compared to John; the doctor and war hero? Sure, he had put criminals in jail and set innocent people free. He had solved puzzles and crimes no one else could. He had a dually photographic and eidetic memory, but did any of that make him worthy of the marvelous man sitting across the table adorably stuffing his perfect mouth with pea pods and white rice? Did that mean John would be attracted to anyone with a similarly perspicuous mind? His track record with women didn't support that hypothesis, nor did his apparent revulsion toward...
Mycroft but Sherlock needed more data, more evidence.

"Where are you?" John's voice came through the haze of his overloaded mind. "Sherlock? Hello?"
He waved his chopsticks in front of Sherlock's face in an attempt to summon him back from
wherever he'd wandered.

"I'm here."

"Urgent matters in the Mind Palace? Leaky tap in the kitchen, was there?" John teased. Sherlock
didn't take teasing kindly. He suffered through years, decades of being ridiculed by people. Then this
dashing and somewhat broken man limped into the lab at Bart's one day and his dry, sarcastic
witticisms didn't offend him; surprisingly they had the opposite effect. Sherlock was never one to
suffer fools gladly but John was no fool. He was quite perfect, even in his imperfections. From his
fair hair lightly salted with grey, to the delicate age lines all over his face that got deeper when he
yelled. The way his tongue flicked out of his mouth to wet his lips which could mean he was
delighted or murderous, depending on the circumstances. The way his eyebrows twitched the second
before he was about to laugh and then the rest of his face lit up. And that laugh – Sherlock would do
anything to evoke John's loud, thoroughly authentic belly laugh. Every time Sherlock walked by the
crystal ashtray with gold inlay he'd stolen from Buckingham Palace he smiled. He'd done it because
he knew John would find it hilarious.

"What's wrong? You haven't eaten a thing, are you feeling alright?" Sherlock found himself being
closely observed not by John, the man from the upstairs bedroom, but by Dr. Watson. His glorious
eyes surveying and attempting to make a diagnosis.

"I am eating," he insisted. "I'm fine."

Dr. Watson narrowed his eyes. "You've had that exact same spoonful of egg drop soup in your hand
for five minutes, Sherlock. You haven't even tasted it yet."

Sherlock looked down and of course the doctor was right. "Oh. Right. Erm – just letting it cool a
bit." He lifted the spoon to his mouth and let the tepid soup run down his throat. Dr. Watson put his
chopsticks down on his plate and didn't resume his meal until Sherlock had eaten half of his bowl of
soup and taken a few bites from his plate of chow mein. Apparently satisfied that Sherlock was
going to eat enough, Dr. Watson retreated and John took a bite from another spring roll.

"Do you want the spicy mustard? You like it, I don't." John offered him one of the packets from the
bottom of the bag.

"Sure, thanks." Sherlock reached out his hand and John pressed the packet into his palm. His skin
was so warm in comparison to Sherlock's own. It was a great comfort to sleep in John's arms, he felt
warm and safe. At contact, his eyes snapped up to John's. He was being studied closely. No one had
ever come close to reading Sherlock's face with as much intensity the way John did. In retrospect, he
realized that no one else had ever tried. His prickly exterior always made people retreat before getting
half as far past his guard as John had managed.

"Are you going to tell me, or do I have to guess?" John asked, pulling his hand back.

"Tell you what, John?"

He sighed heavily. "Sherlock, do we really have to play this game every time?" He sounded like he
was struggling to be patient, but wasn't upset. "I know when something is bothering you. You're not
as inscrutable as you think you are." He ventured a guess, "Do you not want me to come with you?
Should I say home this weekend?" John lowered his eyes and Sherlock felt like he had been
He sat back in his chair and shook his head in surprise, "What? No, of course not. I want you to come with me…that is, unless you don't want to."

John sighed a bit, seemingly relieved. "I thought you were having second thoughts about introducing me to your parents. So, what is actually going on in that big, bustling brain of yours?" He leaned his elbow on the table, made an L shape with his thumb and forefinger and rested his chin on it. The side of his middle finger pressed to his lips.

A smile teased at Sherlock's mouth. "If you're uncomfortable meeting them, I understand. There has been enough…enough of a departure from the conventional in the last few days without adding my parents on to it."

John outstretched his arm on the table. "Stop worrying. I understand your apprehension. Believe me, I do. I haven't done the 'meet the parents' thing since--"

"University. Christmas with the Russells of Bristol." Sherlock offered and John smirked. Of course he'd remember that.

"Exactly. And that was a mistake."

"And how is this," Sherlock gestured with his hand back and forth between them "any different?"

"It's completely different."

"Because I'm male?"

John sighed and put on a patient face. "Because you're you." The words hung in the air between them and Sherlock found himself in the unfamiliar position of not knowing how to respond. John's mobile buzzed in his pocket, saving Sherlock from having to say anything.

John pulled the phone from his pocket, checked the text and rolled his eyes. Sherlock read his annoyed expression and smirked.

"My brother?"

John nodded. "If I'm at all hesitant about this little trip, it is because spending an entire weekend in the company of your brother is at the very bottom of the list of things I'd rather do."

"Well, we have that in common. What did the text say?"

"He asked me if you were packed yet..." John showed Sherlock the phone. He took it out of his hands and began typing rapidly with his thumbs, hit send and handed John the phone back. He slipped it back into his pocket without reading the message and continued eating.

Taking a final bite of his chow mein and wiping his mouth on the napkin Sherlock laid out for him, John's face took on the same sleepy expression it always did after a satisfying meal.

"I'm getting fat, I reckon." He said rubbing his hand over his stomach.

"You feel bloated because you just ate your body weight in Chinese food."

"Oh stop with the pillow talk, you'll make me swoon." John replied dryly.

"You're not fat. You're perfect." Sherlock commented casually as he stuffed half a spring roll in his
mouth. John pressed his lips into a smile and shook his head slightly. He stood from the table and put his dish in the sink. He threw away the empty containers and packed up the leftovers to go into the fridge. He walked behind Sherlock and kissed his cheek.

"I'm going to finish packing." Sherlock turned and watched John walk down the hall to the stairs and kept watching until he couldn't see him anymore as he ascended. He finished the rest of the spring roll he'd been chewing and wiped his hands.

A short time later, he stood in front of his open wardrobe and stared at his clothing. His small black suitcase was open on his bed. He was still filing things away in the new John Annex of his Mind Palace and couldn't focus on anything else. For once, the inability to focus didn't anger him or make him think longingly about the packets of powder he'd hidden under a loose floorboard.

"Sherlock? Sher- Oi!" John clapped his hands and it startled Sherlock enough to make him come back online. Sherlock felt a strong hand gripping his upper arm.

"Alright?" John tilted Sherlock's chin towards him.

"Fine."

John harrumphed "Sherlock, you do know what 'fine' stands for, don't you?"

"Hmm?"

"Fucked up, Insecure, Neurotic and Emotional."

"It is quite a versatile word then but I'm none of those things."

Rolling his eyes, John chose not to pursue it further. "What haven't you packed?"

"I did."

John peered into the suitcase and cocked his head. "One slipper, a bedsheet and a…pickled pig's foot?" John asked sounding bemused and disgusted, he held the jar away from his face as he examined the contents. He removed the odd items from the case. He tossed the slipper to the floor, the bedsheet on a chair and the jar on the dresser.

"I'm…distracted."

"Clearly. Can I help?"

Without a word, Sherlock abruptly flopped back on his bed and stared blankly at the ceiling. John stood over him with his hands on his hips.

"You're doing that thing again."

"Which thing?"

"The thing that freaks me the fuck out and makes me think you're off your tits."

"Check my arms, I'm clean." Sherlock raised both of his forearms into the air, presenting them freely for John's inspection. John moved as if to speak but sighed and turned back to the wardrobe.

"Exactly how many pairs of black trousers do you own?" he mused.

He opened some dresser drawers and pulled out neatly folded shirts, undershirts, pants, socks and
pyjamas, tucking them carefully into the case. He found the other slipper under a chair and placed them both in the front pocket of the case.

"Is there anything in particular you'd like to wear?"

"Orange."

"Orange." John repeated flatly. "Sherlock-"

"Sicily. Turpentine."

"Are you winding me up or having a stroke?" John sat on the bed and took his hand.

"I'm happy, John."

"Eh?"

"I'm happy. You make me happy." He closed his eyes and a soft, contented smile spread across his face.

John smiled and kissed the back of Sherlock's hand. "I'm happy too."

"I'm not good enough for you." John curled up next to him and stroked his hair.

"You're wrong about that one, love." He pressed his lips to Sherlock's mouth.

"I'm never wrong."

"Let me be the judge, alright?" Sherlock nodded in agreement.

"Come on, get up. Let's get you packed. I'm nervous enough as it is, I don't need to get a bollocking from Mycroft about you not being ready on time."

"Don't be nervous. You're perfect." Sherlock sat up and strolled out of the room.

"So I'll just do this for you then?" He called after him. John finished packing for him while the words rang in his ears. For the second time that day, the detective had called him 'perfect'.

Fifteen minutes later they were waiting out in front of the building for Mycroft, who was ten minutes late. Sherlock was pacing the same five steps back and forth and it was beginning to set John's teeth on edge. An obscene moan came from Sherlock's pocket and John felt his mouth go completely dry. He sniffed hard and watched Sherlock look at his mobile, typed a response to the text message and put it back into his pocket.

Before John could say anything, a vintage black Rolls Royce Silver Shadow rounded the corner and came to a full stop in front of them. John raised both eyebrows and admired the car, impressed.

"I'll say this for your brother, he has style."

The back door opened, all that was visible at first was a black oxford on the pavement and the tip of a familiar long black umbrella. Mycroft Holmes' slightly balding head popped out of the car and he stood sneering at them. He was exactly the same height as Sherlock but the sour way he looked down at John made their height distance feel much more significant. The driver collected their two suitcases with a nod and stowed them in the boot before returning to the front seat.

"So good of you to turn up, Mikey." Sherlock said coolly.
Mycroft blanched slightly. "Yes well. Traffic, Brother Mine." They shared a mutually irritated expression before the elder Holmes spoke again. "Ah, Dr. Watson. Good of you to see him off. I expect you're looking forward to having a weekend's furlough from babysitting my little brother."

John sucked his cheeks in and addressed Sherlock. "You didn't tell him?"

Mycroft's eyebrow raised lazily, "Didn't tell me what?"

"John is joining us, Mikey." A smirk hinted at his lips when again his brother's expression clearly betrayed his attempt to hide his irritation.

"And why exactly would your flatmate be joining us for our father's birthday dinner?" He studied both of their faces with cold blue eyes – eyes the same shape as Sherlock's, with very similar color but completely dissimilar at the same time. Suddenly as if the words were written across their foreheads, he nodded and smirked at them in a most unpleasantly smarmy way.

"Hm. I would have lost the wager. I thought it would be at least another six months."

"Pardon?" John took a step forward. "Another six months before what?" Sherlock stopped him from advancing further by placing his hand on John's elbow.

"Another six months before you started buggering me, John." He spoke to John but didn't remove his eyes from his brother's face.

Mycroft cocked his head to one side, a cursory glance at John's exasperated expression and then back to Sherlock. "I would have lost that wager as well."

John narrowed his eyes and his nostrils flared. A clenched fist formed at the end of his arm. Sherlock stepped in closer to his brother, who whipped his umbrella up in front of himself in a defensive pose. His facial expression didn't falter from a calm, insincere smile.

"Well then. Very good. John, since you're going to be tagging along, I'm sure you won't mind sitting up front with the driver."

John swallowed the pulsating urge to smash Mycroft in the gob. "No, not at all."

Sherlock cleared his throat. "I mind, Mikey."

"And me, Mikey."

"Alright, alright. Ladies. You both need leg room, I'm the short arse. I'll sit up front." John pushed himself in between the brothers to break the tension. Before Sherlock could further protest, he walked around the front of the car and slipped into the passenger seat next to the driver.

Sherlock groaned under his breath before stomping to the door closest to them and plopping himself down on the smooth, black leather seat. Mycroft approached him.

"Shift over."

"No, I don't think I will, Mikey. I like this side." He stretched his legs out to prevent his brother from climbing over him and closed his eyes. Mycroft scowled before slamming the door shut and walked straight-backed to the other side of the car. As they pulled away, John spoke to the driver.

"We just need to make a quick stop at the flower shop in the High Street, please." The driver nodded...
and John settled back into his seat.

Sherlock cleared his throat again and removed a palm-sized stainless steel flask from the breast pocket of his coat. He twisted the lid off and held it out for Mycroft to take.

"A toast, to Father’s birthday."

Mycroft pursed his lips. "Isn't customary to make a toast to someone's birthday when they can partake in it?"

Sherlock scowled in a way that so closely resembled his brother that it made John cringe. "Oh Mikey, don't be a stick in the mud." Mycroft rolled his eyes but nevertheless he took a healthy sip from the flask.

"Ugh, what is that?" he coughed.

"It's a small batch bourbon from a former client of ours." Sherlock replied. Mycroft was wiping his mouth on his handkerchief and didn't notice Sherlock had replaced the cap of the flask and tucked it back into his pocket without taking a drink or offering the flask to John.

"It's disgusting." Mycroft scowled.

"There are bottles of water in the boot, if you'd like a palate cleanse, Mr. Holmes." The driver said looking in the rear view mirror.

"Yes, thank you." He stuffed the handkerchief back into his pocket.

"I'll fetch one for you when we stop at the shop, nearly there. Won't be a minute."

John reached into his trouser pocket, feeling for his wallet. He paused and cocked his head thoughtfully. He couldn't recall any clients giving them any bourbon. It could have been from a case Sherlock solved on his own before they met, but Sherlock specifically said 'from a former client of ours'. He shrugged it off as an anomaly. He didn't know about the bottle of Glenmorangie from Sebastian, either.

The Rolls Royce slowed to a stop in front of the Garden of Ethan flower shop. John unbuckled his belt and opened the door. He turned to both Holmeses before stepping out of the car.

"Play nice while I'm gone." He winked at Sherlock, who nodded.

When John left the flower shop with a startlingly large bouquet of pale pink Sarah Bernhardt peonies, he nearly dropped them. Sherlock was dragging Mycroft's limp body out of the rear door of the car. He held his unconscious older brother under the armpits and was struggling to move him. One of Mycroft's shoes was most of the way off his foot. The elder Holmes was heavier than Sherlock had estimated and it was proving to be a much more difficult task than he thought it would be. It was a delightfully undignified display that would have horrified the usually haughty man and Sherlock was enjoying every second of it.

"Sher- What in the actual fuck are you doing?!" John ran over to the car, placing the flowers carefully on the roof and grabbed Mycroft's ankles.

"He should have let you sit in the back with me." Sherlock said simply with a shrug of his shoulders.

"Oh Jesus, Sherlock – you are legitimately mental." They struggled a few minutes getting Mycroft's inconveniently long body into the front seat, garnering more than a couple of odd looks from
passersby. Once he was secured in the front, his shoe was back in place and the driver had a good
chuckle, John and Sherlock slid into the back seat.

It wasn't a terribly long drive to his parent's house but it was decidedly more pleasant with Mycroft
gently snoring rather than making rude jibes at them. Sherlock let his hand creep across the seat to
cautiously rest on John's knee. To his relief, John didn't jump, bat him away or try to hide the benign
display of affection. Instead, John placed his own hand on top of Sherlock's.

"So. Mikey?" John questioned.

Sherlock chuckled. "You'll see."

John smiled to himself and rested his head against the creamy leather of the headrest, still holding
Sherlock's hand. Sighing contentedly he closed his eyes and didn't feel himself doze off. Sherlock
looked over at John's sleeping face, his captivatingly active facial muscles relaxed, allowing his
features to soften. As he sunk deeper into sleep, his lower lip pouted out when he exhaled. Without
any fear of being rebuffed, Sherlock lolled his head back and watched John sleep. The new range of
emotions that were coursing through his body in the last few days were completely foreign and
somewhat frightening. The more frightening bit was how natural caring for John came to him. He'd
always had difficulty connecting to people but this sublime man was the exception to every rule.

Sherlock squeezed John's knee to rouse him when he caught sight of his boyhood home through the
window. The car went over a bump in the road and Mycroft began to stir.

"John, we're here." He said softly shaking the sleeping man's knee. He suppressed the urge to wake
him with a kiss. John's eyes opened slowly and he was momentarily confused as to where he was.
The orange-pink of the sky at sunset wasn't disturbed by the tall buildings of metropolitan London.
They were on a lovely tree-lined avenue with stately Georgian farmhouses set back from the street.

John yawned and stretched his arms out in front of him as they turned onto the long, narrow dirt
driveway. The familiar red bricked structure, partially covered with old white stucco and ivy with its
high garden wall, obscuring most of his mother's flower beds from the street rose up ahead of them.
Sherlock leaned forward in his seat and smiled from one half of his mouth.

An older woman was sitting on a stone bench near a large goldfish pond at the front of the property,
wrapped in a red pashmina scarf. Her greying hair was pulled up off the nape of her neck. Her
glasses were perched far down on her nose and she read a book, she lifted her delicate hand to her
mouth and licked a finger before turning the page. She looked up when she heard the car
approaching. She marked her place in the book, left it on the bench and began to walk towards the
driveway. She raised her hand in a wave, which Sherlock returned. His mother was the firm
matriarch of the family; she demanded much from her sons but always nurtured and indulged their
interests. Everything was a lesson with Marceline Lisette Mycroft-Holmes. She couldn't so much as
bake a batch of biscuits without a lecture on the chemistry and preciseness involved in cooking and
how the heat effected ingredients at different times.

She waited for them near the front door of the house, her hands demurely folded across her stomach.
Sherlock poked Mycroft in the ribs and his eyes opened with a startled snort as the car came to a
stop.

The driver opened the door for John before proceeding around the back of the car to open the boot
and the doors for Sherlock and Mycroft. John exited the vehicle and reached his arms over his head
to stretch. Mycroft stumbled from the car in a most uncoordinated fashion.

Mrs. Holmes sucked air in through her teeth in a 'tsk'. "Mikey have you been drinking?"
Mycroft scowled and patted his hair before smoothing his hands over his disheveled suit. "No, Mother I have not." He kissed both of her cheeks but did not return her embrace.

"Go inside and start the tea, please dear. That's a good boy." She patted him on the shoulder and pushed him towards the front door. He didn't resist but didn't quite seem to fully remember how he'd gotten there. Sherlock saw John grin from the corner of his eye.

"Will darling!" Mrs. Holmes addressed Sherlock and wrapped her arms around him. He patted her back and kissed her cheeks, she held him at arm's length, inspecting him.

"Mum – " He began to speak but she interrupted him.

"Oh sorry. Sherlock. You're looking healthy, son. A bit more filled out than you were at our last visit." She winked an eye at him and poked his stomach. Sherlock smirked and put his hand over the spot where her finger had touched him. He turned to John, who gave him a questioning glance and mouthed "Will?" but Sherlock shook his head as if to say "not now".

"Mother, may I present Dr. John Watson." Sherlock said formally, sounding proud. He held his hand out to John who nervously approached her.

"Oh, Dr. Watson, what a pleasure to meet you at long last." She smiled at him, her blue eyes twinkling warmly. How this amiable woman gave birth to two such idiosyncratic oddballs like Mycroft and Sherlock escaped him at his initial impression. She didn't hesitate in kissing John's cheeks and he reciprocated. Sherlock grinned and folded his arms over his chest.

"I hope it's alright that I'm here…Mother Holmes."

Fuck. What the bloody hell did I just say?! John panicked internally.

"Oh pish, of course it is! Only, I wish I'd known in advance. I'd have aired another bedroom." She sounded concerned. "I hope you don't mind bunking in with Sherlock?"

Sherlock snorted and suppressed a laugh. John flushed and coughed to hide his own laugh.

"That would be just fine. Oh! Erm-excuse me a moment" He suddenly remembered the flowers and went back around to his door to retrieve them.

Sherlock noticed a red sportscar parked near the garage. "Mummy – whose car is that?" He turned to her pointing over his shoulder.

"Oh that. Your cousin Rory has been staying with us. Only he's gone abroad with a girlfriend this week."

"Rory? He's twelve." Sherlock squinted in confusion.

She rolled her eyes in a way that looked deeply familiar to John. "He's 21, Will- erm Sherlock. He's doing an internship with the doctor in the village and he's been staying here with Daddy and me."

"I didn't know that."

"Well you might have done if you called your mother more often." She poked him in the chest playfully.

"Erm – these are for you, Mrs. Holmes." John held the bouquet out to her nervously, feeling relieved that none of the blooms had gotten squashed during the trip.
She smiled widely and clapped her hand to her mouth. "Oh my dear boy, my favorite!" She placed a gentle hand on John's cheek. "It was sweet of you. Thank you very much." She turned to her younger son.

"You might learn something from Dr. Watson, Sherlock," she spoke jokingly in a scathing tone.

"John, please. John is fine," he offered. She smiled and took his hand, pulling him towards the front door.

"Sherlock, get the bags, won't you? So John, you must tell me about yourself. My son is ever so secretive…" They walked in the front door leaving Sherlock outside with the driver.

"I'll put the bags in the foyer, Mr. Holmes." The driver nodded, indicating that he didn't need Sherlock's help. He returned the nod and reached into Mycroft's wallet, which he'd conveniently lifted from his pocket as he shifted him from the back seat to the front. He pulled out two crisp £100 notes and handed them to the driver with a conspiratorial smile.

The old house smelled exactly the same as it always had. A mixture of Earl Grey and desiccating leather from all of the old books that lined the shelves in the sitting room. Sherlock followed the sound of his mother's voice into the kitchen where he found John perched on a stool with a slice of pie and a cup of tea in front of him. Mycroft stood at the marble countertop, leaning heavily his outstretched arm to remain vertical. He sipped his tea and eyed Sherlock suspiciously; his vision going in and out of focus.

"Sherlock – you didn't tell me John was in the army – what was it dear?"

"The Fifth Northumberland Fusiliers, ma'am."

"Oh, and aren't his manners lovely." She gushed and John's ears turned pink.

"Mother, I most certainly did tell you he was a Captain in the army. Also, he's a 42 year old adult man. Do you really need to praise his manners?" Sherlock rolled his eyes.

"Well no one will be complimenting you on yours anytime soon, Will."

"Sherlock," he corrected her with a sigh.

"Oh, fine. Mikey, go rouse your father, he seems to have dropped off." She nudged Mycroft's arm but he gave her a spacey look that she took as one of drunkenness. Sherlock and John looked at each other and chuckled. Mrs. Holmes tsked her elder son once again and padded towards another room. Sherlock and John followed her, leaving Mycroft to gaze absently at the patterns of the hairs in the back of his hands.

The sitting room was modestly decorated in neutral tones with a large red sarouk rug at the center of it. Sherlock saw his father asleep in his usual chair, his hands folded and his chin resting on his chest.

"Bertie? Bertie, wake up dear. The boys are home." She gently nudged his arm and he woke.

"Hmm?" He rubbed the sleep from his eyes. "Oh, Sherlock – " He pushed himself up to stand and took slow halting steps towards his younger son. Sherlock held his hand out to his father, who shook it and pulled him into a hug.

"Happy Birthday, Dad." Sherlock said with a tone of affection that wasn't lost on John.

"Thank you son, I'm glad you could make the trip." The eldest Holmes spied John standing in his
sitting room over Sherlock's shoulder. "And who is this?"

"Oh – erm, John Watson, Mr. Holmes. Happy Birthday, sir." John smiled and held his hand out offering a handshake.

"Oh, so this is Sherlock's John! A pleasure to meet you at last." Mr. Holmes accepted John's hand and shook it with more strength than he was expecting.

Sherlock's heart leapt through a hoop hearing his father's words. They went back into the kitchen where John finished his tea and ate his slice of pie. Mr. and Mrs. Holmes regaled John with stories about Sherlock and Mycroft as children – some made Sherlock cringe ("Remember when Will went through the neighbor's paddling pool completely naked except for the pirate hat?! Oh how we laughed! His tiny little bum was so pale!"), Mycroft was slumped on his stool, resting his head on his hand, struggling to stay awake. John continually cast nervous glances at Sherlock and used his eyes to indicate Mycroft's condition. Each time, Sherlock pouted his lip out a bit and shook his head; which John took to mean there was nothing to be concerned about.

Mr. Holmes suddenly yawned and looked at the clock and saw that it was half nine. "Oh, my. It's really quite late. Lina, we ought to be off to bed, darling. You boys should get some rest, too. Long day tomorrow, I'm officially ancient as of ten minutes past ten tomorrow morning."

"Yes, bed..." Mycroft said, sounding every bit the zombie. He patted his mother on the head, said "Goodnight, Your Majesty" in a groggy voice and stumbled towards his bedroom.

"Oh that boy –" Mrs. Holmes scowled as he walked away and lightly hammered a closed fist on the counter. "Got into my blackberry brandy at 13 and I see he still doesn't have any constitution for alcohol."

"Mum, he thought it was chocolate sauce – he guzzled it like water," Sherlock said. His mother ignored him and went to the foyer. She returned a moment later, dragging Mycroft's wheeled suitcase behind her. Without a word, she pulled it down the hall to his room, which she entered without knocking.

"God Almighty – Mycroft Holmes! You can't sleep like that! What if there's a fire in the night?! Bertie! Will you look at the state of your son!" Mr. Holmes shuffled his feet as rapidly as his age allowed down the short hall.

Sherlock and John locked eyes and couldn't resist laughing.

"You really ought to look in on him, Sherlock." John said, catching his breath with a hand on his own chest.

"He'll be fine. He took a larger sip than I thought he would. It'll burn off while he sleeps and he'll be his customary, unpleasant self by morning." John didn't bother to ask what had been mixed in with the bourbon. In truth he could have guessed given Mycroft's behavior, but he didn't want to know. A long, smoldering look transpired between them. Sherlock wasn't tired but he couldn't get his mind off getting into bed.

"What are you smirking at?" Sherlock asked in a hushed voice. "Surely you're not thinking of defiling me in my childhood bedroom?" He raised an eyebrow, indicating to John that he'd like nothing better.

John bit his lower lip. "I wasn't until just this second. I was thinking about the inevitable presence of photo albums of tiny, little Sherlock in this house and how easy it would be to ask your mum to see
them." He winked. Sherlock shrugged a shoulder, but the blush on his cheeks revealed his desire to keep those naked baby pictures hidden.

"I'll show you one. One photo." John's eyes lit up and he nodded in agreement. Sherlock toed off his shoes and took John's hand to lead him back to the sitting room where his father had been napping when they arrived. John sat down on the overstuffed dark brown sofa as Sherlock went to a bookshelf and pulled an album down.

He sat next to John, close enough that their hips touched. He thumped the thick album down on the table in front of them and flipped through the pages skipping over what must have been hundreds of moments from his childhood. He paused and sat back on the sofa, allowing John to take the album in his hands.

It was unmistakably Sherlock as a teenager. His shock of black curls were swooping up around a metal crown pushed low on his forehead. In truth, with the exception of a few spots on his chin and left cheek, the younger Sherlock didn't look much different from the current incarnation of the man. He was dressed in a suit of armor that was slightly too big for his thin frame. It appeared that he was in the middle of speaking; his mouth was open, the familiar blue-green eyes looking wild, and he was holding a large sword over his head. John recognized immediately how close his posture in the picture compared to the image of St. Michael on the medallion around his neck.

A yellowing theatrical programme was tucked into the album on the opposite page. John slipped it out of the sleeve and opened the cover. It listed the full cast of the production and crew. At the very top of the list he read:

*King Henry the Fifth – William S. Holmes, class of 1993.*

A scrawled hand had brutally crossed out "William S." and written 'SHERLOCK' in small letters above the surname. John gently elbowed Sherlock and pointed at the entry.

"Your first name is William? Your Mum keeps calling you Will…"

Sherlock nodded. "Technically speaking, it's William Sherlock Scott Holmes. I never much cared for William. There were at least 7 other Williams in my year at school. Sherlock is a much better name. According to my mother, I was named for William Sherlock, my grand-dad Holmes' favorite cricketer. The 'Scott' bit is a surname from her side, somewhere. I suppose as a child, I also wanted a more unique name."

"Like Mycroft?" John offered with a raised eyebrow.

"I suppose. It's mum's maiden name." Sherlock pointed to a copy of one of his mother's books on the side table. It listed the author as 'M.L. Mycroft-Holmes'.

John slid the programme back into the sleeve. Without looking to Sherlock for permission, he closed the album and started flipping through it from the beginning at his own pace, resting his unoccupied hand on the table. Sherlock shifted in his seat and leaned forward, slipping his arm under John's. As they looked through the photo album together, Sherlock slowly traced gentle circles with the pad of his middle finger in John's palm. It was a small gesture but still felt deeply intimate.

Sherlock stopped looking at the album and instead studied John's profile, the straight line of his nose, his bottom lip that was significantly plumper than its counterpart; his chin dotted with slight traces of stubble. John felt himself being watched and he turned his cheek slowly towards Sherlock. Only a breath apart, Sherlock closed that distance and placed a soft kiss on John's mouth.
John raised his hand to Sherlock's cheek, holding his face in place while he deepened the kiss.

"Don't let me interrupt."

They split apart, flustered and John's eyes widened to see Sherlock's father standing a few feet from them. The old man pushed his hands into the pockets of his dark green cardigan.

"Dad, I…"

Mr. Holmes shook his head and held up his hand to quiet his son. "Sherlock, it's not as if we didn't know, son. If you're happy, we're happy. Live and let live, my boy. I daresay you could do much worse than a handsome army surgeon." He smirked at them, pressed the tips of his fingers to his lips and kissed them. He waved his hand and walked across the sitting room towards his own room.

John's heart pounded in his chest from the onslaught of adrenaline. His chest heaved and he felt himself start to hyperventilate. He squeezed his eyes shut and held his head in his hands, his temples throbbing.

"John, what's wrong?" Sherlock rubbed his back, his voice sounding choked.

John was breathing too hard to speak. His eyes were blackened by his dilated pupils and his skin was clammy. He was still holding his head when the hot tears began to gush forward uncontrollably.

"Oh Jesus…” Sherlock's heart quickened. He grabbed John's arms and guided him to his feet. It was only a short walk to his bedroom but as John's vision blurred and his ribs felt like they were cracking with every breath, it might as well have been the other side of the world.

"I'm here. I'm here, breathe." Sherlock tried to reassure him. John let himself be lead while he tried to fight back against the panic attack that was overtaking his body.

Once with the safety of his bedroom door separated them both from the rest of the house, Sherlock sat John down on his bed. John cowered, his limbs all pulled in tight and he rocked himself back and forth. Sherlock crouched down in front of him, feeling helpless.


Torrents of tears were flowing freely from John's eyes, he made no attempt to stop them from soaking his shirt. Not knowing what else to do, Sherlock climbed onto the bed and sat directly behind John, wrapping his arms around him.


It took an eternity for his breathing to slow down and his heart rate to normalize but Sherlock didn't move away or loosen his grip until John's voice croaked out a simple "I'm sorry."

"You have nothing to apologize for. Has this happened before?" He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and handed it to John.

"Not since just b-before I m-met you," John replied weakly. "I'm sorry."

"You had a panic attack, there is nothing to be sorry for." Sherlock pulled John backward onto the bed and held him closely as they laid together. "What brought this on? Do you know?"

John was exhausted by the entire experience. "Your parents. They're wonderful."
In that moment, Sherlock understood. John's own father's reaction would have been comparable to nuclear fallout. His father's simple act of immediate acceptance after catching them in a kiss was enough to send John off the rails.

"I'm here." Sherlock said, kissing him on the neck.

"I know. Sherlock?"

"Hmm?"

"I have a confession…something I n-need to tell you…"

"I know. I love you too."
"I know. I love you too."

The words hung there in the air as if suspended by strings. An intangible marionette that cast a spell over them both. John broke the silence first, using his sleeve to dab at his puffy, red-rimmed eyes.

"Y-you do?"

Sherlock pressed his hand gently to John's cheek, "Obviously." John chuckled and sniffled.

"Perhaps it's not so obvious. You're well aware that I'm not terribly demonstrative of my emotions, John. It's not how I'm built, I'm afraid. But know that I loved you as my best friend and I love you now. I'm completely content to spend the rest of my life exactly here. Now, let's get this soaking wet shirt off of you." Sherlock began unbuttoning.

"I love you." John put his hands on Sherlock's, stopping him from pulling the buttons free.

"I know."

"Ok, Han." John rolled his eyes and grinned. "I just wanted to officially say it."

Sherlock returned the grin as he pushed the shirt back over his shoulders and John pulled his arms out of the sleeves. He tugged his undershirt over his head, balled them both up and tossed them to a corner. He felt for the medallion and held it between his fingers.

"Stay put. I'll go get our bags." Sherlock kissed his forehead. He stood and pulled his coat off, draping it on the back of a chair at an antique desk against the wall. He took one last look at John before he left the room, pulling the door shut behind him.

John lay on the bed staring at the ceiling, pulling the medallion back and forth across the chain. As it moved from one link to the next, it sent a vibration to his throat. His body ached from the stress of the attack. He hated feeling so weak and helpless. He didn't ever want Sherlock to see him like that; so thoroughly vulnerable.

"Sherlock loves you. He loves you. He actually said the words," John thought while his head spun. The soft down of the plush duvet cradled his body and somewhat eased the ache.

Sherlock's mobile moaned from his coat pocket. John pursed his lips together and drummed his fingers on the mattress. The phone moaned again.

"What does she want?" He growled under his breath. He looked to the door, knowing Sherlock could return at any moment and decided not to sneak a look. Sherlock was his, after all. Wasn't he? He rolled to face away from the door, tucking his hands into his armpits.

The door opened and he heard Sherlock dragging his suitcase into the room. John's duffle was over his shoulder and he was carrying a glass of water. "How many times did she text me?"

John laughed. "You heard it from the foyer?"

"No, but thank you for confirming the cause of your body language." Sherlock placed the water on the nightstand.

"Twice. What is it between you two?"
Sherlock pulled his phone from his coat pocket and read the messages. He responded to John without looking up, clearly typing a rapid reply.

"There is nothing whatsoever between The Woman and myself that need concern you."

John sat up and faced Sherlock with his arms crossed. "Somehow that doesn't reassure me, Sherlock. It's a wee bit 'the lady doth protest too much, methinks.'" He felt a jealous flush rise from his stomach to his cheeks, Sherlock watched him turn red.

With an eyeroll worthy of a blue ribbon in sarcasm, Sherlock handed John his mobile "You really are adorable when you're jealous. If you think I'm lying, you can look at my messages any time you want to. I've nothing to hide from you, John Hamish Watson."

Being called adorable momentarily distracted John from his concerns, though he wrinkled up his nose at Sherlock's usage of his detested middle name. Why couldn't his paternal grandfather have been called James rather than a Scottish Gaelic equivalent? Sherlock sat on the bed next to him and rested his head on John's bare shoulder.

"I'm bored."

John chuckled. "That took longer than I expected."

"I was somewhat distracted."

"What would you like to do? Why don't you ask Irene what she's up to?" The second sentence came out slightly more bitter than John had intended. He hid his regret by taking a long sip of water. He felt it cool him down from the inside, but did little to assuage his possessiveness.

"I'm going to go check on my brother. Take all the time you need to convince yourself that I'm not interested in her. Oh, by the way," Sherlock reached into his pocket and pulled out two small tablets. "You should probably take these."

"What are they?" John asked suspiciously.

"The anti-anxiety medication you think you're hiding from me." He strolled out of the room with his shoulders hunched forward in frustration and pulled the door shut behind him with a slam.

Fucking hell. He thought. We can't even declare our love for each other without a row.

Gripping under his breath, John popped the tablets into his mouth and took a sip of water to wash them down. Sherlock taking care of him for a change was beginning to get on his nerves. He had the bedside manner of Hannibal Lecter.

Looking at the phone in his hand, he knew it would be locked. He further knew that this was one of Sherlock's tests. The underlying question was the purpose of such a test. Was Sherlock trying to verify if he was capable of breaking into his phone – or if John was willing to trust him enough not to break in? It could have gone either way, really. He decided to occupy his mind by deciphering the password and then he'd decide if he wanted to read the text history between Sherlock and Irene Adler.

He pushed his back against the headboard and puzzled. He could overlook the most obvious keywords and go straight to the esoteric. The main obstacle there of course was, when it came to obscura Sherlock was the master. It could literally be anything under the sun. The five blank spaces on the screen taunted him. It seemed absurd that a simple five digit code was sufficient to keep his secrets guarded.
He started typing at least eight separate times only to delete the words, changing his mind. Too many attempts would reset the password and lock them both out of the device. It brought to mind the agony of Sherlock’s attempt to guess The Woman's phone code. John could almost feel the barrel of the American agent's gun still pressed to his head. He also remembered the frantic sound of panic in Sherlock's voice as he tried to convince the Americans that he didn't know the password. John noted that Sherlock wasn't frantic at all until John's safety was threatened.

In a rush of realization, he remembered that The Woman had given Sherlock her password without him knowing it. He suspected that Sherlock had done the same before leaving the room.

"Ok, Mr. Holmes. The game is on." He said to himself and concentrated. He might not have a Mind Palace, but he had decent recall of conversations. He closed his eyes and thought. What exactly had Sherlock said just before he handed John the phone?

If you think I'm lying, you can look at my messages. Ok, so that was obvious. What was it he'd said just after that?

You're adorable when you're jealous. No, that wasn't it.

I've nothing to hide from you, John Hamish Watson.

His eyes burst open. Could Sherlock's password be his name? He looked back to the five blinking dashes on the screen and frowned. His first name was too short, the second two names were too long. Perhaps he omitted a vowel or added a letter or number? No, that didn't feel right. Somehow though, he just knew he was on the scent.

He tried rearranging the letters of his name into five letter anagrams but nothing struck him. He chewed on his lower lip trying to visualize words he could possibly spell with so many consonants and so few vowels.

As if struck by inspiration, John's jaw dropped and he popped his head up. His hand shook as he typed in the password, knowing before depressing the Enter key that he was right.

OAIAO

The phone obeyed and gave John access. He laughed and shook his head while pumping his fist in victory. Sherlock's password was John's full name, spelt without the consonants. He momentarily thought better of going through the text messages, but temptation simply got the better of him. He rationalized that there was no real invasion since Sherlock had handed him both the phone and the clue to decode the password. Besides that, Sherlock had almost certainly gone through his phone and his laptop, not to mention his bedroom so this was an opportunity for a bit of quid pro quo. He clicked the envelope icon with his forefinger and opened the conversation between Sherlock and The Woman. It was date and time stamped from two weeks prior.

Good Afternoon, Mr. Holmes.

Ms. Adler. – SH

Oh, don't be that way. I didn't mean what I said.

John tried to scroll up but Sherlock had deleted the older messages.

You absolutely meant it. And you were quite right. – SH

I might have meant it a bit. Have you told him yet?
No. – SH

I can't sleep. – SH

My Gran would give me warm milk when I couldn't sleep.

My Gran gave me gin and warm water with lemon. – SH

That explains so much about you.

That was the end of that chat. The next messages were from a few days ago. John realized they were from the night he'd last gone out with Julia.

Irene. – SH

Oh, you're speaking to me? To what do I owe the honor?

He's wearing it again. – SH

The blue shirt or the cologne?

Both actually. Date night with that slag. God I hate her. She's so fucking pedestrian. – SH

Don't be rude.

I think I'm going to die. – SH

You're not dying, Sherlock. Tell him how you feel.

You and my landlady would get on very well. – SH

She sounds entirely brilliant and desperately beautiful. I'm exhausted. I just got done doing some very naughty things to the French Ambassador's chauffer. Want any tips?

It seemed that Sherlock didn't take the bait. The next messages were from later that same night, time stamped only a few minutes apart.

ADLER. – SH

The slag is gone and he threw his shirt at me. What does this mean? – SH

I need context. – SH

It smells of him. – SH

I'm slowly going mad. – SH

She didn't respond and several hours passed.

What do I do? – SH

I can't sleep. - SH

I think I may be having an aneurysm. – SH

Fine. Ignore me. I'll just lay on my bed and stare into the abyss. – SH
Finally, it appeared that she responded just before three in the morning.

Jesus Christ. Just fucking kiss him Sherlock. I'm a very busy woman.

I can't. What if he punches me? – SH

If he does hit you, he'll purposely miss your nose and teeth again, no doubt.

There was a lull in the conversation.

Sherlock?

Oui? – SH

I can read men the way you can read crime scenes. Trust me on this one thing. Go talk to him.

Sherlock hadn't responded. The next messages were from that morning, around the time John was in the shower and while they waited in front of Speedy's for Mycroft to arrive.

Checking in, Mr. Holmes.

Sherlock replied with a winky face emoji.

I was right, wasn't I?

Don't get a big head about it, but yes you were. – SH

HOW WAS IT?

Splendid. Superlative. Sans pareil. Sticky. –SH

Sounds about right.

The last exchange from that evening, just before Sherlock came into the room with their luggage made John's heart stop.

I'm happy for you. He is very good looking and he walks like he's got something impressive in his pants.

Come to think of it, if you ever fancy a ménage à trois…

I don't share well. Especially not John. Hands off him. – SH

So there was the truth. Sherlock was talking regularly to Irene Adler but their conversations centered on him. He felt like a stupid, envious twat. He closed out of the message screen and slipped the mobile back into Sherlock's coat pocket. He caught sight of himself in the mirror over the desk. The whites of his eyes were tear-stained pink and the bags under his lower lids were distended. He grimaced at the sight of himself, what did someone as incredible as Sherlock see in him?

Sherlock re-entered the room and nearly hit John with the door.

"Sorted?" he asked.

John lowered his eyes, sheepish. "Yes," he replied quietly.

"Wonderful. Get a shirt on. We're going for a walk."
"Eh?" But Sherlock had already left the room, the soles of his shoes were scuffing across the parquet floor. John hurried to grab a shirt from his bag and buttoned it as he followed the sound of footsteps.

Sherlock was taking long strides out the front door; John double-timed to catch him up.

"Where are we walking?"

"Not far." Sherlock replied and pointed out in front of them. It was just light enough for John to see moonlight reflecting in the ripples of the water in the goldfish pond. Sherlock sat down on the stone bench where his mother had been reading when they arrived. Her book was still on the seat, John picked it up as he sat next to Sherlock. The bench felt very cold on his arse and his lower back.

"So, what does a brilliant mathematician like Marceline Holmes read for fun?" John asked squinting at the cover of the paperback book.


"Haven't you read them?" Sherlock crossed his arms over his chest.

"Well, no. They're for kids, aren't they?"

Sherlock shot him a scathing glance. "You think a book series written about the battle between good and evil, racism, classism, sexism, xenophobia, and the AIDS epidemic; with a villain who is willing to kill anyone who gets in his way including a one year old toddler is written exclusively for children?"

"I suppose not…I don't really know that much about it to be honest."

Sherlock tsked at him. "Philistine. That is something we are going to change when we get home."

"Whatever you say." John slipped his hand into Sherlock's and their fingers easily interlaced. Sherlock stroked John's thumb with his own.

"It's really nice here. Quiet."

"I hate quiet."

"It was a nice place to be young though, wasn't it?"

"I suppose it would have been but I was never young."

"Well you're a fucking ray of sunshine tonight aren't you?" John teased, squeezing Sherlock's hand.

"Come on, Sherlock. I've no doubt that you were running around this garden as a boy with a wooden sword and a pirate hat. No doubt at all."

"I'd have preferred being in a tent watching the stars with you."

John looked up at him. "That was an uncharacteristically romantic thing to say."

"I know. I surprise even myself sometimes."

They turned toward each other and their lips met. A delicious breeze surrounded them as their kiss became more fervent. John wound his fingers in Sherlock's hair, tugging gently. Their tongues massaged each other. When the sudden intense sounds of wings flapping startled John, he pulled away.
"What the –"

The sounds got louder and were joined by high-pitched squeals that sent shivers through John's spine. He looked up at the night sky in the direction of the unnerving chorus of other-worldly sounds and recoiled. There were at least twenty-five bats swirling around the largest tree in the garden. The actual number may have been much higher but the creatures were rocketing around the tree in and out of the cover of leaves and he lost count. John grabbed at Sherlock's shirt and huddled into his chest in horror for a moment before he realized that Sherlock was watching them diligently, reverently. His eyes darted around, as if he were trying to look at each individual creature independently of the others.

"Aren't they amazing?"

"They're bloody terrifying…"

"Nonsense. They're harmless. They devour mosquitoes and other pests and they help pollinate the flower beds. They're very misunderstood creatures. I built bat houses as a child and my father mounted them in this tree. I enjoy watching them whenever I'm visiting here."

"You built things? With a hammer?" John asked.

"Is that so hard to believe?"

"A bit, yeah."

Sherlock scoffed and stood up, taking John by the hand and pulling him towards the garage.

"Let's take a look at Rory's car." Sherlock walked directly over to the red Porsche 911 Carrera belonging to his cousin. John kept a wary, watchful eye on the bat colony over his shoulder. When there was more of a comfortable distance between himself and them he relaxed and turned back to Sherlock, who slowed his pace as they approached the vehicle.

"Jesus. How does a 21 year old kid come to own a piece of machinery like this? I saw this model on Top Gear – it's unbefuckinglievably expensive."

Sherlock shrugged and simply said, "Rich."

John frowned, his own first car was a miserable blue-and-rust coloured shitbox Toyota with ripped seats and an unreliable tape deck. If you rolled the passenger side window down more than halfway, the door would swing open, even if the car was in motion. More than one of his mates from uni nearly tumbled out of the car on the motorway.

"Must be nice." There was a biting sense of resentment in his tone.

Sherlock looked nonplussed, opened the driver's side door and slid inside. John thought it was really odd that the car would be unlocked.

"Get in, loser. We're going for a drive." He held up the keys and waved them in the window for John to see. John cocked his head with slightly wide eyes. He opened the door and leaned in.

"Where did you get the keys?" The intoxicating scent of new leather filled his nostrils. The all black interior was pristine.

"Nicked them from the room Rory has been using." Sherlock slid the key into the ignition and started the car. It purred to life and Sherlock revved the engine.
"We can't…"

"I'm going to go, you should probably join me."

John pursed his lips together but catching sight of the mischievous expression on Sherlock's face made him bold. He slid silently into the car and closed the door.

"Now, not too – "

Sherlock put the car into gear and hit the accelerator hard. The engine roared and John was pushed back into his seat. He grasped for his seat belt and secured it. A cloud of dust rose up around them as Sherlock peeled down the driveway and into the street.

"Where are we going?" John asked while bracing himself on the dash.

"I've no idea." John knew he was lying straightaway.

Sherlock put his window all the way down and rested his elbow on the door. Cool air rushed in and whipped through his curls. John laughed, thinking it looked like he was being taken away by a tornado. He put his own window down and mirrored Sherlock's pose.

They were able to maintain a top speed of 120 kilometers per hour on the straight, quiet road. The older residents of the area were all in bed like Sherlock's parents. There was a feeling of them being the only two people alive as the sped along and John found it thoroughly exhilarating.

He looked over at Sherlock, admiring his profile. He was focused intensely on the way ahead of them, making a few careful turns. As the street lights were few and far between, John began to get slightly nervous.

"Sherlock, d'ya think you could possibly slow down just a little? It's dark – I can't see fuck all…"

"This car only goes fast and faster, John. What are you afraid of?" There were fewer lights along the section of road they were approaching and John was getting more anxious. Sherlock pressed the accelerator closer to the floor and they hit 130 kph.

"I'm not afraid – this is brilliant. I'm only thinking…"

"That was your first mistake."

"Oh shut up." John saw two sets of oncoming headlights and grabbed at Sherlock's leg, gripping the fabric of his trousers.

"I'm slightly disappointed, actually." Sherlock switched hands on the steering wheel. John heard Sherlock's seatbelt click open and felt him rest his free hand on John's thigh.

"Why? Oi! Watch the road!"

"Rory had the money to buy this car and he went with a damned automatic transmission. Very disappointing. And he chose this dreadful red." Sherlock's hand crept up John's leg until he was massaging his palm into John's groin.

"Sherlock –" A scolding tone took over his voice as he noticed the street was no longer lit at all and they were hurting into pitch blackness. It was difficult to focus on any unseen, lurking dangers on the dark road because all of the blood in his body seemed to be rushing toward his crotch.

"Red is such a grossly ostentatious colour in a car, isn't it?" As he spoke, he pulled John's zip open
and slid his fingertips inside.

"Sherlock –" He made a left turn and there was rumbling under the tires, indicating to John that they'd left pavement and were on a dirt road. Sherlock was gently stroking John to hardness, having no reaction whatsoever to any of the outside stimuli beyond the wind whirling madly through his hair.

"Sod it." Sherlock yanked his hand out of John's jeans, shifted into neutral and pulled hard on the emergency hand brake. Although they were undoubtedly travelling stupidly fast, it felt like slow motion to John as the car began to spin. His stomach lurched and his head nearly hit his window; his heart pounding frantically.

Inertia pinned him in place firmly against the door. Sherlock turned the wheel hard to the right and self-corrected, crying out a loud, excited whoop. John heard the sound of hundreds of small rocks hitting against the underside of the car and the doors as he braced himself again. The back end of the car came quickly around and they stopped abruptly; facing 180 degrees from the direction they'd been heading.

John was panting and his blood raced from his heart to his limbs and back again at what felt like three times the normal rate, leaving him slightly lightheaded and euphoric. Sherlock was smirking but showed no outward signs of an adrenaline rush before he pounced across the center console of the car and crushed his lips into John's.

John kissed him back moaning hungrily, tearing at his shirt and digging his fingers into his skin. A button went flying and clinked off the radio screen. Bemoaning the lack of enough space to move in the car, Sherlock kneeled up on the driver's seat and clicked John's seat belt open.

"I'm sorry… I'm so stupid… I'm sorry…" John's moaning turned into a soft whine in between wet, raw kisses. Sherlock took John's lower lip between his teeth and bit down enough to make him yelp.

Sherlock pushed his hand back into John's jeans and was stroking him again with his left hand. His right hand fumbled for the switch on the outside of the passenger seat cushion to recline the seat back. As the back of his seat started to recline, John ached for more contact. He reached for his belt and unbuckled it, and made quick work of the button of his jeans.

Having a nominal amount of extra room to move, Sherlock pulled John's cock free of his pants and caressed him aggressively.

"I'm a jealous idiot… I'm so sorry…" John moaned into Sherlock's mouth and gripped the back of his neck, making sure Sherlock couldn't deprive him of the taste of his tongue.

"Don't apologize. Just cum." It was by far the easiest command John had ever been given. He arched his neck back and tensed his thighs and abdomen, preparing to delay his orgasm for as long as humanly possible.

"Yes sir…" He winked.

The next thing John knew, his cock was buried deep in Sherlock's mouth. He felt it hit the back of his throat and he took a fistful of curls in one hand. He gripped the headrest with the other. Sherlock licked and sucked on him with increasing intensity, humming a low pitched tone. The lustful vibrations against his skin sent John reeling.

"So much for Danielle fucking Rosario…" John thought, while his brain was still capable of cohesive
thoughts.

He felt the smallest bit of pressure of Sherlock's teeth graze his skin, evoking a guttural moan and the hiss of air escaping his throat. John watched his head bobbing up and down, the curls waving wildly. When his jaw began to tire, he wrapped his long fingers around John and stroked hard and fast. They made direct eye contact but John was incapable of speech. His words all morphed into the same completely inarticulate groaning.

John pushed Sherlock's head back downward with a flat palm between his shoulder blades. With a loud grunt and a thrust of his hips, John's cum filled Sherlock's mouth.

"Fucking hell…" John panted as Sherlock sat back up in the driver's seat, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand.

"I agree." Sherlock relaxed against the leather seat.

John turned toward Sherlock as his heart rate slowing slightly. His cheeks were pink from the adrenaline rush. "What am I going to do with you?"

Sherlock shrugged a shoulder. "I am sure you'll come up with something."

In truth, John was very much considering bending Sherlock over the bonnet when he started chuckling to himself.

"What's so amusing?" Sherlock cocked an eyebrow at him.

"Well, to be honest; by 42 I'd assumed that a blow job in a Porsche from a leggy brunette was a fantasy I'd have to let go of."

A wide grin spread across Sherlock's face and he leaned in to kiss him. John tasted traces of himself on Sherlock's lips.

"Follow me." Sherlock said simply before getting out of the car without a backward glance.

John tucked himself back into his jeans and did up his flies. He popped the door open and squinted as his eyes adjusted to the complete absence of light except for the moon. He felt hard packed dirt under the soles of his shoes that switched to soft, cushy grass as he followed behind Sherlock. When he finally caught up to him, they walked for a few minutes in silence, hand in hand. The grass got higher, giving John the impression that they were in an abandoned field or unkempt pasture.

Sherlock paused and looked up to night sky and turned to his left.

"There it is." John couldn't tell if he was speaking to himself or not. He followed him to a single tree in the field that looked like it was twisted and gnarled by arthritis. Its trunk and branches bent at painfully unnatural looking angles and it was nearly barren of leaves. Sherlock ran his fingertips along the rough bark. He came to a dip in a branch that was about the height of his waist. He pushed down on it with his palms, testing its durability and with ease hoisted himself up to sit on it.

John approached and placed his palm on Sherlock's knee.

"There's room for one more." Sherlock said.

John mimicked Sherlock's movements and was quickly sitting next to him on the branch. It was thin but surprisingly sturdy.
"I've never brought anyone here before." He looked off into the distance. John noted they were up on a hill that overlooked the village below. A few lights burned in windows, aside from a few intermittent barks, it was silent as the grave.

"I thought you hated quiet."

"My mind wasn't quiet when I started coming here. I'd run all the way from the house to stave off a panic attack from being overloaded with thoughts; or after a particularly bad row with my brother. This is where I started constructing my Mind Palace. I'd sit here for hours and file things away, including my emotions. I didn't want Mycroft or any of the children who mocked me to be able to get the better of me."

"I would have kicked them all in the face for you." John said as he bopped Sherlock on the nose with his finger.

"You know, I believe you would have."

"Without question."

"I've wanted to take you here for a long time."

John smiled and took his hand. "I'm glad you did. You're not alone anymore, Sherlock and you never will be again."

They shared a soft, simple kiss and watched the thin clouds move slowly across the night sky for what felt like hours. Sherlock started yawning first and John caught on.

"Let's get back and get to bed." He jumped down and offered his open hands to Sherlock to help steady him. They strolled quietly back to the car and John slid into the driver's seat. Sherlock passed him the keys and he started the car.

He had been feeling sleepy until his seat vibrated with the power of the 309 kW engine. They followed the same route back to the main road, leaving the dirt and gravel behind and were once again on tarmac.

Sherlock rested his head against the cool glass of the window with his eyes closed as John drove at a reasonably fast speed. He switched on the radio and smiled to hear the song playing.

I packed my bags last night, pre-flight…

He sped up a bit and was mouthing the words to the song. From the corner of his eye he saw that Sherlock was awake and also mouthing along.

Sherlock felt John watching him and raised the volume of his voice first.

And I'm gonna be hiiiiiiigh as a kite by then.

John joined in singing along softly enough to still hear the radio and each other until the chorus. John cranked the volume of the radio and they mutually began belting out the song at the top of their lungs while John got the car up to 125 kph.

And I think it's gonna be a long, long time

Til touchdown brings me round again to find

I'm not the man they think I am at home
Oh, no no no! I'm a rocket man.

Rocket man burning out his fuse out here alone…

They sang the song together to its completion and were soon pulling back into the driveway at his parents' house. John turned the key in the ignition and handed Sherlock the keys with a kiss.

"Take me to bed, Dr. Watson." Sherlock said sleepily.

"With pleasure, Mr. Holmes."
As they walked towards the house, Sherlock affectionately draped his arm over John's shoulders and lightly kissed his temple. They quietly slipped in the unlocked door together and Sherlock took John's hand, leading him back to the bedroom they would be sharing.

Once inside Sherlock took John's wrists in his hands, pushed him against the door, pinned them over his head and kissed him so hard it felt like he was trying to suck the air out of his lungs. The seal of their kiss broke for a moment and John took in a gasp of air. He tried to wriggle free from Sherlock's grip but found himself thoroughly restrained, the taller man pressed his hips in closer, limiting John's movement.

Sherlock suddenly released John from his grasp and turned away casually like nothing had happened, a smug grin plastered on his face.

"Kissing you whenever I please is deeply gratifying." He lifted his suitcase onto the bed and opened the zip. He rifled through the clothing John had packed for him and found a pair of navy pyjama bottoms and carelessly plopped the suitcase onto the floor at the foot of the bed.

John squatted next to his duffle and quickly found his own pyjamas. He stood up, ready to change but instead found himself transfixed. Sherlock shed his tight shirt like a snake sheds its skin. He dropped his trousers and John realized he hadn't taken a breath, possibly in days. As the boxer-briefs fell to the floor, Sherlock lifted one foot and stepped out of them. He turned around toward John as he kicked them off and caught him watching. John's tongue was slowly tracing back and forth across his lower lip.

"See anything you like?" He asked with his eyebrow raised flirtatiously. John swallowed hard and rubbed the back of his neck.

Without another word, Sherlock pulled his pyjamas on and got into the bed.

"Put the light out, will you?" He sounded sleepy.

John nodded and undressed, then stepped into his own pyjama bottoms. He found his mobile on the floor and placed it on the nightstand after he turned the light out. He didn't know why his heart was pounding so ferociously as he approached the bed. It wasn't going to be the first time they shared a bed and they'd certainly been a lot more intimate than that.

Perhaps it was the lack of a lock on the door and the prospect of someone walking in on them embracing as they slept. Perhaps it was the fear of the dreams returning. Before he moved into the Baker Street flat he was plagued by vivid nightmares that were always worse after he'd had a panic attack. Whatever the reason, John shrugged it off, too tired to care. His eyelids were heavy and his limbs felt thick and lazy. As he fit himself between the sheets, Sherlock pushed his back into John's chest; he could feel the persistent thumpthump thumpthump of John's heartbeat against his spine. John kissed his shoulder blade before he closed his eyes. He rested his palm on Sherlock's belly and let himself relax.

Sherlock waited until he felt John's breathing slow down and his body went limp with sleep.

"Good night. I love you."

John's mobile ringtone interrupted Sherlock's sleep. It had interfered with a dream he'd been enjoying and the longer it continued to ring, the more difficulty Sherlock had ignoring it. He tried to hold onto
the remnants of his dream but it slipped away like a sand castle constructed too close to the tide.

He grunted in aggravation and waved his hand at the nightstand. He realized he couldn't reach it because John's body was wedged against his own; his head was cuddled into his chest and his arm draped across his stomach. He shifted his body upward, John's head slipped off of his bicep. He snored softly and rolled to his other side. The phone stopped ringing before Sherlock could reach it.

Sherlock stared at the ceiling, hoping he'd be able to jump back into the dream where he'd left off. He breathed deeply, trying to block out the soft but constant snoring coming from John. Almost as soon as he closed his eyes, he heard John's voice. It was softened by sleep but his words were spoken with distinct urgency.

"Alraja' musaedati!" He was definitely still asleep but his face was contorted in fear. "Ana tabib' aismi alnaqib John Watson..." Sherlock softly shook John in an attempt to gently rouse him out of the dream.

"laqad tama 'iitlaq alnnar , 'ana bihajat 'iilaa musaeada..." Sherlock pulled John in closely and rocked him as he whispered into his ear.

"Shhh…it's a dream. You're alright John, shhh…" He didn't open his eyes but John seemed to hear him because his pained face relaxed and he lay still again. Arabic wasn't one of the languages Sherlock had a fluent grasp of, but he understood enough of it to surmise the content of John's nightmare.

"'Inaa khayif...musaeada...raja'..."

Just as he quieted down, John's phone rang a second time. Sherlock outstretched his arm and grabbed for it. The ringing stopped just as he was able to touch his middle finger to the screen. He groaned, rolled to his side and wrapped his arm around John, letting his eyelids close again.

When the ringing began yet again, he swatted his hand at the phone as if trying to crush a buzzing fly. He squinted at the screen and pursed his lips, seeing the name displayed there.

**HARRY MOBILE**

He frowned. It was just after two in the morning. A call from his sister wouldn't be a pleasant way to awaken John. He decided to mute the call and switch off the ringtone, setting it instead to vibrate. Whatever it was, it would have to wait until later. He replaced it on the nightstand and settled back down behind John, pulling him into his own chest. He placed a kiss at the spot where his neck met his shoulder and closed his eyes again.

A few hours later, the buzzing from his ringing mobile on the nightstand woke John. He looked at the clock, it was 5:11. He slapped at it and took it in his hand. The blue glow of the screen made his still mostly sleeping eyes blink hard. He didn't recognize the number and he was hesitant to answer. It stopped ringing and he went to lay back down, but it began again almost as soon as it fell silent.

Grunting, he lifted himself up on his elbow and swiped his finger across the screen.

"'Lo?" He cleared the gruffness out of his throat with a forced cough.

"Heeeeeey. There you are, Johnny Rotten, I've been ringing you all night."

He rolled his eyes. He couldn't be sure what irritated him the most - it could be her use of the detested nickname of their youth, the early hour, or how completely piss drunk she sounded at five in the morning. She had either started very early or hadn't been to bed yet; they were equally as likely.
Combine any of those with the fact that he was pulled from a warm bed by the one living person who could upset him more than the man he was laying beside, and John was decidedly starting the day off on the wrong foot.

"Hallo, Harry. What d'ya want?" He tried to swing his feet out of the bed but found them pinned down by Sherlock. He used his hand to push a silk pyjama-clad leg off of him and he sat up.

"Is that any way to greet your baby sister?" She slurred.

"I didn't recognize the number," he began with the distinct subtext of and if I knew it was you calling I wouldn't have answered at all. "Did you change it again?"

"Noooo," She paused and he heard her take a sip of something he could almost guarantee wasn't water. "I'm at a friend's place – I can't find my mobile."

"Check the liquor cupboard." He spat at her. Without waiting for a reply he said; "What kind of trouble are you in now?"

"Why do you assume that I'm in trouble?"

"Oh, I dunno. Experience?" He stood from the bed and paced to the desk, plunking himself down in the chair. The woven wicker seat dug uncomfortably into his backside.

"The last time you rang me at this hour, you had punched a mirror and you needed me to trek over to your place to clean and suture your hand."

"I don't remember that."

He scoffed, "Of course you don't."

"Look, I'm sorry. Ok? I haven't had a single drop to drink in weeks but I…had a bad night."

"Mm-hmm. Listen, Harry I'm sort of away with someone this weekend. Can whatever this is wait until next week?"

"Oh. I didn't know you were seeing someone. I guess. Yeah." They listened to each other breathe. "I heard you were in the hospital. Clara told me."

"I'm fine. It was nothing. I didn't know you two were speaking."

She sounded like she was gulping down another sip of a drink. "We had some more things to settle… from the divorce. The flat finally sold and she needed to collect her share of the furniture from our storage unit."

"So, your ex-wife told you I was in hospital and it suddenly filled you with sisterly concern?"

"I am always filled with sisterly concern. How many big brothers do you think I have?"

John inhaled deeply and began to loudly thump his thumb on the desk. "Harriet, it's five o'clock in the morning, can we do this another time? I'd like to get back to bed."

"I need your help, Johnny."

He felt his ire rise up. "Well spit it out, then. I'm hours away from London so if you need a sober ride home, better call a taxi."
"No it's not that. I…I found boxes of Mum and Dad's belongings in my storage unit. I need your help sorting through it all."

"Harry, I have absolutely no interest in doing that. I told you that when I signed over my half of the house to you after our Father died. I don't want any of it."

"Well they were your parents, too." She matched his ire with the newly sharpened tone of her voice.

"Don't remind me."

"Whether you want to keep any of their things or not, it's too much for me to do alone. Please?"

"As I said, I'm out of town at the moment. I'll ring you when I get back."

"Do you promise?"

"Yep. Promise."

"Johnny?"

"Hmm?"

"I love you."

"Yeah. Me too. Good night, Harry." He clicked the phone off and dropped it unceremoniously on the desk. His heart was beating fast enough that he knew there was no way he was getting back to sleep. The tiniest bit of light was streaming in the windows and he used it to search through his duffle and pulled out a pair of black track suit pants. He changed silently and pulled on a long sleeved t-shirt. He was exceedingly glad that he'd decided to pack his trainers, he'd almost left them behind. He pulled on some cushion-soled socks and carried his trainers out of the bedroom, careful not to wake Sherlock.

He sat at a stool in the kitchen and securely tied his shoelaces. A long run in the cold morning air as the sun began to sneak up over the horizon would be exactly what he needed.

He took a couple of minutes to stretch and started jogging at a slow, warm-up pace down the drive. He jogged in place at the road, looking both ways before he arbitrarily chose to turn right and slowly picked up speed. He usually ran with his earbuds in, blasting his brain with Siouxsie and The Banshees or the Red Hot Chili Peppers; music that made him move and let him zone out, his feet pounding the pavement to the beat. Today he needed to be zoned in; he needed to think about his conversation with his sister; this one was more complicated than usual.

How many times did he have to tell Harry that he didn't feel any filial connection to their parents or anything they had owned? John escaped from the family home as soon as he could and only returned to visit begrudgingly out of obligation. Their father routinely sucked the joy out of every room he'd ever entered. Before his drinking escalated when his son was in primary school, Raymond John Watson had at best, a Jekyll and Hyde personality. As John approached manhood, his father's demeanor morphed into Hyde and Hyde; the extremity of his malevolence hinged on the available quantities of Wild Turkey. The death of his mother Constance when John was 17 did nothing to slow his father's descent into bitterness and eventually cirrhosis.

He struggled to keep his marks up in school. His father's incoherent rantings often kept John and Harry up all hours of the night making sleep nearly impossible and thorough revising improbable. The day he left for university, John told Harry she could come stay with him for a visit as soon as he got settled. To his dismay, in John's absence Harry and their father had entered into an entirely
unhealthy relationship; they became drinking buddies. Raymond never missed an opportunity to verbally abuse his then 15 year old daughter, but she was usually too drunk to notice or care much. John returned home for his first Christmas holidays and found the house a shambles. Empty liquor bottles were in every room; there was no food in the fridge or in the cupboards.

Neither Harry nor their father were aware of what day it was, or why John had suddenly appeared back home. He used what little money he'd been able to squirrel away to buy some groceries and he cleaned up the entire house while they slept. When he was finally finished, he nudged Harry awake and proffered two paracetamols and a glass of water. She swallowed the pills with the smallest bit of water possible.

"Come with me." He pulled her gently to her feet and she gave no resistance. He drove them to the only motel he could afford for the night, ordered a pizza and he fell asleep before it arrived.

F a l a l a l a, l a l a l a.

When they returned to the house the next afternoon, their father barely left his bedroom. It was difficult to leave her alone with him when it was time to return to school but Harry seemed to turn a bit of a corner while he was home over the break. She got her drinking in check and promised to call him if it went tits up again. He checked in periodically; he could tell when she was sober (rarely) but her marks were decent and she spoke enthusiastically about becoming an estate agent like the parents of the girl from school she'd started seeing; which she eventually did – with great success – although the relationship did not last.

The sun was rising; the grey sky taking on pinks and oranges reminiscent of a watercolor painting. The undesired memories flooded to his mind as his feet pulverized a path on the deserted road. He wiped furious tears from his eyes more than once. After an hour, he lost only a little speed as he pivoted and turned to run back to the house.

Abuses his father had drunkenly shouted at him echoed in his ears as if the old man were following him in a car with a bullhorn. No one ever made him feel smaller or more worthless. The drill instructors at Basic Training didn't hold a candle to the venomous taunts and rantings of his father. He sped up, trying to extricate the voice from his memory. His lungs burned and his knees threatened to give way due to the strain, but he kept the blistering pace. He was attempting to evict his father's chastisements and the very sound of his voice from his memory.

Five meters or so from the bottom of the Holmeses' driveway, John stumbled over a rock. He hit the ground with a thud and rolled to his back in the grass. His chest was heaving, sweat poured out of his flushed skin, and every last part of him ached. He felt bile rising up into his throat. In spite of his making every attempt to choke it back down, the eventual retching was unavoidable. John rolled onto his side and the excruciating stomach contractions that prefaced vomiting began. He choked and coughed, unable to breathe or to stop his muscles from seizing up. When the bile eventually escaped his throat, he felt relief and was able to at last inhale in painful short, staccato breaths.

He wiped his mouth and runny nose on his sleeve as he rolled onto his stomach and lifted himself up to his knees. His legs wobbled when he pushed himself up to stand. He stretched his arms over his head and twisted at the waist while shaking his arms and legs out. He brushed the dead grass and dirt off with his hands.

The taste of vomit lingered in his mouth and he spit in an attempt to rectify that. He slowly jogged the rest of the way to the driveway despite the angry protestations of his knees.

Seeing Mrs. Holmes sitting on the stone bench near the pond at that early hour surprised him. He hoped she wouldn't be able to tell that he'd just had to collect the scattered pieces of his psyche on the
side of the road; and furthermore he hoped that he'd managed to locate all of them.

Upon hearing his footfalls she turned and greeted him with a warm smile.

"Oh, good morning, John! I didn't know you were such an early riser!"

He returned her smile, "Good morning. I took a phone call around five and couldn't get back to sleep."

She tsked and patted the seat beside her, welcoming him to sit down. It was much to the relief of his still-trembling body.

"So early? I hope everything is alright…" She put a comforting hand on his knee.

"Thank you. It was my younger sister. Everything is alright, just…complicated." His openness and honesty surprised him. He could have easily said that he was always up at this time to run before the streets got too crowded; it was mostly the truth.

"Families can be quite complicated, don't I know it." She nodded understandingly. Suddenly John realized Sherlock's blue eyes were directly inherited from his mother. All of the same colours churned in her eyes and they had the same penetrative qualities. John leaned back slightly as a precaution in the event that she was capable of reading him the way Sherlock could.

A sudden change in the direction of the wind brought a delicious scent to John's nostrils. He closed his eyes and lifted his chin, drinking in the aroma of freshly baked bread; his stomach gurgled loudly.

"That smells like heaven…" he said turning his head.

"Oh yes, it's lovely isn't it? There is a delightful, old-fashioned baker in the village; he bakes the bread fresh every morning. It sells out nearly as quickly as he can take it out of the oven. When the east wind blows you can smell it for hours. There's always an eastward wind at this time of year."

Detecting something suddenly sad in her voice he cocked his head.

"Are you alright Mrs. Holmes?" She looked to him with watery eyes. A turbulent sea of memories were just out of the realm of his understanding.

"I'm fine, dear," she said unconvincingly. "May I ask you something?"

"Of course, anything."

"Is my Will happy?"

John smiled softly. "I…I'd say so."

"The boy is a conundrum. Not as enigmatic as my Mycroft but Will – ahem – Sherlock; he's so unflinchingly mysterious all the damn time."

"I think he is happy." John said softly. The easterly wind was making his sweaty skin go cold. "Although, it's easier to identify some of his other moods and emotions –"

"Anger and boredom." She had taken the words right out of his mouth, John nodded.

"He never could abide boredom – even as a toddler. He pitched such outrageous fits like you've never seen. He embarrassed me in public more times than I care to recall."
John laughed, "Not much has changed, I'm afraid." Before he could think better of it, he recounted the story of hearing gunshots coming from their flat and finding Sherlock in his pyjamas firing John's pistol at the sitting room wall chanting about how bored he was.

Horrified, she flushed and turned her head towards the house.

"Oh that BOY! I've half a mind to drag him out of bed and put him over my knee. How do you manage living with him?"

John shrugged, a smile hinting at his lips. "He's brilliant and I…I'm a glutton for adventure I suppose. He might get bored, but I never have time to."

She cleared her throat thoughtfully and took John's hand in hers.

"Bertie told me about last night." She said quietly, a nervous smile hinted at her lips. "I do hope you weren't embarrassed."

John's pulse quickened but he didn't look away. "Oh, erm…Mrs. Holmes…I…I…"

"No, no John dear. There is nothing you need to say. We are joyfully relieved that he has you. Mycroft has always been the independent son. He'll be fine on his own – though I certainly have held out hopes that he'll find companionship. Will – Sherlock shouldn't be alone. He's always been the sensitive, sentimental one."

He allowed himself to smile sincerely and placed his other hand on top of hers.

"If I may be honest – your son is a madman. But he is also probably the love of my life."

The genuine smile that eased its way across her face warmed a spot inside John that he didn't know needed warming. She pressed her hand to his cheek and called him a dear boy. The brring-brring of a bicycle bell broke their eye contact. Mr. Holmes rode up alongside the bench on an honest-to-god blue tandem bicycle complete with a wire basket at the front.

"Lina, shall we? Oh, good morning, John."

John and Mrs. Holmes each stood up. She walked to her husband and kissed him on the cheek.

"Good morning, Mr. Holmes. Happy birthday, sir." He acknowledged the greeting with a friendly nod.

"I'm glad we had our little chat, John. Would you go and wake Sherlock before he sleeps the day away? We're going to ride down to the village for some of that bread." She waved to him after she carefully swung a leg over the bicycle.

John nodded and watched them pedaling in sync until they were out of sight. It struck him how drastically they contrasted from his parents and how much more comfortable he felt in their presence and home than he ever had in his own. Sherlock's words to him, "You're my family" suddenly echoed more loudly than any of the harmful things he recalled his father saying to him. He could count that as a victory over the ghosts in his past.

He saw the light on under the bedroom door and was pleasantly surprised. Sherlock was rarely up this early when he managed to fall asleep. He opened the door.

He heard a loud gasp and saw Sherlock quickly whip the duvet over himself. It was too late to feign sleep but Sherlock appeared to be playing dead – he lay very still on his back with his face tilted
away from John, who cocked his head and closed the door behind him.

"Everything…ok?"

Sherlock cleared his throat. "Yes. Fine. Everything. Ahem. Yes, everything is fine." John crossed his arms over his chest and leaned his shoulders back into the door.

"What were you doing just now?" He raised an eyebrow.

"Nothing. I woke up and you…weren't here. So I showered and…that's all." John noted the soft scent of soap in the room. He also noted that it didn't appear that Sherlock had taken any clothing out of his suitcase. It was more or less in the exact same position on the floor where he'd abandoned it the night before.

"Sherlock…are you naked under there?" John knew the answer before he asked as he approached the foot of the bed. He saw Sherlock's cheeks turn pink but he gave no reply.

John lifted the duvet near Sherlock's ankle and tucked his head under it. He crawled underneath, running his hand up and kissing Sherlock's bare skin. Sherlock moaned quietly every time he felt John's mouth make contact. He straddled Sherlock's legs and lightly licked his way up his chest to his collarbone. The crown of his head slid out from under the duvet as John sucked on Sherlock's neck.

"You smell so good…' John whispered to him. He ground his groin into Sherlock's.

"You smell like…sweat and dirt and grass…I like it…"

Suddenly the door swung open wide and before either of them could react, an utterly furious Mycroft dumped an entire carafe of cold water on them both.

"Ketamine! You gave me Ketamine! Of all the ridiculous, underhanded tricks you've ever had up your sleeve, Sherlock Holmes – you drugged me with Ketamine!"

"OI!" John gasped from the unwelcomed ice bath and rolled off of Sherlock, taking the duvet with him and landed on the floor.

Sherlock growled angrily and leapt from the bed. He grabbed Mycroft by the shoulder and pinned him against the doorjamb with his forearm across his chest. John scrambled to his feet and pulled Sherlock away from his brother. He put himself in the middle, holding them both apart with his arms spread wide.

"Stop it! Stop this, now. You two are grown fucking men, you are not getting into a fist fight right now."

Each of the Holmes brothers turned to John with matching incredulity.

"Do you really believe we'd lower ourselves to engage in a physical altercation? I've never been in a fist fight in my life. How gauche. All that…excessive touching…” Mycroft sneered and shivered at the thought.

"And it's a good thing for you, dear brother; because I would take your fucking head off.” Sherlock retorted; if looks could kill, Mycroft would have been vivisected.

"Well if you're not going to fight, back up." John ordered them. Before their eyes he had morphed into Captain Watson.
"Oh for goodness sake Sherlock. Have you no modesty – get dressed." Mycroft averted his eyes.

"John and I were under no obligation to be modest until you burst into our room, Mikey." Sherlock was clearly baiting his brother and John narrowed his eyes at him.

"Sherlock – you are sapping my strength - knock it off." John growled through clenched teeth.

"That's exactly what I was trying to do before he doused us with water." Sherlock said under his breath.

"Shake hands, the both of you. Stay away from each other until your parents get back. For Christ's sake, I did not come all the way out here to be child-minding for the weekend." John commanded and they reluctantly complied.

Mycroft turned on his heel to walk away, still holding the now empty carafe.

"And besides, it wasn't Ketamine – it was Xylazine. Do you honestly think I'd take the chance of you spending the night in a K hole? As if I would waste my supply on someone who wouldn't enjoy it."

Mycroft froze in his steps, straightened his back and continued walking without another word. He slammed the door of his bedroom.

"I don't know what is weirder – being caught in bed by your brother or the fact that you threatening to take his head off while your dick is hanging out is actually pretty hot." John turned to Sherlock and they both laughed.

John shook his head and closed the door again. Sherlock turned for his suitcase and began getting dressed.

"I don't suppose there's an Olympic-sized bath I could avail myself of?" John asked.

"It's not quite that big but I think you'll approve of the one in the upstairs loo." Sherlock replied pulling on his trousers.

"Oh? Where?" John asked hopefully. He pulled a change of clothes and toiletry bag from his duffle.

"Up the stairs, to the right. Third door. One thing before you go…"

"Yeah?"

"Did you get out of bed this morning because you spoke with your sister?"

"How did you guess that?"

"I didn't. She called you at least three times before I set your phone to vibrate."

"Ooh, that makes sense now. I knew I didn't turn the ringer off. Yes, I spoke with Harry."

"Was she drunk?"

"You realize that's like asking if she was breathing?"

"Sorry." Sherlock frowned. "Do you…need to…talk about it?"

John smiled, he knew it would be an internal sacrifice for him to listen to John's family bullshit.
"You don't want to hear about it. It's fine. She's fine. I'm…fine." He waved his hands in front of himself.

"What was it you told me 'fine' meant?"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. I know."

"John, I'm not good at this but…I'm willing to try. We're…in a relationship now and as I understand it, this is part and parcel to the experience. If you need to get something off your chest, you can talk to me. You don't need to run until you have shin splints and vomit on the side of the road."

"How did you…?"

"Your mobile was on the desk rather than where I left it on the night stand. Your eyes are pink, you have a few burst capillaries on your face consistent with vomiting. You have grass and dirt all over you and you were limping as if you were trying to break a land speed record without proper stretching…"

"Never mind. Thank you, Sherlock. I notice and appreciate the gesture. Maybe later. I just really want to have a long soak in some hot water. I…I love you." He kissed him on the cheek and went in search of the upstairs bath.
Chapter 9

The bathroom was more than John could have hoped for. It didn't fit in with the subdued, traditional décor and style in the rest of the house. It looked like a picture out of a magazine; some exclusive spa that only spoiled celebrities could afford to go to. It was nothing short of luxurious.

The floor was covered in smooth, off-white ceramic tiles. The walls were a very pale grey, with darker grey wainscoting to accent it. A long navy-blue vanity held double sinks that sat on top of it looking like two bowls made of frosted glass. The mirror above the sinks was held in an antique gilt frame. In the center of the room, the gleaming white bathtub was partially recessed into the floor and surrounded by smooth light-coloured rocks. Hanging just above was a beautifully delicate crystal chandelier.

As he stripped off his sweaty clothes, he heard someone cough loudly in the hallway. When he turned around, he saw the shadow of two shoes underneath the door, a folded piece of paper was slipped in the crack between the bottom of the door and the ceramic tile floor.

He cocked his head.

John picked the piece of paper off the floor and carried it back towards the tub. Settling down into the most perfect bath he could possibly conceive of, John felt all the tension he'd built up in his shoulders and back melt away. The water left the tap practically at the exact temperature he preferred. He found a delicious smelling essential oil in a basket on the floor and added a few drops to the water as curls of steam rose up from the milky white porcelain.

He kept his hands dry purposely so that he wouldn't get the note wet. He immediately recognized Sherlock's tiny, untidy scrawl in his customary black ink. Some of the letters began with a much darker splotch of ink, indicating that Sherlock had thought very carefully about each word he wrote and had hesitated before committing each of his thoughts to paper.

John,

As you are well aware, due to the way I conduct myself, the vast majority of my interactions with people are nothing short of disastrous. I've no doubt that the demeanor I have cultivated over the years has had more to do with my solitude than my actual desire for it. That is neither here, nor there. (Odd expression, isn't it?)

While you have said that I think I am inscrutable, you have rightly made no such claim about yourself. When something is troubling you, you wear your concerns all over your face. I hope this time, it's nothing I have done or failed to do.

I find it deeply burdensome when you are upset and I can't do anything about it. There is a helpless feeling in my chest which is anomalous and highly objectionable. Let's face facts, I don't do emotions (see Sociopath); I leave that up to you. Essentially, John: when you're upset, I'm upset.

I would do anything to spare you pain.

Please let me help, if I can.

Yours,

Sherlock
As he shook his head, a smile crawled across John's lips. Sherlock had a softer side that only he saw, only he knew about. It was an easily kept secret, no one who'd ever met Sherlock would believe it if he told them. He sighed, folded the note back up and let it drop to the floor near his clothes.

He soaked in the water not knowing that just outside in the hall, Sherlock was sitting on the floor staring at the closed door wishing he could see through it; wishing he could bash it in, or at the very least, wishing John would open it.

John reached to take hold of a bar of soap and his scarred shoulder protested. He rotated his shoulder and used his opposite hand to work his fingertips into his aching muscles. He rubbed the soap into his skin beginning at his chest and arms, then worked his way down. That finished, he dipped his head backward and wet his hair. He exhaled hard and reached for the miniature shampoo bottle in his toiletry bag. John squeezed a tiny dollop into this hand and massaged it into his scalp. After he rinsed, he let a bit of the bathwater go down the drain and replaced it with fresh. Then he placed a rolled hand towel behind his head and rested back. John breathed in slowly and deliberately trying to force all thoughts from his mind; contrary to what Sherlock would think, it was very difficult. The water rose to just under his clavicles, wrapping him safely in a cocoon of eucalyptus-scented steam.

John found himself wondering if it would be at all possible to sneak back up here with Sherlock and a bottle of champagne before the end of the weekend; there was more than enough room for the two of them. Taking advantage of the solitude, he created a deeply detailed daydream of Sherlock riding him and making the water spill out of the bath and splash all over the floor. He arched his back against the side of the tub as he slowly stroked himself.

A resounding, solitary knock at the door made him jump nearly out of his skin.

"Erm - Yes?" He was hoping that somehow Sherlock had sensed his longing for a romp in the bath and had made his way up the stairs.

"John, are you decent?" He wrinkled up his nose at the sound of the older man's voice.

"Um…no Mycroft. I'm in the bath." He grunted in frustration, why the fuck else would he be in a bathroom? Who wouldn't be indisposed in a bathroom? He didn't enjoy speaking with Mycroft in ordinary circumstances, this made their interaction even worse than usual.

"Well. May I come in? It's very…urgent."

"Is Sherlock alright?" John twisted at the waist and stared at the back of the closed door, his heart began to race – why else would Mycroft interrupt him unless something was drastically wrong?

"At the moment, my brother is fine. May I please speak with you?"

"Erm – give me a minute." John reluctantly stood and reached for a towel, grumbling under his breath. He didn't appreciate this interruption and he especially didn't appreciate the tone Mycroft engaged when calling Sherlock 'my brother' as if he were property. John was pleasantly surprised to discover the towel was hung on a heated rack. It momentarily made up for Mycroft's rude interruption as he dried his legs and wrapped the towel around his waist. As an afterthought, John pulled his dressing gown on as he padded with wet feet across the tile floor to unlock the door.

Mycroft slid his upper body in the narrow opening John made for his passage. He had a queer look on his face that John couldn't decipher.

"What is so important?" He made no effort to hide his exasperation.

Mycroft bowed his head slightly.
"I apologize for barging in, I would have preferred it happen at another time but I don't think I'll have another opportunity to speak with you privately."

"Just get on with it then. I'd like to get back in the water before it goes cold."

Mycroft scowled and stepped past him, making his way to an antique wooden rocking chair painted white that was being used to hold a rather large urn containing an aloe plant. He placed the plant on the floor and sat, crossing one leg over the other. He steepled his fingers under his chin.

"John, now that you and Sherlock are…” he lifted his eyes to the ceiling, seeming to be searching for the right phrasing.


"Yes, as a matter of a fact. All of the above. I feel it is my duty as his elder brother to speak with you."

John rolled his eyes. "Mycroft, if the word 'condom' is about to come into this conversation I swear to god I will drown you."

Mycroft grinned out of one side of his mouth in such a familiar way that it gave John a shudder. "No, no. Nothing like that. Something far more serious I'm afraid."

"Well what then?"

"John, you know that Sherlock is…unusual."

"I prefer to think of him as remarkable, but yes."

"As his brother, I have been looking after him all of his life. We get under each other's skin and no one on Earth irritates me more than he does but all the same there is nothing, absolutely nothing; that I would not do to protect him. No length I would not go to in order to keep him safe."

"That…that's sweet." John said cautiously. He eyed Mycroft out of the side of his eye.

"I don't know if you have any siblings at all, so maybe you can't relate – "

"I have a younger sister."

Mycroft nodded. "So then you might understand the inherent protectiveness and responsibility of being the elder."

John grimaced slightly. The abrupt and rude way he'd interacted with Harry was still very fresh in his mind. "Y-yes. I understand."

"While Sherlock has never had a real romantic entanglement before –" John held up his hands to interrupt.

"Mycroft. I think I know what you're saying. You're warning me not to break his heart, is that it? Firstly, don't try to intimidate me. I could snap you like a twig if I were so inclined. Secondly, I love him. Lastly, I can stand here and tell you that I have already killed a man who was threatening Sherlock and I wouldn't hesitate doing it again if I had to."

"What about her?"

"What would you do to keep her safe?"

"Anything."

"Anything except being a decent brother to her. You selfishly made her settle all of your father's affairs when he died. You put all of it on her shoulders even though you knew perfectly well that she was teetering on the edge of sobriety. And in fact, given the complex nature of their relationship; his death and your refusal to do your fair share is what sent her into a drunken spiral that nearly killed her. You couldn't even say 'I love you too' on the phone."

"Wha- how do you know any of this?!"

Mycroft stood and took a few menacing steps toward him. His slow, heel to toe footsteps reverberated jarringly off the walls. "Admit it, John. You've failed her."

John stepped back, feeling the river rocks suddenly under his feet. His heels were just at the edge of the bath.

"You failed. She deserved better. She still deserves better."

Without warning, Mycroft took both of John's shoulders in his hands and shoved him hard into the bath. John felt the back of his skull crack against the side of the tub. He sputtered and choked on the water that was filling his mouth and throat. His feet were slipping against the bottom and he couldn't get any purchase to stand up. He felt Mycroft's deceptively strong arms holding him down in the bath by the lapels of his sodden dressing gown. He tried every counter-manoeuvre he could think of to break Mycroft's grip but it was if he was made of metal, there was no budging him. Struggling, John reached a hand up in a last-ditch, desperate attempt to free himself as the water flowed into his lungs. His vision started to go black as he gulped in mouthfuls of water. His mind went immediately to Sherlock, he wanted to see him again; he wanted to kiss him again. He knew he'd have to continue fighting if either of those things were going to happen. His fingers grazed Mycroft's cheek. He curled his hand into a claw and scratched at the face of the man now trying to murder him. He felt himself being abruptly pulled from the water and he gasped desperately for air. What he saw would have made him scream in terror if there was room for oxygen in his saturated lungs.

It wasn't Mycroft holding him under the water. John was horrified to discover it was his own father's face he was suddenly staring into. The same blazing blue eyes that he saw in the mirror everyday were now wild with hatred and glaring back at him.

"You're no son of mine!" He relinquished his right hand's grip and whipped a pistol out of his coat pocket. He pushed it against John's forehead, he could feel the cold steel pressing into his slick skin.

Once again, someone was knocking rapidly on the bathroom door. John woke up from this nightmare, his heart frantically pounding against his ribcage. Disoriented, he gasped and grunted loudly in response to the knocking. His cry echoed off the walls and ceiling of the spacious room.

"John? John are you alright?" Sherlock twisted the knob but the door was locked.

Clearing his throat John called out to him; "I'm fine." He sounded anything but, and he knew Sherlock would not be convinced.

"There's that word again: Fine. I'm coming in."

John had been gripping the sides of the bath with white knuckles. He cupped some water in his
hands and splashed his face. He dipped his head backward and wet his hair, the rolled
towel/improvised pillow dropped into the water. He had to at least try to convince Sherlock that
everything was copacetic.

"It's locked."

"Oh, please."

He heard a couple of clicking sounds and the door swung open. Sherlock strolled in wearing freshly
pressed black trousers and a navy blue shirt underneath a black jacket. His shoes squeaked slightly
on the tiles as he walked towards John.

"You've been in here forever. I'm bored." His lower lip pouted out slightly as he folded his arms over
his chest. He studied John's expression – he looked more pale than usual and the worry lines in his
forehead were deepened.

John looked down at his hands and was shocked to see how wrinkled his fingertips were. It was
incontrovertible evidence that he'd been in the bath a lot longer than he thought. He had fallen asleep
and lost all sense of what time it was. His hands were shaking from the post-nightmare adrenaline
rush as he smoothed his hair back from his forehead. He hoped Sherlock didn't notice the tremors but
he knew the chances were slim.

"You look like you've seen a ghost John, what happened?" Sherlock pushed his own hair out of his
eyes.

John swallowed hard and recounted his dream to Sherlock as he got out of the water. Sherlock
handed him a towel while a worried expression contorted his face.

"That's…to use the common vernacular…really fucked up, John."

"You're telling me." John laughed and dried his torso and legs with the towel. "Apparently my
subconscious is very preoccupied with Harry." He pulled on his navy boxer briefs as they continued
talking.

"How badly did your conversation go with her this morning?"

"A bit badly. I was short with her."

"You're short with absolutely everyone over the age of 11." John saw the twinkle of a joke in
Sherlock's eye.

"Oh, ha ha ha. You should give up detective work and become a stand up." He threw up two fingers
at Sherlock and put his hands on his hips.

A smile teased at the corners of Sherlock's mouth. "When are you going to call and speak to her?"

John frowned. "I told her I'd call when we got back but…yeah I should do it sooner rather than
later."

Sherlock snaked his arms around John's waist with no regard for his now-wet jacket and shirt. John
intertwined his fingers behind Sherlock's neck.

"If I stay here one more minute, we'll end up in the bath together." Sherlock kissed him, their tongues
met briefly.
"Not a terrible idea." John's tongue darted out of his mouth and wet his lower lip.

"But sadly, we're out of time. You missed breakfast. It's nearly time for whatever surprise Mum's cooked up for the afternoon."

John found himself pouting about missing the fresh bread at breakfast, then he smirked.

"I know that look. What wicked thought is going through that tiny mind of yours?"

"Am I not allowed to picture all the places I'd like to…what was the phrasing you used…defile you?"

"Last I checked, you are definitely allowed. As a matter of fact, I can think of a handful of them right now." Sherlock kissed him. John felt a warm hand sink below the band of his boxers and squeezed his arse.

Their mouths came apart and Sherlock turned his attention to John's neck. Water was dripping slightly from his hair, Sherlock licked a trail of moisture from its end point all the way back up to the spot behind John's ear where it began. John hissed a soft moan that sent a shiver up Sherlock's spine.

"Sher-Sherlock…"

"Hmm?" He gently sucked on John's earlobe.

"The note," John felt Sherlock start to pull away.

"No, look at me. Thank you." John placed a hand to Sherlock's cheek. "I know you care. I appreciate it very much and no, you didn't do anything to upset me. Harry said she found boxes of our parents' junk in her storage unit and she asked me to help her sort through it. That's what set me off."

"When are we going to do that?" Sherlock asked, looking relieved.

"I'll try to set it up when I call – wait, we?"

"You don't honestly think I'm going to let you do something potentially traumatizing without me, do you?"

"I guess I assumed you wouldn't want to."

"You assumed wrong." John rolled his eyes and wet his lower lip.

"John?"

"Yes?"

"What does alraja' musadatou mean?"

John cocked his head again, knitting his brows together. "Do you mean alraja' musaedati? Where did you hear that?"

"You said it."

"When?"

"In your sleep, last night. You were speaking Arabic in your sleep. I didn't even realize you could
manage more than one language in your simple little brain. I thought it was stretched to its very limit with your rudimentary grasp of English."

John grinned and rolled his eyes. "It means 'please help me'. You know, Sherlock – maybe not in this house, maybe not in our flat – but in certain circles I am considered to be of above-average intelligence. I was never fluent but I was able to have a conversation if the native speaker spoke slowly. We had a couple of great chaps working with us as translators, they gave me lessons. Did I say anything else?"

Sherlock stumbled through a rough pronunciation of the words he could remember John saying in his sleep.

"I've been shot, I'm a doctor…" John's throat ran dry. He didn't remember dreaming about the day he'd been shot.

Sherlock nodded and there was silence. "That's what I thought."

"I have a much better word for you to learn." John said softly.

"This is a change, you teaching me something." Sherlock grinned. "Go on."

"Qablni."

Sherlock raised an eyebrow at him. It was a mouthful to say the least.

"Kah-"

John shook his head. "No, it's not a hard K sound. It's in the back of your throat."

"Kuh-"

"No, you sort of…squeeze the epiglottis…qablni"

John chuckled watching Sherlock struggle with something that came easily to him. After a few tries, he'd mastered the word. John gave his pupil a satisfied nod and a smile.

"So, what does it mean? What have I been saying? I'm a massive knob?"

John smiled and pulled him in. "Kiss me."

"Happily, but what does the word mean?"

"That's what it means, Sherlock. It means 'kiss me'."

Sherlock softly kissed him again. "Get dressed, come downstairs."

John watched him stroll out the door and he closed it softly behind him.

-xXx-

"Oh, John! I was getting worried!" Mrs. Holmes greeted him from her armchair with a smile when he entered the sitting room.

"I'm sorry about breakfast – I fell asleep in the bath. I'm sure it was delicious." He sat and rested one arm on the back of the sofa.
"I do that all the time." Mr. Holmes chuckled. "The remodel was my brilliant wife's idea for our wedding anniversary two years ago. Best money we've ever spent." He reached out his hand and took his wife's. John almost missed them winking at each other.

"Surely paying for my bedsit when I was at university was the best money you've ever spent." Sherlock flopped onto the sofa next to John and pressed his back into John's chest. He felt John tense up slightly and then relax. Sherlock handed him a single piece of toast smeared with jam. Sherlock stretched his legs out across the sofa, crossed his ankles on the armrest and rested his bent arm across John's lap.

"I am cuddling on the sofa with Sherlock in front of his parents." John thought with a smile and a slight shake of his head as he began to eat his toast. These were words that formed a sentence which would have been completely unthinkable a few days before. He let his arm fall from the back of the sofa and pulled Sherlock in closer.

"Feet off the furniture, Wil-Sherlock." Mrs. Holmes swatted at him and he complied without complaint. His elbow lightly grazed John's groin as he began to eat his toast. They made small talk while John finished his toast. He wiped the corner of his mouth with his thumb.

"Now that we're all here, shall we? Our minicab should be here shortly." She stood up and started walking towards the door, Mr. Holmes followed with his hands in the pockets of his cardigan.

"What about Mycroft?" Sherlock said, not moving from his place next to John.

"Called away. He's outside waiting for a car."

"Ah. A matter of great importance to the state." Sherlock said grandly. He stood up and adjusted his jacket. "John?"

Without waiting for a reply, Sherlock followed his parents outside.

Mycroft was sitting on the bench near the pond, his legs crossed and his suitcase at his feet. Sherlock approached him as the three others stood far enough away not to be able to hear.

"What's it to be this year, Lina? Skydiving? Skinny dipping?" Mr. Holmes asked with a nudge to his wife's elbow. She laughed and swatted the back of her hand at him.

"Oh, you! You'll see my dear."

"Every year she surprises me with something new on my birthday. I don't know how she manages it." He spoke to John and rested his hand on her shoulder.

John crossed his arms over his chest and smiled warmly. "Sherlock manages to surprise me quite often; sometimes at my own peril."

"I don't know how you manage to live with him." Mrs. Holmes shook her head. They heard a car approaching and John turned towards Sherlock in time to see him and Mycroft shake hands. Sherlock started walking towards them as Mycroft climbed into the rear seat of the stretch limousine.

"When I figure that out, I'll be sure to let you know." They laughed.

"Love's fire heats water, water cools not love." Mr. Holmes said as Sherlock joined them.

"My husband, the poet." The long look they shared made John blush and turn away to give them privacy. He caught Sherlock looking at him and his breath caught in his throat. His paralyzing blue-
green stare made his mouth run dry and his heart race, he was standing a whisper away.

"Jesus Christ those eyes…” he thought. He felt Sherlock's fingertips graze against his own and he didn't hesitate to let their fingers interlace.

A minicab arrived and John jumped to get the door first, letting Mr. and Mrs. Holmes in. She gave him a wink just before ducking her head into the car. He felt Sherlock give his backside a pinch before he stepped into the cab.

Mrs. Holmes gave the driver an address and they rode in relative quiet. Sherlock contentedly looked out the window and rested his hand on John's leg during the trip. John watched Sherlock's mother and father whisper to each other. He wondered if he would ever have that kind of love – the forever kind; the stare deeply into each other's eyes even well into their 70's kind. Sherlock gave his knee a squeeze and John easily slid his hand into Sherlock's. He gently stroked his middle finger up and down Sherlock's palm and felt him shiver and shift in his seat.
Sherlock slid his hand between himself and John, feeling for something. From the corner of his eye, John watched him pull his wallet from his trouser pocket.

Twenty-five minutes after the trip began, the minicab was finally coming to a stop at the kerb in front of a large white-bricked building with mirrored windows. Mrs. Holmes fumbled with the clasp of her handbag but Sherlock leaned forward with his card pinched between his fingers.

"Oh, Sherlock that's unnecessary – "

"Mum, just take it." He spoke gently and she accepted it with a nod. He signed the bill and handed the driver another £100 note he liberated from Mycroft's wallet as the others stepped out of the car and stretched. Mrs. Holmes linked her arm with her husbands and led him to the front door. The white letters stood out against a black marquee:

*The Mueller-Thurbon Gallery.*

John stepped ahead and held the door for them as Sherlock looked on with a grin hinting at the corner of his mouth. He raised his arm over John's head and took hold of the door. He raised his chin indicating John should enter.

"After you."

"Ta."

The gallery was deceptively larger on the inside than it appeared on the outside. There were hallways going off the main room leading to other smaller spaces. Straightaway John noticed that striped sections of the floor were covered in rows of small copper coins that he recognized as American pennies covered over with some sort of clear epoxy. He lifted his chin and looked up at the ceiling; there was a chandelier made of multicolored hand-blown glass flowers.

"Oh this is just marvelous, Lina." Mr. Holmes put his fingers to his mouth and looked around with twinkling eyes. Canvases of various sizes with various subject matter were evenly spaced along the white walls. Small nameplates next to each painting listed information about the piece and the artist. Several pedestals were positioned around the room holding sculptures and busts.

They wandered around the gallery each at their own pace; pausing for varying lengths of time at each canvas. John didn't recognize any of the artists and he didn't know much about art but he could appreciate the beauty of a painting and the skill necessary to create one. He was always more sporty than artistic in school and now as an adult the extent of his drawings were limited to doodling in the margins of his notepad while Sherlock was talking to clients.

John was particularly taken with a close up portrait of a young woman with ginger hair, pulled into long plaits hanging over each shoulder. Her small upturned nose and full, pink lips were perfectly proportioned and her dark brown eyes stared out from behind long, messy fringe.

"A little young for you, isn't she?" Sherlock's voice made him jump slightly.

"She's stunning." John replied. "She reminds me of someone. I can't put my finger on who it is. Times like this, I wish I had a Mind Palace."

He looked at the nameplate next to it and started nodding his head in recognition. "That's it. That's
why."

Sherlock leaned in over his shoulder. "Call Me Cordelia. What does that mean?"

"It's Anne of Green Gables – a book series Harry loved when we were young. They adapted it for the telly sometime in the 80's. I remember watching it with her. Anne was an orphaned teenager living on a farm in Canada." He sighed heavily. "I guess this is a sign that I should call her today."

Sherlock screwed up his face. "Don't tell me you actually believe – "

"In signs? I might. A little." John shrugged. Before he could reply with something biting, they heard his mother calling his name from the other side of the main room. She approached them quickly, looking nervously over her shoulder as she spoke.

"Sherlock? Sher- there you are, darling. It's almost time for Daddy's surprise – come quickly or you'll miss it." Mrs. Holmes gestured wildly with her hand beckoning to them both.

Sherlock reached for John's hand and missed. They both followed her, moving quickly. Mr. Holmes was still strolling through the gallery, humming to himself, seemingly in his own world. He tapped his fingers against his lips thoughtfully.

"Now John," Mrs. Holmes slid her hand in the crook of John's arm. "When Bertie and I met at university, he was studying art and he was a brilliant artist. He could have made a career of it if he didn't have to go into the family business. He let go of that dream less than a year after qualifying for his Bachelor of Fine Art. He kept painting at home whenever he had spare time but once the boys were born, he was just too busy. He created some beautiful pieces for the boys' nurseries when they were born but that was it."

John smiled. "Hence this trip to a gallery, it's lovely."

"It's more than that…” Sherlock's voice came from behind them. He crossed his arms over his chest and leaned against a wall, watching his father.

He stopped in front of a painting, hung by itself in the middle of the furthest wall in the rear of the gallery. It was one of the largest in the collection; showing one half of a woman's face. It was done in wild brush strokes entirely in greyscale except for her eye. It was vibrant shades of swirled blues, greens and flecks of gold leaf. She stared hauntingly into space, wispy curls framed her face giving the appearance of a gentle breeze barely touching her cheek. A giant peony was in her hair and there was a hint of a smile on her lips, a shadow of a dimple and a spattering of barely visible freckles.

John recognized the image straightaway. It was unmistakably a portrait of Mrs. Holmes as a younger woman.

"Li – Lina?" His arm reached behind himself, searching for her and she took his hand.

"How – how did you? You said you were having the frame replaced…” He looked back and forth between her face and his painting.

"They feature local artists. You gave this to me on our wedding day, and now it will be here." She used her thumb to wipe a tear from his eye. They both turned to the canvas and he wrapped his arm around her shoulder.

He kissed her temple and said "You are just as beautiful today as you were then."

John took quiet steps toward Sherlock, who was still leaning against the wall. John slid in next to
him and tapped Sherlock with his elbow.

"That, " he whispered, gesturing at the Holmeses with an open palm. "Has got to be the sweetest thing I have ever seen in all of my life."

Sherlock grunted and thrust his hands into his trouser pockets. The sound made John turn towards him.

"Alright?"

"Mmm. I'll be outside." He turned and walked away taking giant strides. John moved to stop him but changed his mind. He looked around the corner and watched Sherlock exit through the front door. He pulled a pack of cigarettes from his inner jacket pocket and lit one before walking out of view.

When John turned back to Sherlock's parents, they had moved into a separate room and were talking to a woman in a black pantsuit who was shaking Mr. Holmes' hand. John approached the painting to study it more closely. If he squinted one eye and ignored the shoulder-length hair, the subject of the painting could have been Sherlock. The nameplate read:

2000

*Oil on canvas c. 1964*

*Albert G. Holmes, on loan from artist*

As John puzzled at the title of the painting, he felt his mobile vibrate in his pocket and pulled it out. The text message waiting for him made him blink hard.

*Are you having second thoughts? – SH*

He knit his eyebrows together and his mouth went dry. He thrust his mobile back into his pocket and raced outside.

"Sherlock?!!" He looked to the left and to the right down the sidewalk and spotted him. He was leaning against a lamppost, one foot propped up behind him. He was sucking on a cigarette and looking very much like James Dean. John's breathing was shallow as he approached nervously.

"What was that message? What is going on?"

"I'd have thought it was very straightforward, even for you. Are you having second thoughts about us?" He whipped the hand holding the cigarette back and forth between them.

"No! Not remotely. Why would you think that? What have I done?" John was trying to keep his quavering voice down but he felt his face flush and his skin felt clammy.

"You haven't touched me first all day."

John was gobsmacked. "Sherlock – wha – ugh – you're being utterly ridiculous."

"Am I? Then kiss me. We're in public; people can see us. Prove that this is real outside the confines of Baker Street."

John pursed his lips together in anger, his pulse began to visibly throb in his temples. "Sherlock –"

"That's what I thought." He turned to talk away but John grabbed his wrist.
"Stop! I don't understand you! We were fine – erm, we were great! Just this morning we were cuddling on the bloody sofa -"

"Because I put myself in your lap, John."

"And? What is your point? Did I push you away?"

"I felt you freeze up. You were squirming."

John groaned and raked his hands through his hair. "Ok. Maybe I did squirm at first but that's because your parents were right there-"

"And they have both accepted us being together. Why are you so uncomfortable?"

"I'm not uncomfortable! At all! If anyone has a problem with us being together, they had better say it to my face so I can tell them to get fucked." John reached up and grabbed Sherlock's cheeks, not letting him look away. If this was a joke, he would have been able to tell by studying his face.

"I do not know how to go about this relationship, Sherlock. You're usually so…I don't know…aloof?" John let go of his face. "What do you want from me? Public displays of affection? It's as if you expect me to shove my –" he lowered his voice, detecting passersby beginning to stare.

"Do you expect me to shove my hand down the front of your trousers and wank you off in front of your parents?"

Sherlock took a step back. "Obviously not."

"What then? You want me to kiss you? Hold your hand in public? I don't have a problem with either. Do I need to remind you that this is the first time we've actually been in public? Tell me what you want."

Sherlock nodded. "I want," he sighed. "I want what they've got." He motioned over John's shoulder back towards the gallery and flicked his cigarette to the ground.

"Do you see how they look at each other? I want that, John." A single tear protested in his left eye. He straightened his back, took a deep breath and refused to let it fall down his cheek.

"Who says we can't have it? Who says we won't? Your parents have been together nearly 50 years, Sherlock. It's been less than a week for us…be reasonable…"

He looked down at his shoes and lit another cigarette. John narrowed his eyes and glared.

"What are you playing at? Why are you doing this?"

"Doing what?" He exhaled, making no effort to keep the smoke from hitting John in the face.

"You're pushing me away. Don't pretend that you aren't. I've done it, I know what it fucking looks like. Unless – is this a test? You're picking a stupid fight with me to see if you can get me to give up on us."

Sherlock silently chewed on the inside of his cheek. John hoped that at least some of what he was saying was getting through to him.

"Two years we've lived together – two years I've put up with your mood swings, your drug use, and your madness and a whole host of eccentricities; not the least of which includes finding random body parts in jars stashed all over the damn place - to say nothing of your near-constant insults and jibes at
me personally and various times I've nearly fucking died because of my association with you… I'm not even listed on the lease for the flat! I've been under absolutely no obligation to stay. Don't you realize if I was going to walk out, I'd have done it by now?" John’s hands gripped his own hips instead of Sherlock's neck.

Sherlock took a long drag and set his jaw.

"This isn't just new for you, you know. It has taken me a while to admit it but I fucking love you, Sherlock. I don't know how I'm supposed to convince you of that except to tell you as often as possible." He took a step closer and with one hand behind Sherlock's neck, pulled him in for a passionate kiss that nearly knocked them both over. Sherlock grabbed at John's waist to steady himself. When they came apart, Sherlock pressed his forehead to John's.

"I'm sorry."

"Yeah, you're sorry. You're also an idiot. Now I don't feel nearly so badly about being jealous of a few text messages." There was no scolding tone in his voice. He filtered away all the sarcasm which would normally have come out of his mouth and spoke as sweetly as he could muster. He pulled the cigarette out of Sherlock's fingers and took a long drag. He inhaled it deeply and blew a cloud of smoke out of his nostrils and mouth.

"I am not an idiot." Sherlock said, suddenly grinning from one side of his mouth.

"You are. But, for better or worse; you're my idiot." John coughed slightly and took hold of Sherlock's hand and placed his palm against his own chest. Sherlock felt John's heart thumping away madly.

"It's clear that we both have insecurities and communication shit to work through, but every couple does. I haven't had a great deal of success in relationships, but as I've been down this road before and you…well, haven't; take my word for it. I'm not going to ask you to talk about your feelings or any of that hippie dippy shite but you can't shoot straight for anger when something doesn't go the way you anticipated, Sherlock. I know you're the bloody genius and I'm not fit to wipe the dust off your shoes, but can you admit that you might be slightly…out of your element here?"

Sherlock spoke after a long, thoughtful pause. "I'm sorry. I've observed my parents' marriage and your countless false starts. I am only realizing now that I have minimal understanding of anything in between. It's never been…important until now. I didn't realize how unprepared I was for these…intricacies." He brushed the back of his fingers against John's chest.

"I'm going to ignore that little jab at my dating history because you're not entirely incorrect. Can we agree to just be patient with each other? I know patience isn't your strong suit…"

"John?"

"Yes?"

"You were looking at the female nudes more than any of the other paintings in the gallery."

John's jaw clenched and his temple started twitching along with the vein in his neck until Sherlock winked at him.

"You're an arse."

"And I'm all yours, aren't you lucky?"
"I am. Pretty lucky indeed." Sherlock tilted John's chin up and kissed him softly.

He took one last puff of the cigarette and exhaled quickly. "You're a bad influence, I don't even like these." He waved the cigarette in his hand.

"Oh John! You ought to know better than that! Honestly, a doctor smoking!" Mrs. Holmes tsked at him.

"Yes, Mum – shocking isn't it? It's a foul habit and he's quitting." Sherlock winked at John who bit his lip hard and snarled as he stubbed the cigarette out with his foot.

"Boys, we thought we'd get a spot of lunch before going home, would you like to join us? John, you must be starving – you missed breakfast."

John looked to Sherlock with a questioning, raised eyebrow and shrugged a shoulder.

"John didn't sleep very well last night, so I think he should go have a lie down at home."

"Oh, yes, of course but John, aren't you hungry?" She asked, gripping the strap of her handbag.

"I…" Sherlock held up his hand to quiet him.

"He doesn't eat much, Mum. I keep telling him to take better care of himself but he insists he can live on a lettuce leaf like a caterpillar."

There was an awkward type of silence between the four of them, Mr. Holmes was the first to speak.

"Lina, I think we might have interrupted something. Let's leave them alone. We'll see you back at home." Mr. Holmes smiled softly and took his wife's hand beginning to lead her away.

"Well wait – John needs to eat something…" she protested.

"I will, Mrs. Holmes. I promise." John laughed.

On the roof of a building down the street, a man in black tactical gear was watching them through the high-powered scope of his rifle. He had watched the scene with interest. He couldn't hear their voices but from their body language, he could tell there was an argument and it seemed to resolve itself. He smirked when he saw them kiss. The crooked scar that ran from the right corner of his mouth up towards his ear gave an otherworldly appearance to his smile. He used a handkerchief to mop the sweat off his brow before detaching a radio transmitter from his belt and spoke.

"Target acquired. Are we a go?" He lifted the butt of the rifle slightly higher and rested it into the crook of his shoulder as he waited for the order. He switched the safety catch off but kept his finger off the trigger. He slowed his breathing down as he methodically kept his target within the crosshairs.

"The boss asked if his suspicions are confirmed."

"Tell him he'll be happy."

"Affirm." The voice coming from the radio crackled slightly.

"Are we a go?"

"Abort." He lifted his head and took the radio in his hand again.

"Repeat?" With the communication line open, he heard static and then the boss's voice came purring
"Abort. Return to base. Change of plans."

"Affirm."

As he lowered his rifle he saw the grouping of four split and each pair went off in a different direction. He folded the carbon fibre tripod his rifle was resting on and disassembled the rifle itself, tucking all the pieces into a black canvas bag. With the rifle, scope and tripod secured, he removed a pistol from a side pocket of the bag. He pulled the black clothing off and changed back into his jeans and t-shirt, carefully tucking the pistol into the waistband of his jeans snugly in his lower back and lifted his shirt up over it to conceal it.

He folded the black clothing and shoved it all into the bag with his radio and everything else. He then carried the bag to the opposite side of the roof and peered over the edge. The skip was still there and the top was still open, according to the boss's plan. He casually held the strap of the bag over the edge of the roof and let go, watching it fall into the skip. The weight of it pulled it down under the full rubbish bags, effectively hiding it until it could be collected.

He gave one last look around to make sure he hadn’t left any trace of himself behind before slipping out the door and down the stairs. He exhaled deeply before opening the door that lead to the street. He blinked in the bright sunlight and walked off.

"So, where are we going?" Sherlock was walking ahead of him and John broke into a light jog to catch up.

"Back to the house, you have to call your sister. We'll be able to find a taxi over here." Sherlock took John's hand and kissed his knuckles.

John nodded somewhat reluctantly and looked up ahead of them. Sherlock was leading him towards an area with shops and cafes. A man was selling ice creams out of a cart on the side of the road. The place was abuzz with people going about their day and not a single one took notice of the men holding hands.

"Sherlock? I actually am starving. Can we stop in that pub over there? I could go for fish and chips." John looked longingly at the tables of people sitting at the small tables outside, chatting casually.

"If that's what you want."

Sherlock secured the last empty table and John went inside to order. He returned carrying two drinks. He placed one in front of Sherlock before he sat down and took a sip of his own.

"Bit early isn't it?" Sherlock dipped his middle finger into the gin and tonic and traced the rim of the glass.

"After the morning I've had? No." He lifted his glass to his lips and took a slow sip while staring at Sherlock over the rim.

Sherlock nodded understandingly and took a sip. "Not bad." He ran his tongue across his teeth and lifted the glass and appeared to examine the liquid inside it.

"It's Hendricks, you snob." John rolled his eyes and a smile teased at Sherlock's lips. His knee started bouncing under the table. He tried to hide it, but it was hard to get anything past those keen blue eyes. Sherlock raised a questioning eyebrow at him.
"Why am I so nervous about calling her?" It was more of a confession and confirmation of Sherlock's suspicions than an actual question. He filled his mouth with a gulp of his drink.

"Are you going to tell your sister about us?" Sherlock looked up at him through his eyelashes, his eyes met John's and darted away quickly. He sipped his drink, waiting for an answer. The waitress placed John's dish in front of him with a smile and walked away.

"How long have you been waiting to ask me that?" John sat back in his chair and rested his left ankle on top of his right knee. He ate a chip and watched Sherlock with interest.

Sherlock grinned and raised an eyebrow. He stole two chips and stuffed them in his cheek.

"Yes, by the way. I planned on telling Harry. Don't make that face, I did."

Sherlock had swiped another chip from John's plate and pursed his lips together.

"You might order your own chips." John said, playfully pulling his plate closer to him. The waitress returned and placed a basket of chips in front of Sherlock.

"Anything else?" She gave a cursory glance to Sherlock and smiled warmly at John.

"Not just now, thanks." John nodded politely. The left side of his mouth curled into a grin and he lifted his eyebrows.

"Thank you." Sherlock said simply and took a sip of his drink.

"You always steal them. You say you aren't hungry, then you take mine."

"Chips taste better when someone else orders them." Sherlock shrugged and ate a few.

"That's why I ordered them for you. Technically, you're still eating my chips."

Sherlock paused and considered what John had said, it was a sound argument. He shrugged his shoulders and ate some more.

"Are you sure you want to help me sort through boxes? I mean, I'm bored just thinking about it – you don't have to." He used the side of his fork to cut into the piece of fish in front of him and took a bite.

"I don't have to do anything, John. I wouldn't offer if I didn't want to be there for you."

"You say things like that and it makes me want to climb over this table." John chewed on his lower lip a second before taking a drink. He sucked an ice cube into his mouth and swirled it around, turning it over with his tongue.

"Noted." Sherlock finished his drink with a smirk.

They ate in silence for a few minutes until John's mobile rang in his pocket. He swallowed quickly and looked at the screen. He sighed and pushed his tongue into his cheek before sliding his finger across the screen to answer it.

"Hi."

"Johnny – don't be mad…"

"Why would I be mad?"
"Well, you said you'd call me but I'm calling you."

"It's fine, I was actually going to ring you after lunch."

"Oh, Ok. I wanted to say that I'm sorry for calling you so many times, so early. Like I said, bad night."

"Harry, I…it's fine. Are you ok?"

"You mean am I hungover?"

"I was trying to be nice."

"I appreciate that, even if I don't deserve it. Yes, I'm ok. Paracetamol and black coffee cure many sins. I just…I miss her so much. I well and good fucked that up for myself. I was having a pity party last night."

John sighed, finished his drink in one final gulp and stood from the table. He gently slid his fingers into Sherlock's hair and kissed the top of his head. He moved the phone away from his mouth.

"I'll be back in a minute."

Sherlock nodded and waited until John was a few steps away before he stole a bite of fish off of his plate. He glanced up momentarily and thought the man with the strange facial scar was staring at him, but it was probably his imagination.

"So what's her name? This woman you're seeing?" Harry asked him, sensing the need for a subject change.

"Erm…Sherlock." John sat on a low decorative rock wall not far from the pub.

"Sher…that's not a woman's name. It's hardly a man's name…"

John laughed. "Shut up, you." She laughed too.

"The Sherlock? Your flatmate? Your crazy, obsessive-compulsive, egomaniacal, and forgive me if I'm not giving this enough attention, male flatmate?"

"The same. It's ah…very new. Very recent."

"Clearly. Johnny this is…wow. I'm sorry, I don't know what to say. Clarrie didn't tell me."

"Clara wouldn't have known – it happened after the hospital."

"I'm speechless. So, is this…you know, the first guy since Simon Foster?"

"Yes, he is – wait, Simon Fost – how in the hell did you know about Simon?"

"Johnny. I wasn't blind. You two…had a thing."

"Hardly a thing – it was no-thing. You know Dad would've…"

Harry coughed. "Let's leave him out of this for now. Can I meet him?"

"You've never asked to meet anyone I was seeing before." John puzzled.

"Well when's the last time you were seeing someone long enough for me to meet them? You split up
with your date to my wedding the morning of my wedding for fuck's sake. You took one of the waitresses home from what I recall. Besides that, I've been hearing you complain about this man for two years...I was curious to meet him just based on that and on your blog. Jesus Christ, I need to meet the man who caught the attention of 'Three Continents' Watson." She laughed.

John smiled and felt his cheeks go red. "Well, when we get back to Baker Street, come round for dinner."

"Drinks would be easier."

John rolled his eyes. "Harriet – " he scolded patiently.

"I'm kidding, Johnny. I'd love to. I want to fix whatever is broken between us. I miss you. I haven't been a very good sister."

"Harry...it's fine. You offered to help me when I got back from Afghanistan. I was too damned proud. Besides, if I'd have accepted your help, I wouldn't have met or moved in with Sherlock."

"That is true, I guess."

Sherlock twisted at the waist and watched John. To his own great relief, he was smiling and laughing. John caught sight of him and held up one finger, mouthing 'I'll just be a minute' and he nodded.

John and Harry agreed to meet up the following week to begin sorting through their parents' things and to have dinner. John felt a great sense of relief blossoming in his chest. He was hopeful in spite of the nagging voice creeping around his brain that told him this wouldn't last.

"Hey, Harry?"

"Yeah?"

"I, uh, I love you. You know I do, right?"

"I know, Johnny. I love you too. See you in a few days."

"Bye."

John ended the call and slid the phone into his pocket. He strolled back over to Sherlock, who had finished his own chips and half of John's portion of fish.

"That seemed to go well." He said with a cheek full of partially chewed chips.

John sat and smirked at Sherlock, obviously noting how much of his food had gone missing.

"It did, actually. Better than expected, she's coming for dinner; said she wants to meet you." John proceeded to finish his meal.

"Ready to head back? We'll have the house to ourselves for at least an hour before they get back." Sherlock asked as he stood from the table.

"I like the way you think." John pushed in his chair after him and they left the pub. Sherlock lead the way towards the main thoroughfare and hailed a cab with an outstretched hand.

They got themselves comfortable and Sherlock gave the address to the driver and they were on their way. John yawned and stretched his arms over his head.
"You're tired?" Sherlock raised an eyebrow at him.

"A bit." John rubbed his eye with the heel of his hand.

"Come here, then. We've got a bit of a ride ahead of us, close your eyes until we get back to the house." Sherlock lifted his arm indicating that John should rest against him. John gave him a sleepy smile and shifted in his seat. He rested his head against Sherlock's chest, sighing softly. Sherlock kissed the top of his head and wrapped his arm around him before letting his head loll back against the head rest and he closed his eyes.
Chapter 11

The assassin's head was throbbing as he regained consciousness. He couldn't move and his mouth felt dry. He could smell and taste blood. He opened his eyes slowly, one of which seemed to be swollen shut. He discovered that he was bound to a chair in a poorly lit room. He couldn't breathe through his broken nose. He looked down at his chest he saw the front of his shirt was stained bright red with his own blood.

"Oh, you're awake at last, Eamonn. Welcome back." The boss's cheerful yet cold voice was enough to give him the shivers.

"What am I doing here? And…where am I?" Eamonn was having trouble focusing his eyes.

"How long have we known each other?" The lean shadow of a man stalked across the opposite wall and the boss took a step into the dim light. His fair skin was starkly contrasted by his black suit and neat black hair.

"A long time." Eamonn replied as he cleared his throat. His head was throbbing on the left side. He vaguely recalled someone saying his name and then feeling a blow to his head from something very hard but it might have been a dream.

"Indeed. Ten years or more. I've known you since the night you got that beautiful scar on your face. And yet, you still haven't grasped how inadvisable it is to displease me."

Eamonn examined as much of the room as he could but the pain in his head made it very difficult to see and his head could only turn so far. Beyond that, he knew he had to be extremely careful not to take his eye off of his captor for too long.

"H-how did I displease you?" He fought to conceal the trembling in his voice. He had stood by with a mocking expression on his face countless times while the boss screeched and ranted at his colleagues. It was almost comical and nearly always ended with those who were being chastised sharing a beer with him at a pub once the dress-down was completed. Each member of the boss's inner circle could relay the story of the worst bollocking they'd received from the boss. This was very different; the calm, quiet, even tone of the his voice was more chilling than listening to hours of him screaming with rage.

The boss crossed his arms over his chest and cocked his head; a queer little grin teased at his lips.

"You disobeyed me, Eamonn. You know what you did."

He took a deep breath through his nose and tried to relax. "Jim – I…"

"I wouldn't get too familiar, if I were you. I could either let you go or flay you alive depending upon the way this conversation progresses." The unassuming form of the boss was walking casually around the room with his hands in his pockets as they spoke. Eamonn couldn't turn his head to maintain visual contact with him and he felt himself start to sweat with anxiety.

Eamonn cleared his throat and squeezed his eyes shut, willing them to focus when he opened them again. "I – I'm sorry Sir. I'm afraid I do not know what you're talking about." He was determined not to beg, determined to remain calm. If this was the day he was going to meet his maker, he wasn't going to go out pissing himself and crying like some others he'd seen, the pathetic fools.

The underworld was always after the boss. They either wanted to join him, or kill him and absorb his
criminal network. Typically the joiners were thoroughly vetted by those in his employ and welcomed into the fold. It was usually years before newcomers would ever meet their employer, if ever. He remained to many a congenial voice on the other end of a telephone, or words appearing on a computer screen. The potential usurpers were greeted by the boss personally. Eamonn was one of the few who knew that if you were perceived as an enemy and you sat face to face with Jim Moriarty, you were not going be standing up ever again.

He heard the fast-moving footsteps rushing up behind him. His heart pounded as he felt hands grasp his shoulders. The scent of his aftershave burned Eamonn's nostrils. There was a sudden rushing feeling in his head as he was yanked backward. He howled in pain and the air was knocked out of his lungs when his back collided with the stone floor. When he opened his eye again, Moriarty was standing over him, one leg on each side of his waist and he crouched down until they were nearly nose to nose.

"You're afraid, eh? I'm sure you are now." He still wasn't shouting but there was an angry panther pacing back and forth behind his dead black eyes. The pain and terror that Eamonn attempted to conceal was deeply satisfying; enough so that Moriarty was able to relax a bit. He laughed the most unsettling laugh Eamonn had ever heard and his eyes remained lifeless.

"Eamonn, Eamonn, Eamonn," he snarled. "You were told to abort and return to base. Was there a bad connection? You did hear the order, didn't you?"

He had partially regained his composure and was able to take deeper breaths. He was afraid to speak so he nodded.

"But you didn't obey the order?" The boss's fingers gripped his shirt collar.

"I…I did…" Eamonn's voice was muted with fear.

"You DIDN'T!" The sudden scream made Eamonn's heart pound. His voice returned to normal eerily easily. "You were seen watching them at that pub. You know I have eyes everywhere. Why would you defy me?"

"I didn't. Jim, I swear. I stopped for a drink. I looked up and they were just there. I have never lied to you, Jim. I'm your oldest…friend…" He gulped in air. If he was about to be killed, he hoped it would be quick.

"Quite the coincidence, my friend," he sneered. "So you just happened to find yourself at the exact same pub as the target you were instructed to walk away from?"

"Yes." Eamonn maintained defiant eye contact. He was terrified but he'd be damned if he'd give Moriarty the satisfaction of showing it.

*Karma karma karma karma karma chameleon You come and go, you come and go…*

The sudden interruption of Moriarty's obnoxiously loud ringtone gave Eamonn a bit of hope. Perhaps whoever was on the other side of the call would put him off whatever he planned to do to Eamonn.

"Busy." Moriarty said as he answered. The sing-song tone in his voice belied the venom in his eyes.

"Yes, yes. I know." Eamonn strained his ears in an effort to hear the caller's side of the conversation. It was a male voice speaking but beyond that, there was no use.

"Fine. If you must." He laughed his deeply disconcerting laugh. "Darling, all of my ideas are
brilliant. Even the ones that don't work - and there are so few of them - even those are an F.A.I.L - first attempt in learning."

The caller was taking too long, talking too much. Annoyance was charging across his face. He began flapping his hand open and shut, mimicking a person talking. The longer the caller kept him on the line, the faster he flapped his hand. He created a circle shape with his hand and began performing an exaggerated panto of wanking. He moved the phone away from his mouth and blew a raspberry.

"Darling, I am a bit tied up at the moment – well, I have someone tied up…” He laughed again. "Naughty naughty. No, nothing like that I'm afraid – although if you're offering…”

The caller replied something that elicited a raised eyebrow. "I might just hold you to that, love. Alright, alright. A bien tot." He slid his mobile back into his pocket and crossed his arms.

"Feckin eejit." He said under his breath.

He turned his attention back to Eamonn and cocked his head again. "Let's say that I believe you. I suppose I can see how that might happen. You needed to cool your head with a pint after I cancelled your assignment. What it doesn't explain is why you poisoned the doctor's drink. I specifically ordered you to leave them alone. I have other plans."

Eamonn coughed. "I didn't. Ok – fine, I admit it. I was going to do it. It would have been so easy to get him out of the way. I thought you'd be pleased. I tried to distract the bartender but he…”

"Thank you Eamonn." He stood up, smoothed his black suit jacket and trousers and took slow steps away from the prone body tied to a chair.

"Eh?" He blinked hard with his good eye.

Moriarty turned on his heel suddenly holding a revolver. Before Eamonn could speak a single word in his own defense, he raised his arm in one smooth motion to aim and fired two shots directly into Eamonn's chest. He watched the horror on the man's face fade and the slowly light left his eyes.

If he was capable of having emotions, he might have felt something in the pit of his stomach about killing his long-time associate. He shrugged, concealed the pistol back in the shoulder holster under his jacket and walked away whistling Wouldn't It Be Loverly?

xXx

Sherlock listened to John's quiet, steady breathing as the landscape they were passing in the cab changed from buildings and pavement to pastoral lush fields and trees.

His back ached and his arm had gone numb from the uncomfortable position the weight of John's upper body had pinned him into but he was so deliriously happy to have John pressed against his chest that his discomfort was drastically minimized.

"John? Are you awake?"

"Yeah, I'm here. You're a comfortable pillow for such a bony git."

A grin crept across Sherlock's lips. "I'm glad you came. I'm glad you're here," he said simply. John put his hand on Sherlock's knee and squeezed gently.

"I'm glad too. I was looking forward to having the flat all to myself, but I would have gotten really
bored after an hour or two. I'd…miss you."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, of course I would. Is that so surprising?"

"I hadn't considered that. I…I miss you when you're away," Sherlock smiled nervously and avoided John’s eyes.

"Now, that is a surprise to me. It doesn't seem like you even notice when I'm not there."

"Quite the opposite. I hate the silence. I've grown completely accustomed to your whinging about the state of the kitchen. I go quite mad when you're not home."

"Is that meant to be a compliment?" John asked with an amused lilt in his voice as he sat up.

"Possibly."

John felt a stupid grin spread across his face and he licked his lower lip. He reached his hand up to Sherlock's cheek and leaned in until their lips met. The soft kiss deepened as John threaded his fingers into the curls at the nape of Sherlock's neck. Their tongues undulated against each other gently. They only came apart when the cab hit a bump.

"John?"

"Yeah?"

"I have a request."

"Um…ok."

"Well…you're really going to make me say it?"

"Sherlock, I don't have a clue what you're about to say."

"We're going back to an empty house…" he began. John raised an eyebrow, indicating that he understood.

"Ah. Feeling a bit pent up are you?" John teased him.

"No." The tips of Sherlock's ears burned red and John laughed. He ran his hand up Sherlock's inner thigh and watched him bite his lip.

"Liar." John leaned in to suck softly on the skin behind Sherlock's ear, feeling him shiver. "Your pulse is elevated and I believe you're blushing, Mr. Holmes" John moved Sherlock's shirt collar aside and sucked on his neck.

Sherlock growled and turned his head to capture John's mouth. He moaned hungrily as their lips connected again and again. John cupped Sherlock's groin over his trousers. In between kisses, he spoke.

"I…want…you…naked…so…bad…"

"Badly," Sherlock corrected.

"Oh, shut up."
The cabbie cleared his throat loudly. "Almost there, gents," he called to them casting a quick glance in his mirror.

Sherlock coughed and adjusted himself as John sat back. Sherlock's mobile chirped in his pocket and he pulled it out.

*If you haven't already spent all of the cash that was in my billfold, I need you to call me straightaway.*

Sherlock cocked his head.

"What does Mycroft want?"

Sherlock raised his eyes at John, who chuckled.

"You've got that annoyed expression on your face. It's the one specifically reserved for your brother."

Sherlock didn't reply to the text, switched the ringer to silent and slid the phone back into his pocket.

"It's nothing. He wouldn't text if it were important. He'd step out of whatever Grand Poohbah King of the Universe Meeting he's currently in to phone me."

The cab rounded the corner into his parents' drive and a hissing sound escaped his mouth when he spied the blond woman standing by the front door.

"Oooh shit," he groaned.

John straightened his back and craned his neck to get a better view.

"Who's that?"

"Meredith Ashton."

John rolled his eyes. "And who is Meredith Ashton?"

Sherlock began to chew on the inside of his cheek. "The daughter of friends of my parents. She had a…thing for my dearest brother." John couldn't stop himself from laughing.

"She had a *crush* on Mycroft? A human woman had a crush on Mycroft?"

Sherlock snorted a laugh as the cab came to a full stop. He pulled another £100 note from Mycroft's wallet to pay the driver. He didn't accept the change he was offered and stepped out of the car. John followed close behind and thanked the driver.

"Sherlock Holmes." The woman adjusted the strap of her bag on her shoulder and approached them.

"Meredith." Sherlock nodded at her and reached into his pocket, feeling for his key.

She ignored John almost entirely, which for once he didn't mind.

"Is Mycroft here?" She asked with a scowl.

Sherlock shook his head. "He was supposed to be, got called away this morning. How did you know he'd be here?"
She tsked at him. "Obviously he told me as much." Her crush on Mycroft suddenly made sense to John. The hostility in her voice was very similar to the condescending way Mycroft sneered at people. They had that in common, if nothing else.

"Well not that it isn't absolutely delightful to see you, Meredith but we do need to go inside now." Sherlock slipped the key into the doorknob.

"Did he at least give you my money?" She crossed her arms and tossed her hair over her shoulder. The sour expression on her face was difficult to read.

"Your money?" Sherlock cocked his head and turned back to her, neither of them spoke, they just glared.

"Yes, well, so good of you to pop round, Meredith. I'm John, by the way. John Watson. Sherlock and I are quite busy at the moment but if we happen to speak to Mycroft, we'll be sure to have him ring you." He pushed forward, turned the key in the lock and pulled Sherlock inside by his arm and shut the door behind them.

"On the scale of normal human interaction to alien abduction, I'd safely say I've just been probed. And not in the good way." John joked. "What the bleeding hell was that all about?"

"A puzzle, John. It's a puzzle." Sherlock was staring at the closed door. He didn't look away, even when he knelt to remove his shoes.

John approached him from behind and wrapped his arms around his waist. "Can the puzzle wait? Please?"

He felt Sherlock hesitating, the curiosity was humming off of him as clearly as steam rising from black pavement on a hot day. John put his hands on Sherlock's belt and began unfastening it.

"Can we go to bed? Sherlock? Hello?" When Sherlock didn't respond, John grunted in frustration and stepped around him to see his face. Sherlock was still staring at the same spot on the back of the door; John could practically see the wheels in his mind in motion. He snapped his fingers in front of Sherlock's eyes to get his attention, which finally worked.

"John, I…"

John rolled his eyes. "Can you try to pretend for a little while that none of that happened? Can we go to bed and then maybe later, when we don't have an entire house to ourselves you can examine the case of the miserable blonde looking for money from your brother at the door?"

Sherlock nodded with some obvious reluctance, but he took hold of John's waist and pulled him in for a long kiss. John responded enthusiastically but when he opened his eyes for one moment, he saw that Sherlock was staring into space as they kissed.


"Yes, Captain Watson, sir," Sherlock responded with a wink. He was suddenly giving John his full attention. His sharp blue eyes locked on John's for a moment and he marched toward the bedroom in long strides of his thin legs.

When John reached the open door of the bedroom, he found Sherlock sitting on the bed, unbuttoning his shirt. The fading marks on his chest were turning a sickly looking purple-yellow. John caught himself chewing on his bottom lip as Sherlock tossed his shirt to the floor. He lifted his chin at John, silently calling him over. John quickly toed his shoes off at the door and crossed the room in four
He could see Sherlock was still distracted, but was making an attempt to hide it; his eyes darted past John more than once. John tilted Sherlock’s chin up and stooped slightly to kiss him. Sherlock’s hands were suddenly gripping the back of John’s thighs, making him gasp in surprise. The kiss deepened as John pushed his tongue past Sherlock’s teeth and he started unbuttoning his own shirt.

Sherlock’s hands roamed upward, pausing to squeeze John’s arse and came to rest on his hips. Not letting their mouths part, he shifted backward on the bed, pulling John toward him. John pulled the last two buttons of his shirt open and crawled up on the bed, straddling him with one knee on either side. He pushed his hands down on Sherlock’s shoulders to brace himself.

John pulled Sherlock’s curls, tugging his head to the side and giving him access to his neck. He nipped and sucked on the taut skin there and enjoyed hearing the soft moans leaving Sherlock’s mouth. He licked a trail up to Sherlock’s ear and whispered as he rock his hips forcefully.

"I’ve been waiting for this all fucking day."

Sherlock reached up and yanked John’s shirt down his arms and it fell to the floor.

"I was a dick this afternoon. At the gallery," Sherlock said while he started to fumble with John's belt.

"Yep. You were, it's nothing new. Now shut up and get your trousers off." John swung his leg off of Sherlock's lap and scrambled to his feet. Sherlock lay on his back and pushed his trousers down to his calves then sat up and yanked them the rest of the way off. John slid out of his jeans and boxers and kicked them to the side.

John slid next to Sherlock and plunged his hand down the front of his boxers. He slowly worked his hand up and down the shaft. Sherlock raised his arms over his head, reaching for the headboard, his eyes closed and his jaw went slack.

"I'm…I'm…" Sherlock's breath caught in his throat. John pulled his hand out of Sherlock's boxers and rested it on his chest.

"You'd better not cum yet, not allowed."

Sherlock teased a smile. "Not what I was going to say, I promise." He nuzzled John's nose with his own and pulled him into a passionate kiss, his palms splayed flat against his back. Their tongues rolled over each other and they made no effort to quiet themselves. Sherlock took John's lower lip between his teeth and bit down softly. John reached back, took hold of Sherlock's wrists and pinned them gently up against the pillows on either side of his head.

He pushed his leg between Sherlock’s, rhythmically grinding into him as he kissed the pulse point behind his ear. John suddenly stopped and lifted his head shoulders up, wide eyed. The St. Michael medallion swung back and forth on its chain.

"Shit. Shit shit shit."

"What?" They could feel each other's hearts beating against each other as they lay chest to chest.

"I..I don't think I packed any lube."

"Front pocket of my bag."
"Wha?"

"I thought you might forget." Sherlock wrapped his leg around John's.

"Christ, I fucking love you." John thrust his groin against Sherlock. The exquisite pressure of their bodies against each other made them both moan.

"Ob – fuck – viously…" Sherlock worked his wrists free and dug his fingers into John's back. He worked up a bit of leverage and managed to flip John onto his back, surprising him.

John reached for him but Sherlock swatted his hands away.

"You aren't the only one who's been wanting this all day. Let me apologize for being a dickhead properly." A desirous grin formed on John's face and his tongue ran across his bottom lip. He leaned up on his elbows and raised an eyebrow at him.

"How exactly are you going to do that, eh?"

"I'm going to make you moan my name."

John snorted sarcastically.

"Oh you don't think I can?" Sherlock narrowed his eyes at the proposed challenge and he saw a flicker of amusement on John's face.

"I dunno Sherl-"

Sherlock ran his tongue up the crease of John's thigh straight to his stomach and nipped his skin just to the side of the fair hair that ran from his navel downward. John fisted the sheets and his hips bucked up slightly, his erection bobbed against Sherlock's shoulder.

"Still a Doubting Thomas? Or a Doubting John Thomas, as it were?" Sherlock pursed his lips together.

"Let's say I'm slightly more optimistic," John replied.

Sherlock smirked and turned his attention back to John's cock. He heard the choked moan in John's throat when he slowly slipped the first two inches into his mouth. He messy curls bobbed up and down with the motion of his neck and he swirled his tongue around the head.

John arched his back and tensed his thighs, bending both legs at the knees. His breathing got shallow and with nothing short of animalistic hunger, he stared at the top of Sherlock's head. His method was no less intense than the way he approached anything else. His mouth and hand were expertly choreographed; the movements exact, deliberate and seemingly tailor-made to suit John precisely.

John grabbed at the pillow he was laying on and pulled it to his mouth. He bit down into the foam and moaned hard. Sherlock lifted his chin, pausing his oral ministrations but continuing with his hand.

"What was that?" He asked with a smirk.

"Nothing. Nothing at all," John panted. His cheeks were flushed as was his chest. He ran his hand through his hair, brushing it from his forehead.

"Hmm. Interesting. Plan B, then."
Without waiting for a response, Sherlock swirled his tongue around the head of John's cock and took it as deeply into his mouth as he could. He felt fingers tangle in his hair, pulling softly. Sherlock kissed and sucked at the base and briefly let his tongue graze John's testicles. He placed both of his hands on John's inner thighs and massaged, his thumbs applying delicious pressure. He knew he was on the right track when he heard a muffled "aaah," John must have been moaning into his pillow again. He pushed John's legs apart and took his shaft into his mouth one more time. He stroked the pad of his thumb up and down his perineum then pressed the knuckle of his forefinger more forcefully in the same place. Before John could even consider objecting, Sherlock's tongue moved further south. He felt strong hands spreading him a bit and suddenly Sherlock's tongue was lapping at a place only John's doctor had touched before.

"Fuuuuck…" It was a brand new sensation that sent John's head reeling. At first he squirmed from the singular newness of anal stimulation; he swallowed hard and locked his fists around the pillow as his toes curled. It was one of those moments that made him wonder how in the hell he'd ever made it in life to that point without experiencing this before. It wasn't a thing he'd ever done to a woman, let alone had a woman do to him. If he wasn't so convinced that the only other person he was thoroughly sexually compatible with was Sherlock, he'd have been having some major regrets about not trying it earlier.

After a brief adjustment period, he was subconsciously rocking his body toward Sherlock’s tongue, feeling him explore an erogenous zone that he had never even considered needed exploring. One little, tiny, barely audible voice buried deep in John's brain was telling him he shouldn't enjoy it. It had never been easier to ignore that voice; he pressed his head back into the pillow. The longer it went on, the louder John got; the moans seemed to come from deeper and deeper within his body until…

"Uuh Sher…Sher…fuck." He looked up at John, wearing a self-satisfied grin.

"Close enough for me." Sherlock sucked on John's inner thigh and bit him playfully.

"Come here, you" John growled at him. Sherlock crawled up the length of John's body and buried his face in his neck.

"Go get it," John moaned. "Now."

Sherlock batted his lashes at him. "Get what, Doctor?"

"You know perfectly well what, unless you don't want me to fuck you, that is." John crossed his arms over his chest.

Without another word, Sherlock bounded off the bed and yanked the front zippered compartment on his suitcase open. Once he found the bottle he tossed it to John who just barely caught it by the tips of his fingers. Sherlock pulled his boxers off and was soon back on the bed with John's tongue in his mouth.

As they shared feral kisses, John enveloped Sherlock's shaft in his hand. The skin was slick with precum.

"How do you want me?" Sherlock said in a low breathy voice.

"Is that a joke?" John asked, tightening his grip and increasing his speed.

"I mean…on my back or…hands and knees?" John kissed him hard.

"Back. I want to see your face." Sherlock nodded and situated himself accordingly on the bed.
"I love you." John got to his knees between Sherlock's legs and slicked himself up.

"I know." Sherlock spread his legs and braced himself by taking the sheets in his hands.

"Relax…" John coaxed and applied some lube to Sherlock's opening with his lubricated fingers. He lifted one of Sherlock's legs gently over his hip and kissed his knee. He dipped two fingers in quickly and watched Sherlock's eyes roll back.

"That ok?"

"More…"

John sucked on his own lower lip and pushed his fingers in deeper. Sherlock clamped his eyes shut and moaned.

"I'm ready…John, please…"

"But what if…"

"JOHN…"

Swiftly adjusting his position and allowing Sherlock to wrap his legs around him, John guided himself in. The feeling of hot, slippery flesh sliding into tight flesh; invading and being invaded made them both ignite with a passion they only felt when joined in that way.

Knowing he probably should have prepped Sherlock a bit more thoroughly, John was pumping his hips slowly. The very last thing he wanted to do was hurt him with too much, too fast. He could feel Sherlock's erection pushing against his belly. Every other thrust resulted in John's cock hitting his prostate and Sherlock clawed at John's back, one of his nails was a jagged and it drew a bit of blood.

"It's never felt like this…fuck…I fucking love it…" John canted Sherlock's hips higher off the mattress. He felt himself reaching the brink but he did everything he could think of to push it back; he wasn't ready for it to end.

"Don't stop…ever. John…just like that…" Sherlock pushed his sweaty curls off his forehead.

"You're mine. I want you every fucking day." John pressed his lips to Sherlock's. They panted into each other's mouths.

"I think that can be –f*ck – arranged."

"I can't hold back anymore…"

"Don't then…"

Seizing a handful of drenched brown tendrils, John let himself erupt with a coruscating outcry of pleasure. His limbs trembled fiercely but he didn't let that prevent him from taking hold of Sherlock and start stroking him to his own orgasm.

"Come for me…come for me Sherlock…"

With one arm thrown dramatically over his head, the detective keened and with a sonorous exclamation he let his hips buck hard. John moved at the last second and very nearly caught the full force of Sherlock's ejaculation in the face. It was hot and sticky and quite literally everywhere.

John dropped onto the bed next to Sherlock and as if on cue, they both began to chuckle.
"That was…"

"Yep. Fan-fucking-tastic," John replied as he let his fingertips dance down Sherlock's pale abdomen.

"I concur." Sherlock rubbed the back of his own neck.

"We ought to get cleaned up before they get back, I reckon," John said as he placed a series of soft kisses on Sherlock's chest.

"If I believed in such things, I'd say that you have successfully read my mind. Shower?"

"Together?" John rested his head on his fist.

Sherlock rolled his eyes. "Obviously."


"John?"

"Hmm?"

"I do love you, you know," he said quietly.

"I know. Me too. I love you too."

"You have far too much patience with me."

John put his finger to Sherlock's lips to quiet him. "I think we have argued enough in the last few days to disprove that theory, Mr. Holmes."

"We don't bicker that much."

John raised an eyebrow.

"They've been more like 'misunderstandings'"

"Call it what you like. I'm still right." John smirked.

"I bow to your superior knowledge." Sherlock mimicked an army salute.

"Can you say that again? Slowly?" John licked his lower lip.

"Oh, shut up." Sherlock rolled his eyes and playfully pushed John's shoulder. "Come on, old man. Let's go shower."

"Old man? Old man?" John said indignantly. "I'll make you swallow those words, Mr. Holmes." Sherlock stood up and crossed his arms over his chest.

"Tempting, but as my parents might be home before we finish showering, we ought to get a move on."

John was stone-faced.

"Oh come on, you know perfectly well I was teasing."

When he still didn't budge from his spot on the bed, Sherlock dropped to one knee and with a grand flourish took John's hand in his and did his very best impression of a southern American accent.
"John Hamish Watson, will you be ever so kind as to accept my sincere, heartfelt apology for accurately pointing out that while it has absolutely no bearing on anything of any significance that you are, in fact, older than I am?"

"Git."
With the primary focus of their shower completed, John and Sherlock completely lost all track of time and were making out like hormone-ravaged teenagers in the downstairs shower. John had Sherlock pinned against the navy blue tile wall; both wrists held fast by his hands and his leg was firmly pressed between Sherlock's, allowing him very little movement.

John released his wrists and wrapped his arms around Sherlock, one hand on his arse. Between the steady humming of the running shower and their throaty moans of arousal, they didn't hear the knocking or notice the doorknob turning.

"Sherlock, where are Mother and Fa-Aaah!" Mycroft shouted.

John jumped halfway out of his skin. Sherlock flung the glass door open and for the second time in as many days, charged at his older brother completely starkers.

"Give me one reason, one bloody reason not to wring your scrawny, intruding neck." He had Mycroft against the wall, his arm pressed across his collarbones.

"For god's sake Sherlock, in my shower?" Mycroft snarled.

Sherlock released his grip and they sniped at each other while John struggled to get dressed without letting Mycroft see him naked. He was buttoning up his shirt as he approached the still bickering brothers.

"Hey, Sherlock – did you ask him about that woman at the door?" John asked in an attempt to get them to act like adults rather than children.

Sherlock cocked his head and smiled at Mycroft. "Why was Meredith Ashton here looking for you and why were you supposed to give her money?"

Mycroft's eyes opened wide and he squared his shoulders. "That is an entirely personal matter.

"She must really have something on you. You have a truly awful poker face, Mycroft." John held out a towel to Sherlock, who seemed to forget that he was dripping wet.

"Did you spend all of the money you stole from me?" Mycroft ignored John completely.

"Most of it," Sherlock said as he pulled his trousers on. "I'm sure you have plenty more in the bank. Why don't you write her a cheque?"

"I can't." Mycroft said through gritted teeth.

"Well now you have to tell me." Sherlock's curiosity was piqued and he would not be able to concentrate on anything else until he knew.

Mycroft snarled and reached into his breast pocket. He pulled out a photograph of a little girl in a blue dress with yellow ribbons in her brown pigtails. She smiled with a big dimpled grin; her two front teeth were missing.

"Her name is Mia. She's 9 years old and she's my daughter."

John's jaw dropped, Sherlock snatched the picture from Mycroft's hand.
"Go on. Say it, Sherlock. Ridicule me, get it over with." He crossed his arms.

"Why the big secret? It's not as if you're teenagers or something. If you and this Meredith woman have a child, why doesn't anyone know about her?" John stood close to Sherlock and looked at the photograph.

"Her name is Meredith Cleary now and she is married to one of my colleagues. Our affair was as ill-advised as it was brief. I only found out the truth recently and she won't let me see her. I've been giving her money for the last five months. I can't write a cheque, my accounts are monitored due to my security clearance. Besides that, it would look incriminating if it was discovered I was writing regular cheques to a colleague's wife. It's a trade-off. I get to know everything about everything but I myself have no hope of having privacy. I have a limited amount of pounds in cash in my wall safe; that's what I've been sending to Meredith." He crossed his arms and awaited whatever piss-taking was in his future.

Sherlock laughed. "Oh you giant idiot. She isn't yours. Meredith is leaving her lump of a husband and she's using your money to finance her divorce. How stupid can you actually be?"

The hot red anger that rose from underneath Mycroft's collar swept all the way up his face. Sherlock held the photo up in front of his brother's eyes and pointed to the little girl's smiling face in the photograph.

"Dimples, my dear brother, are traits determined by dominant genes. I may have only seen a smile once or twice on Meredith's wretched face but she doesn't have them and neither do you. Do I have to draw you a Punnett square?"

Mycroft tilted his head and his eyes bugged out. He chewed the inside of his cheek as he turned on his heel and left the bathroom without another word and slammed the door behind him.

Sherlock turned to John, "Haven't I always I told you that I was the smart one?"

xXx

Later that night, they sat around a table at Mr. Holmes's favorite restaurant. They toasted to his health and enjoyed the meal. Mrs. Holmes closely monitored every sip of wine Mycroft drank and clicked her tongue at him when he asked for his glass to be refilled.

Mr. Holmes told Mycroft all about the gallery and his painting that now hung there.

"Which painting?" Mycroft asked.


"I never understood that title, but it is a beautiful piece." Mycroft took a long sip of wine, much to his mother's dismay.

"It's your Mum's initials, Mycroft." John looked up from his meal at Mycroft's bewildered face.

"Marceline Mycroft, MM. M is 1000 in Roman numerals, therefore MM is 2000." His tone wasn't condescending, but he was quite surprised that he worked it out and Mycroft hadn't; particularly since he'd essentially had his entire life to think about it and it only took John a few minutes of silence pressed against Sherlock's chest in a cab.

John saw Sherlock smirking into his glass as he took a sip. Their eyes met for a moment and Sherlock winked subtly. When he looked back at Mycroft, his expression was as "just sucked a bag
"I'm glad you could make it back in time for dinner, son. It wouldn't be the same without your cheerful disposition at the table." Mr. Holmes, red in the face with sleepy alcohol besotted eyes, held his glass up to Mycroft in a salute. John snorted and covered his face with his napkin in an attempt to disguise his laughter.

Sherlock didn't say much during the meal but to John's happy surprise, he ate without being reminded. For the most part, he sat back in his chair with his hand on John's knee and smiled to himself. Halfway through the salad course, John realized that Sherlock had given him all of the tomatoes from his salad and John had picked out all of the banana peppers from his own and gave them to Sherlock. He didn't remember making the exchange; it was just something they had always done.

When their entrees arrived, John dug into his spaghetti carbonara with embarrassing zeal.

"He lives on a lettuce leaf, eh son?" Mrs. Holmes chuckled as John turned red and wiped the sauce from his chin.

"Maybe he eats slightly more than that Mum," Sherlock replied and gave John's knee a squeeze. As is a mother's habit, she monitored how much Sherlock had eaten and looked at him frowning.

"Sherlock, don't you like your meal?" She gestured to the plate of shrimp risotto, barely touched.

"Hm? Yes, of course, it's very good."

"But darling, you've barely touched it." She took a long draught from her wine glass, eyeing him.

"I'm/He's saving room for cake," Sherlock and John replied simultaneously.

After the meal, they piled into the minicab that would return them to the Holmes estate. Both of the elder Holmeses and their younger son fell asleep on the way, leaving John and Mycroft awake. It was the closest they had been to being alone for any amount of time.

"Are you alright?" John had three gin and tonics and was feeling very honest.

"I'm always alright." Mycroft didn't turn his head to address John.

"Bullshit. You look upset. Is it about the girl? Did you want to be her father?" John made an extra effort not to slur his words or speak loudly enough to wake the others. He watched Mycroft's silhouette stiffen.

"I can't answer that question, John."

"Mycroft, you can be honest with me. I'm pissed, I might not remember in the morning. You're allowed to be human from time to time." He hesitantly placed a hand on Mycroft's shoulder.

"Take care of Sherlock."

"Eh?"

"My brother is…important to me."

"He is to me, too."
John watched Mycroft nod and that was the end of that. The cab pulled into the drive and John nudged Sherlock to wake him. It struck him how vulnerable and child-like his face always looked when he was waking up. He caressed the back of his fingers softly across Sherlock's cheek and kissed his eyelids.

John helped Mrs. Holmes step out the car and Mr. Holmes held her arm as the three of them walked into the house.

"Thank you for having me this weekend." John gave them a shy grin.

"You are welcome here whenever you like, dear boy." She kissed his cheek.

"Happy Birthday again, Mr. Holmes." John held his hand out and Mr. Holmes pulled him into a hug.

"This is the happiest I've seen my son in…possibly ever. I credit that to you." He said when he let go of John. He didn't have a reply, he just sighed contentedly and smiled as they took each other's hands and walked towards their bedroom.

John assumed Sherlock and Mycroft were sneaking one last cigarette before turning in for the night. He chose to let them speak privately and he got ready for bed. He crawled between the sheets, intending to stay awake at least until Sherlock came in but the excitement of the day and the strong drinks he had at dinner caught up to him and he nodded off.

Sherlock crept into the bedroom, switched the light off and changed into pyjamas in the dark. Cautious not to disturb John, he slid one arm under his head and pulled him into a spooning position; his chest to John's back. He placed a whisper of a kiss to John's hairline and closed his eyes.

The goodbyes the next morning were brief, but both of Sherlock's parents made John promise not to let too much time elapse before his next visit. Mycroft took a separate cab back, intending on stopping at Meredith's and having it out with her once and for all.

It was early afternoon by the time they arrived back at home.

xXx

They didn't leave John's bedroom very often for the next few days. Sherlock's experimentation regarding John's volume was yielding satisfying results. Before either of them knew it, the day John and Harry agreed to meet at the storage locker arrived. John was anxious and distracted all morning. Sherlock did his best to stay out of his way. He watched him stare into space, clasping his medallion tightly near his lips, whispering to himself. An hour before the appointed meeting time, he retreated to his bedroom and made the floor vibrate from the volume of the music he was playing.

The landline phone rang and Sherlock answered.

"Lo?"

"Oh – erm, is John there?" It was a woman's voice.

"He's indisposed at the moment."

"Is this Sherlock?"

"It is, yes."

"Sherlock, hi. This is Harry erm- Harriet. John's sister." He swallowed, relieved.
"Hello." He was suddenly lost for words. "I recently met your former wife."

_That was a stupid thing to say._ He could tell by the pregnant pause on the other end of the phone.

"Yeah, well. John told me you're coming to help us sort through things, are you?"

"I am. Unless you'd rather I not come..." He found it difficult to read new people over the telephone and it was aggravating. There was so much less context available to decipher without body language.

"No! I don't mind one bit. I'm... glad John has someone there to support him. I don't know how much you know about our parents."

"Enough to know that this could be a difficult day for you both. Might I suggest you avoid all alcohol entirely?"

His bluntness was refreshing and darkly amusing. "I'll take that under advisement, cheers. You're right though, it is going to be a rough afternoon. That's sort of why I'm calling. I know we planned to go out to dinner tonight but I was wondering if we could order in? My treat. At yours or mine, it makes no difference to me. We might not be in the mood to be out in public."

"The idea certainly has merit and your logic is sound. I only have one demand."

She huffed, slightly exasperated by him. "Yes?"

"Please let me pay." He heard her exhale and possibly chuckle.

"Agreed."

"Our flat might be more suitable. You'd have a private room to sleep in, should you choose to spend the night and if you and John need time alone, I can easily retreat to my own space."

"The idea has merit and your logic is sound." She repeated, imitating his voice.

"Did you want to speak to John directly? He's upstairs abusing his eardrums."

"David Bowie?"

"Sex Pistols."

"Ooh, he is really freaked out about this, huh?" She sighed.

"I like that you know that." Sherlock smiled, certain that she was sober and that would please John.

"You can't grow up in the same house with him and not know that. He is going to need you. I am very glad you're coming."

"I can, or rather...erm...if you need support, I'll do my best to..." He stumbled over his tongue forming the sentence.

"Thank you, Sherlock. I look forward to meeting you. See you shortly."

They hung up and Sherlock went upstairs to tell John about the slight change of plans. John agreed it would be a good idea.

"I like your sister," Sherlock observed.
"Do you? From one conversation? You don't generally like people." John pulled his trainers on and tied his laces. Once downstairs, Sherlock hailed a cab and they were on their way to the address of the storage facility Harry had sent him in an e-mail. As they rode silently, John flicked through his Facebook page. He'd received a Friend Request alert earlier but hadn't checked it yet. He tapped the screen and his jaw went slack.

*Simon Foster has sent you a Friend Request.*

His thumb trembled over the screen. He had never, ever been more grateful that Sherlock avoided all social media.

"Oh, that didn't take very long at all." Sherlock was looking over John's shoulder at his phone.

"You, you *knew* about this?"

"It was hardly a Herculean feat to find him. I found the website of the school you attended and looked up the class roster in the archive. Once I had the list, I realized you hadn't told me Simon's last name and unfortunately, there were three Simons in your year."

"Ok, ok. Quit trying to impress me. How did you work out which Simon it was?"

"The school website also had a listing of the faculty and I matched Mr. Howard Foster, former Head of Sixth with his son, and you first paramour, Simon."

John clenched his jaw. "He was *not* my bloody paramour." Sherlock ignored him and continued.

"After that it was a small matter of hacking into your Facebook account, finding his profile and hitting the thumbs up button on a few of his photos."

"YOU WHAT?"

"I thought it might be helpful to you if you spoke to him about what went on between you."

John rested his phone on his knee and covered his face with his hands, groaning in exasperation.

"Sherlock, do I need to explain to you how many levels of wrong what you just said is?"

"Nonsense." He waved his hand dismissively.

John began to say several different things, but stopped. Instead he chose to laugh. Hard. He laughed so hard and for so long, his stomach ached and his face went red. The left corner of Sherlock's mouth curled upward in to a smile. John was wiping his eyes as the cab pulled up in front of the storage facility. Sherlock paid the driver with the last of the £100 notes he pilfered from Mycroft.

"Johnny!"

They heard her calling from across the street and turned toward the sound of her voice. She broke into a light jog and waved to them. As she got closer, she looked worried.

"Johnny, your face is all red. Have you- have you been crying?" She put her hand on his shoulder and looked him in the eye.

"No, no. I was laughing. Long story, I'll explain later. Hi sis." He kissed both of her cheeks and gave her a hug.

Harry Watson, Sherlock observed, was exactly two inches shorter than John with the exact same
colour eyes. Her skin was unusually pale and clear for a chronic alcoholic; he was expecting her to have a slight yellow tinge to her complexion. Her light brown hair was pulled up into a bun on top of her head, revealing an elegant neck and two diamond stud earrings in her ears; there was a much smaller diamond chip in her right nostril. Her smile had a similar appearance to John's and in spite of being younger than he by several years, she appeared to be at least the same age; her face was lined as deeply as John's. She had a slight frame underneath the baggy green cable knit jumper and black leggings.

"Harry, this is Sherlock. Sherlock, my sister Harry."

"I've heard so much about you." She gave him a genuine smile and extended her hand, unsure if she ought to kiss his cheek. He shook her hand and gave her a friendly nod.

"You ready, Johnny?"

"As ready as I'll ever be."

The three of them entered the facility after Harry entered her access code at the door. Her hand fit easily into the crook of John's arm and they walked slightly ahead of Sherlock.

"I got this unit mostly for storing staging furniture for unoccupied properties. I must have tucked the bins in here when I sold the house, I don't remember doing it but I don't remember much from those days." She frowned and her face was the picture of regret.

She opened the padlock and John helped her lift the retractable door. The locker was much bigger on the inside than it first appeared to be. It was organized quite well, furniture was neatly packed, covered in thick blankets to prevent the wood pieces from getting scratched. There was an easily traversed pathway through and she led them towards the back. Sherlock walked behind John and watched his gait slow down, he was nervous.

"So, here we are." Harry gestured to six unassuming, aged cardboard storage boxes stacked on top of each other. John felt a bit sick to his stomach from nerves. He was expecting to see more boxes, so there was some relief but his gut instinct told him that there was plenty of potential for emotional harm in the innocuous looking boxes. As he looked a bit closer, he saw that she had labeled each of the boxes. One was labeled "Dad BDRM", another was labeled "Study" two were "MISC" and the last two were labelled "Johnny BDRM".

Sherlock stepped forward and pulled the "Study" box from the top and laid it on the floor by his feet.

"Most of this can probably go into the skip out front, I can't remember why I didn't toss it all away from the beginning." She seemed hesitant about approaching the box Sherlock opened.

This box contained relics from their father's time in the army. Mostly consisting of yellowing papers, John leafed through the box with a moderate level of interest. Harry sat crossed-legged next to him, reading the documents he handed to her.

He knew his father served during the Dhofar War in Oman, but until he searched through the box he was unaware that his father had also served in Malaysia. In an unassuming wooden box, John found his father's GSM and a couple of others he didn't recognize. He quietly passed the box to Sherlock who closed it gently and put it on the floor.

John and Harry briefly discussed if they ought to keep the papers documenting their father's brief military career. Harry volunteered to take the documents and scan them into her computer, then the originals would be thrown away.
"All of this must have been in his roll-top desk," Harry pulled out a red leather bound address book and an engraved pewter mug reading:

_Sergeant Raymond Watson_

"He kept pens and pencils in this, remember Johnny?" She held it out for him to see and he nodded with a noncommittal grunt. The rest of the items were consistent with what one might find in a desk; envelopes, an empty notebook, stapler, sellotape dispenser, and a stack of letters wrapped with red twine. Harry tucked the letters into her bag without John noticing. The last item in the box, sat a small lockbox.

"Is this his gun?" Harry looked afraid to touch it.

"Doubtful. I think I remember you telling me that Clara turned it in to Metro after he died."

"Oh, that's right. I remember now. We had no use for it, so she turned it in.

"Sherlock? Fancy a challenge?" John lifted the metal box out by its handle, eyeing the tumbler lock.

He nodded and took hold of the handle. He sat on the floor nearby and began spinning the tumbler at random.

Aside from an awkward feeling of superiority for rising to a higher rank than his father, John made it through the first box and continued on.

Harry pulled one of the "MISC" boxes over to her and opened the lid. Inside she found all of their mother's photo albums, going back to her own childhood, straight through to Harry's 12th birthday. They'd spent that week by the sea on a holiday in Plymouth. Less than a month after they returned home, their mother was diagnosed with the breast cancer to which she would eventually succumb.

John and Harry looked at photographs of their younger selves. It was achingly obvious that their smiles were forced.

"They would have divorced if she didn't get sick," John commented offhandedly. "They hated each other by this point. I don't know why we even bothered to go on holiday that year."

Harry pulled the album into her and she continued to flip through the pages as John looked at another album from the box.

"There isn't a single picture of either of them in here. It's all you and me," she said.

"Why would they take pictures of each other? They couldn't be in the same room without fighting, they didn't need reminders of what either of them looked like," he replied sounding bitter. "How we ever made the drive down to Plymouth all in the same car is a mystery to me.

Sherlock reached into the box and pulled out one of the older albums. He opened the first page and saw that it was the Watsons' wedding album. John and Harry were talking amongst themselves so he quietly looked through the pages by himself, noting how much John physically resembled his father, except Raymond Watson seemed incapable of smiling. He paused at one page that held a photograph of a small boy, no more than 2 years old in the arms of the bride.

The photo was black and white and somewhat blurry but he recognized that the child must have been John and he cocked his head. John never mentioned that he was born before his parents married but he didn't speak much about his family. It would have been slightly taboo back in 1973 but not unheard of. He closed the album and held it to one side.
He watched John's face, checking for any signs of distress but he seemed fine. He and Harry even chuckled at happy memories couple of times while they went from album to album.

"If you see any photos that you want, I'll make copies," she offered.

"I'd at least like to have some pictures of Granny," John said. He had several albums scattered around him, which he proceeded to put back in the box.

"I'll go through the ones with my name on them myself. Chances are, it's all rubbish. I didn't leave anything of importance behind when I left." He pulled one of the boxes over between himself and Sherlock while Harry continued looking through the photo albums.

Sherlock was still holding the locked box in his lap and tapped his fingers on the top of it. He stared at the tumbler.

"John? What year was your mother born?"

"1948," he replied as he turned the pages of an old comic book. He looked up when Harry responded:

"1952."

"Mum was born in '52, Johnny." She cocked an eyebrow at him. "She was exactly 5 years and five months younger than Dad."

He looked at her, confused as to why he was so sure she was older but he shrugged and went back to sorting through comics and old, discarded notebooks. Sherlock pursed his lips and spun the tumbler.

48 to the left. 71 to the right and…

"Harry, what year were you born?"

John popped his head up, "This one I know. 1974." He still looked to Harry to confirmation and she nodded.

74 to the left.

The barely audible click gave Sherlock a jolt of victory but he wasn't sure if he should tell Harry that her recollection of her mother's date of birth was off. He opened the box and the hinges squeaked. At first glance there was nothing unexpected about the contents of the lockbox. Passport, military ID card, 2 wedding rings. Sherlock pulled a stack of official looking documents out and looked through them casually. One of them made him stop cold. His eyes opened wide and he read it twice.

"What's wrong?" John was staring at him, a stack of comics in front of him. Harry looked up from the photo albums.

"You got the box opened? How in the bloody hell did you do that?" She got up to her knees and craned her neck to try seeing what he was looking at.

John chortled, "It's what he does, Harry. He's a master of the impossible. So, Sherlock what's that there?"

Sherlock hesitated. He had no doubt that what he found would greatly upset John but he'd been caught and he couldn't think of a way to hide the document in his hand, unless he ate it; which he
was considering.

"It's uh, it's nothing."

"Liar," John knit his eyebrows together. "Show me." He tensed his jaw and tapped his thumb impatiently on his thigh.

He reluctantly handed the document over and John read it.

"What's the big secret, Sherlock? It's only my mother's death certificate…” He kept reading and Sherlock held his breath.

"What the…fuck. This can't be right." The colour drained from John's face.

"What's wrong, Johnny?" Harry scooted over and knelt beside him, looking over his shoulder. "Oh, her maiden name is wrong. It wasn't Kelly, it was Mulligan." She rested her chin on her brother's shoulder.

"Look at the date of death," John said darkly. Her eyes grew large and she held her breath.

"16 March 1972. But, that's impossible."

John got up to his feet and began to pace. Harry looked lost and turned her attention to Sherlock, pleading with him to explain.

"Harry, John's mother's name was Constance Kelly, born in 1948. That's what is on his birth certificate." Sherlock flipped over a few pages and showed her the evidence before continuing. "Your mother...was Constance Mulligan, born in 1952." He pulled her birth certificate from the pile and handed it to her.

"She wasn't my mother," John was fingering his medallion, still pacing. "I can't believe this. It makes a lot of bloody sense, but I can't fucking believe this. You're not my sister…” He looked at Harry, who was frozen in place, still holding the two birth certificates in her hands.

"John," Sherlock said softly. "She is your sister, she's your half-sister." He decided to show John the wedding album that he'd pushed aside. He held the photograph of John and his step-mother up for them both to see.

John's heart sank into his stomach. "He married two women named Constance. Two of them. And this bitch," John took the album from Sherlock's hands and pointed at himself as a two year old. "Never loved me. Never bloody wanted me. This explains so much."

"Johnny…” Harry got to her feet and walked to him cautiously. She could see he was teetering at the edge of a meltdown, Sherlock saw it too.

"I can't...Sod this, sod it. I need some air." John threw the album to the ground and kicked it as hard as he could, sending it skittering across the floor and under a table.

"John –" Sherlock began but John threw his hands up as he walked away.

"Should we go after him?" Harry asked softly. She was still reading over the documents in her hands. "I swear I didn't know."

"I'll go. Wait here. We might have to continue this another day." He hesitantly squeezed her shoulder and she put her hand on his for a moment.
It had started raining since they'd been inside. Sherlock swiveled his head left and right, looking for John.

"John?!" He called.

John was bent over, leaning his hand against the skip and retching. Sherlock raced to him, nearly slipping in a puddle, they were both soaked to the skin. He rubbed John's back as the last of whatever was left in his stomach hit the ground.

"She wasn't my mother, Sherlock. That's why she never protected me from that bastard. She didn't care about me at all. It makes so much sense now. I always thought it was my fault."

"John, you were a child. Of course it wasn't your fault." He wrapped John in an embrace and held him hard, even when he tried to push him off.

"Why didn't they tell me, Sherlock? Why the fuck didn't one of them ever sit me down and tell me the bloody truth?" Sherlock released him from the embrace.

"I don't know. They should have. I'm sorry, John."

"I need to go for a walk. I need to think." He stomped away with his hands buried deeply into his pockets.

"Johnny!" Harry came racing out of the building and he ignored her.

"John!" She hollered after him.

"John Hamish!" He stopped walking but didn't turn around. She ran to him and grabbed him in a hug, which he resisted and did not return.

"This doesn't mean anything. You are my big brother. You protected me, you took care of me. Nothing is going to change that, ever. They're dead and we're alive. Fuck them."

John took a deep breath and hugged her back at last. Sherlock approached them and he rubbed John's back affectionately.

"I've called for a taxi. Let's get out of the rain. I doubt either of you are hungry but if you are, I'll get takeaway. John?"

John turned to him with angry tears being washed from his eyes by the rain.

"None of that rubbish matters. You're five times the man your father ever was and you became a good man in spite of your upbringing. That is something to be proud of."

"How do you know just what to say?" John sighed and leaned into him. They shared a kiss in the rain. When they came apart, Sherlock saw Harry smiling at him over John's shoulder. She nodded her head in approval and he nodded back.
Chapter 13

John's mood darkened again as he was sandwiched in between Harry and Sherlock during the taxi ride back to Baker Street. His fingers were linked with the detective's and she rested her head on his shoulder.

She was trying to get John to speak to her but he remained composed, quiet and rigid. The more she spoke, the harder John was squeezing Sherlock's hand to show his inner distress and discomfort. Knowing her brother as well as she did, she was well aware that he was internalizing his feelings. She only hoped that he wasn't all alone when the cork finally flew out of the neck of his emotional champagne bottle.

In the relative quiet of the backseat of the taxi John was thinking back on occasions he had tried to get positive attention from the woman he believed to be his mother and all of the times he was greeted by cold indifference. No marks or test scores were good enough, no rugby match winning goal was exciting enough. If she were alive when he was applying to university, he was sure she wouldn't have been impressed by his results there either. As an adult, he assumed that his father's alcoholism and putrid outlook on life had poisoned her ability to be happy, but now that John knew the truth, it stung even more.

"Why," he finally said when they reached the privacy of the flat at 221b. "Would a woman marry a widowed man with a child if she had no intention of being a proper mother?" He posed the question to no one in particular. Sherlock and Harry exchanged concerned looks.

"Hmm? No answer for that? Brilliant. I need a drink." He toed off his trainers and marched directly to the liquor cupboard.

"John…" Sherlock began cautiously.

"What?" He snapped at him angrily. "I'll do you one better; why would a man marry a woman who didn't accept his child? I was a little kid, what did I ever do to her?" They heard glass bottles tinkling against each other.

"John, that isn't a great idea…” Harry crossed her arms over her abdomen. In truth, she was dying for a drink but she felt that loyalty to her brother was tantamount to giving into her addiction.

John laughed sardonically. "Excuse me? You're going to lecture me about drinking? You are? Spare me, baby sister." He twisted the cap off a half-empty bottle of single malt and took a gulp that set his chest on fire as soon as it went down. Looking worried and dejected, Harry sat quietly on the sofa, twirling her silver thumb ring around and around. Her knee was bouncing nervously as Sherlock spoke.

"She's only trying to help. Put the bottle down." Sherlock took two steps closer to him.

"It's either whisky or hydrochloric acid. I'm drinking one of them tonight – so I suggest the pair of you back the fuck off."

"We're both here because we love you, John. Please put the bottle down." Sherlock took another step forward.

"Not until it's empty." He took a defiant sip, glaring at his sister.

"Johnny! Stop this immediately. You and your goddamned hair trigger temper." Harry jumped out of
her chair and got across the room to him before Sherlock could intervene. She took John by surprise, pushed him back and snatched the bottle from his hand and proceeded to dump its contents out the open sitting room window without any thought as to who might have just potentially received a shower of alcohol. She slammed the bottle down on the table next to the window.

"No one is sorrier than I am for the way they treated you. But keep in mind that I didn't have it much better. For better or worse, they're the ones who raised us. We can't change it. Believe me when I tell you it's not going to be at all profitable for you to drink yourself stupid. That's what Dad would do; do you really want to be like him?"

Stunned into silence, John visibly deflated. His shoulders slumped and he covered his face in his hands. Without another word he grabbed Harry around the waist and pulled her into his chest. She held him and rubbed his back.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry," his voice was quiet.

"It's fine. You were angry, I don't care." She rocked him side to side, still holding him tightly. "I still love you."

"It's not fine. I don't want to be like him. I look like the son of a bitch; that is more than enough. I'm sorry Harry. Sherlock -" John looked up from his sister's shoulder but Sherlock wasn't there.

Harry released John from her grip and they both looked around their immediate area for Sherlock. John went down the hall; he wasn't in the bedroom or the bath. He listened at the bottom of the stairs that lead to the second bedroom and upon hearing Sherlock's voice, sighed with relief.

"He's upstairs. Give me a minute." John carefully climbed the stairs and Sherlock's voice grew louder as he approached. He pressed his ear to the bedroom door.

"Well Mum the reason I called is that it recently has occurred to me how fortunate I was to have you and Dad as my parents. You're ordinary and unremarkable but I'm extraordinary and remarkable enough for all of us. I had a supportive upbringing in a safe environment. I wanted to say thank you."

John smiled and gently knocked on the door.

"Just a moment, Mum. Yes?" He called out. John turned the knob.

"Can I come in?"

"It's your room." John peered inside his bedroom and Sherlock was seated cross-legged on the bed, his shoes were sticking out from underneath the bed skirt.

"Mm-hmm. Yes, Mum this is about him. I can't really explain at the moment. No, they're both deceased." He looked up at John guiltily; he'd been caught telling his mother about John's terrible family life in his formative years.

"Erm – John? She's asking to speak to you." Sherlock held his mobile out to John, who took it from his hand and sat next to him on the bed before he spoke.

"Mrs. Holmes?"

"John, my dear boy. Will was just telling me about what happened with your sister. You mustn't give your parents another thought. You are a wonderful, accomplished, remarkable man and they were foolish not to recognize how lucky they were to have such a son." Her words bounced around his
head like a rubber ball while his heart soared with affection for Sherlock's mother.

"Thank you, Mrs. Holmes. That is sweet of you to say."

"If it's not being terribly forward, John – Bertie and I would be delighted if you chose to call us Mum and Dad. You are part of the family now. Think of us as parents. If you want to."

John looked up at Sherlock, who was smiling brightly.

"I appreciate that very much. Thank you."

They exchanged parting pleasantries and John handed the phone back to Sherlock, who wished his mother a good night before he ended the call.

"She couldn't be any more of the polar opposite to the woman who raised me if she were trying to be." John took Sherlock's hand.

"Believe me when I tell you that if your stepmother were still alive, she would have also given her a piece of her mind. Marceline Holmes is many things but a drooping lily is not one of them." Sherlock observed.

"Sherlock – I'm sorry I snapped. Along with prematurely greying hair I inherited my father's temper. I'm trying not to be like him and I'm not always successful. It's been a life-long struggle."

"I assure you that making amends is unnecessary. You were upset and you needed to let off some steam. Let's go back down to your sister, she'll think we're up to no good up here if we stay much longer."

John chuckled and led the way back to the sitting room where they found Harry, who was in the middle of her own phone call.

"It was the most insane thing. I don't know if it has hit me completely yet. Well, how do you think he took it? He lost it…” Harry paused as she took notice of the two men returning to the sitting room.

"I, uh, yeah. So crazy day. Listen, do you think there is any way we can…yes. Ok. Yeah, alright. I'll see you soon. I love you, too Cookie.” John saw the blush illuminate her cheeks and it made the left side of his mouth curl up into a smirk. He knew exactly who she was talking to. When she ended the call she had a tiny grin on her face to match his.

"So. How is Cookie?" John asked in his big brother voice, crossing his arms over his chest. Harry pursed her lips and rolled her eyes hard.

"She's good, thanks. Sends her regards. Johnny, I erm…” She looked away from him as if a good excuse for leaving was written on the sitting room wall.

"Harry, go. Go see her. I'm ok. Better than ok. We can talk tomorrow.” He waved her off.

"Sorry – I take it Clara is Cookie, but why Cookie?" Sherlock looked between them both with questioning eyes. John rubbed his right hand over his eyes and massaged his temples.

"Because she's erm…soft and delicious,” Harry sounded a bit embarrassed, she and John both giggled a bit.

"Ah. Well John is also soft and delicious –” He watched John cringe out of the corner of his eye.

"Well, be that as it may – I guess I'll be off. I have some…baking to do."
"Alright, alright – that's just about enough of this analogy, I think." John held his hands up in surrender and Harry laughed.

"You're going to be ok?" She stood up and put her arms around his neck.

"I'm ok. Honest. Go get laid." He winked at her and she laughed again.

Harry slung her bag across her chest and turned to Sherlock who was contemplating what pet name he could give John that would be sufficiently embarrassing to use outside of their flat.

"It was lovely to meet you at long last, Sherlock. Take care of that one." She indicated John with a rapid lift of her chin.

"Good to meet you as well, Harry. Leave it to me, I'll sort him out." He held his hand out to her but she stepped in and gave him a peck on the cheek.

"I'll speak to you soon Johnny. Good night." She waved and a second later was bounding down the stairs.

"If they're divorced, why are they still sleeping together?" Sherlock cocked his head and stared at the empty space Harry had been occupying moments before.

"They're the lesbian Burton and Taylor. They split up, reconcile, split up, reconcile. It's been going on for years. I can't tell you how shocked I was when they actually went through with the divorce. I thought for sure they'd call it off. I honestly think Clara did it to teach my sister a lesson." John flopped on the sofa, exhausted.

"Do you think they'll remarry? Burton and Taylor did. Several times." Sherlock nudged John to make room for him on the sofa. John scooted all the way back and allowed Sherlock to weave himself into his arms. They didn't exactly fit comfortably but neither one of them complained.

Soon after, Sherlock was snoring softly and John was wide awake. He wiggled his arm free and pulled his mobile out of his pocket. He opened the Facebook app and accepted Simon's Friend Request.

When he clicked on Simon's profile picture, he saw the familiar face of his childhood friend with slightly longer hair and a cultivated stubbly beard. He was wearing a dark blue suit with a bright blue paisley pocket square and had his arm around a brunette woman wearing a similar colour blue. As he scrolled through a few weeks' worth of Simon's status updates, a chat window opened.

Well if it isn't John Watson. Rugby star and war hero.

Hi Simon. It's been a long time.

I'll say. I couldn't have been more surprised to see your name pop up out of nowhere. Last I heard, you were in Iraq or somewhere.

Afghanistan, actually.

O. Sorry.

It's fine. How have you been?

Oh, you know. Staying busy. These kids will be the death of me.

You have kids?
Yes, but I was referring to my students. I've continued the Foster Family Teaching Legacy.

Your father was a good teacher. I qualified for A levels in Chem, Biology and in Maths because of him. He encouraged me, made sure I got tutoring when I needed it.

Always an overachiever.

Guilty as charged, Your Honor.

How are you staying busy these days?

Medicine, mostly. I see patients at a small surgery but I also work cases with a private detective.

That sounds exciting.

Yep.

Can I ask you something?

Course.

Do you remember that night? In my parents' back garden? The meteor shower.

Yep, I remember.

Is that why we stopped being friends? Did it make you hate me that much?

I never hated you Simon. Ever. Do you remember how my father was?

"John, quit being such a fucking pouf and go punch someone then fuck every girl who looks at you."

Ha. Practically an exact quote.

He was a charmer.

I was really confused about that night for a long time. Years.

I had no idea. Do I owe you an apology?

No, not at all. I never told anyone about it until a few days ago when I told my partner.

Interesting thing to call your girlfriend...

Interesting way to get me to tell you that my partner is a man.

Ah. That is a surprise.

I'm sorry about the way I treated you after that night. I was immature and confused.

I appreciate the apology but we were kids, John. It's water under the bridge. I have to go grade some papers. Maybe we can get together for a drink sometime?

Sounds good.

John closed the chat window and went to his own profile. He chuckled quietly to himself as he changed his relationship status from "Single" to "In a Relationship". Almost immediately, his phone
informed him that Harriet Suzanne and Clara Rougas-Watson had both clicked "Like".
Chapter 14

It was an ordinary Sunday at 221b Baker Street.

John woke before Sherlock and carefully lifted his arm from where it had been resting across his chest. Sherlock had fallen asleep with one of his legs over John's and he had to wiggle it free without disturbing his partner. Sherlock's untidy mop of curls was splayed all over John's pillow in spite of Sherlock's own pillow being mere centimetres away, completely undisturbed.

He yawned and rotated his shoulder blades this way and that as he pulled on his dressing gown and tied it loosely at his waist. His bad shoulder ached from the weight of Sherlock laying on it all night. He made a quick stop in the bathroom to relieve his aching bladder and brush his teeth. As he proceeded with his morning ministrations, he tilted his head to the side and caught sight of a shockingly purple mark on the side of his neck. A smirk curled his lips as he spit toothpaste into the sink. He bit down on his toothbrush and used both hands to rub at the mark.

I specifically told him not to bite quite so high, I'll never be able to hide this, not even with a scarf. He thought.

A moment later while he looked at his reflection in the mirror, he shrugged and raised his eyebrows. It was no longer important to him to care. He was happy at long last. He wasn't about to let a rogue love bite ruin his morning. It had been eight months since his and Sherlock's relationship had evolved from flatmates to bedmates. They had recently decided to cohabitate the bedroom on the first floor and use John's former room for storage space. They discussed eventually turning it into a proper study where they could meet with prospective clients in an area separate from their living space.

As he made his way to the kitchen, he picked up the empty glasses of wine from the sitting room table and placed them in the sink. He spin around on his heel, his dressing gown twirling around him like an old-fashioned opera cape as he tried to think of where the empty wine bottle could have gotten to. He recalled drinking in the sitting room after dinner the night before but the bottle wasn't where he thought it should be.

Again, he shrugged his shoulders and went about his morning routine – the empty bottle would eventually turn up.

Opening the refrigerator, John removed the egg carton and some other ingredients and set to work preparing breakfast. He'd worked up quite an appetite the night before.

Fancying a bit of noise, he switched on the radio and was delighted to hear one of his favorite songs had just begun. John nodded his head in time to the music while he diced a whole tomato, cracked six eggs and beat them in a ceramic bowl with a fork.

"My sweet Lord…mm my Lord…mm my Lord…I really wanna' see you…" he sang to himself, putting on an exaggerated Liverpudlian accent. He was making his way effortlessly around the kitchen while he prepped breakfast. The song went on and John went on singing both parts…

"My sweet Lord (Hare Krishna) My Lord (Krishna Krishna) My Lord (Hare Hare)…”

The sound of the bathroom door clicking shut made him look up but only caused a momentary halt to the proceedings. The butter he'd dropped into the frying pan had melted and he grabbed hold of the handle to spread the melted butter across the cooking surface. He then dropped the scrambled egg and tomato mixture into the pan and relished the sizzling sound it made as it began to cook.
No matter how many times he'd heard the song, the actual lyrics by the end were always dodgy in his memory so as usual, he sang whatever it sounded like whether or not they were the actual words. By the time the song ended he looked up and saw Sherlock, similarly clad in pyjama bottoms, a t-shirt and loosely tied navy silk robe leaning against the entranceway to the sitting room, arms crossed over his chest. The detective stifled a yawn with the back of his hand.

John smirked. "Morning, Mrs. Watson." He added a ridiculously over the top eyebrow wiggle for effect before looking back down to what he was doing. He tossed in two handfuls of fresh spinach and used a spatula to work the leaves in with the egg and tomato.

Sherlock grunted and shuffled his feet across the room toward the kitchen. He placed a hand casually on John's hip and leaned in to place a soft kiss on his cheek before switching the kettle on. The well-used appliance lit up in obedience.

"You need a shave. And I do wish you wouldn't call me that." He said nonchalantly as he reached for two mugs in the cupboard.

"And I wish you'd stop leaving body parts in jars in the pantry. I took what I thought was a jar of Mrs. Hudson's homemade pickles out last week and you can imagine my surprise when I saw it was actually…"

"Yes, yes, alright. Your point is made." Sherlock waved him off dismissively. "That still doesn't make me your Missus, don't change the subject." He shuffled off to the sitting room and plunked down in his chair.

"Well the day you stop introducing me to people as your 'Balls and Chain' will be the day I stop calling you 'Mrs. Watson' in the privacy of our own home." John said with a balled up fist resting on his waist.

"I find that quite amusing, actually." Sherlock said pouting his lower lip out in consideration.

"You would."

"What are you making over there? Can't we just have tea and toast?" Sherlock craned his neck looking toward the final ingredient John tossed into the pan as he folded the omelet in half.

"Nope. Not today. I fancied something different," John said without looking at him. The water in the kettle boiled rapidly and John was quick to prepare tea for each of them.

"Where did you learn to cook, anyway?" Sherlock asked.

"In the army." John said while he plated their meals. "Come get it." He raised his eyes to Sherlock, who exhaled heavily in an expression of impatience as he stood up and went back to the kitchen.

"You weren't in the catering core. Though I think you'd look adorable in nothing but a chef's hat." Sherlock said taking a plate and mug from John's hand. He sat at the kitchen table and lifted his fork, but decided to wait until John sat down.

John rolled his eyes. "No indeed. But that's where I learnt it all. It could get quite dull at night so I read a lot. I read everything I could get my hands on, including cookbooks. Once in a while, they'd let me in the kitchen. I met an American reporter embedded over in Helmand who was a real foodie. He joined my unit on patrol sometimes and when it was boring, we'd talk about food."

John was sitting opposite Sherlock but hadn't touched his own meal. He was sitting there waiting for Sherlock's appraisal.
"Oh, erm…" Sherlock used the edge of his fork to cut a triangular piece of omelet and raised it to his nose. "Smells quite nice." He took a bite and closed his eyes while he chewed. He took deep breaths to enhance the taste by breathing in the aroma.

John sat back with a satisfied grin as he cut his own meal into bite-size pieces.

"What's in this?" Sherlock asked as he copied John's movements with an eagerness to eat that made John puff his chest out with pride.

"Simple really. Farm fresh eggs, diced tomato, baby spinach and the key element…" John lifted his fork to show Sherlock the mostly melted white substance oozing from in between the other ingredients.


"I'm glad you like it. I learnt quite a few local recipes when I was in the east – I'm out of practice now of course but I was told by our interpreters that my qabili pilau was as close to authentic as any non-Arab could make. My chicken maglooba, was highly regarded too."

"Tell me, did you actually ever leave the canteen when you were in Afghanistan?" Sherlock said flippantly with a mouthful. The clinking sound of John angrily dropping his fork told Sherlock straight away that he'd made a serious mistake.

He lifted his eyes to John's face slowly. John's lips were pursed together tightly, he was chewing on the inside of his left cheek and his nostrils flared wide as he exhaled.

"You know, you can be a real cunt." John said through gritted teeth a few seconds later.

Sherlock frowned and his shoulders sank. He held a hand out to John but it was batted away.

"That was a grievous error in judgement on my part, John. I am honestly very sorry. I meant no offense."

John exhaled slowly, some of the ire fading from his face. He swallowed hard and took his mug of tea in his hands. Holding it to his lips he whispered a barely audible, "Whatever."

The congenial mood clearly ruined, they finished eating in silence. Sherlock kept his head down but stole looks up at John while they finished. He was eating robotically, neither hating nor enjoying his food. He stabbed each piece with his fork so that the metal scraped on the plate. That's when Sherlock knew he'd really put his foot in it. The sound of a metal utensil scraping on a plate never failed to make John grimace and he wasn't flinching one bit. John stood first and cleared his dish straight away that he'd made a serious mistake.

He lifted his eyes to John's face slowly. John's lips were pursed together tightly, he was chewing on the inside of his left cheek and his nostrils flared wide as he exhaled.

"You know, you can be a real cunt." John said through gritted teeth a few seconds later.

Sherlock frowned and his shoulders sank. He held a hand out to John but it was batted away.

"That was a grievous error in judgement on my part, John. I am honestly very sorry. I meant no offense."

John exhaled slowly, some of the ire fading from his face. He swallowed hard and took his mug of tea in his hands. Holding it to his lips he whispered a barely audible, "Whatever."

The congenial mood clearly ruined, they finished eating in silence. Sherlock kept his head down but stole looks up at John while they finished. He was eating robotically, neither hating nor enjoying his food. He stabbed each piece with his fork so that the metal scraped on the plate. That's when Sherlock knew he'd really put his foot in it. The sound of a metal utensil scraping on a plate never failed to make John grimace and he wasn't flinching one bit. John stood first and cleared his dish from the table. He pushed the sleeves of his dressing gown up while he ran the tap and wet the sponge they kept by the sink.

"No, no let me…" Sherlock stood hurriedly and motioned for John to stop cleaning. "You cooked, I'll do the washing up."

John raised an eyebrow at him and nodded. They stared at each other a minute.

"I'm sorry about that comment. I wasn't thinking." Sherlock placed his palm to John's chest. While John's face didn't look as angry as it had, his heart was pounding furiously behind his ribs. The silence was cavernous between them until John finally spoke.

"Thanks."
"What became of the American reporter you knew? The foodie one?" Sherlock asked, hoping the subject change would lighten the mood.

John cleared his throat and chewed on his upper lip. "He took a new embed assignment and…there was an IED in Kabul. From what I hear, he only lost a leg but it took out most of the supply convoy he was riding in about a month before that Taliban fucker shot me." He looked down at their bare feet and lifted his hand to his opposite shoulder and absentmindedly rubbed the scar that the sniper's bullet had left behind.

Sherlock tilted John's chin up and their eyes met. John's eyes were cloudy blue, a sea of awful memories crashed like waves on rocky cliffs in a storm. Sherlock searched every inch of his brain for the right thing to say but to no avail. When it came to emotions and saying the right thing, he knew he was outmatched.

"I'm sorry." Sherlock's voice was low and sincere. He hesitated for only a moment before placing his hands on John's waist and pulling him in for a long kiss. John had been leaning back, steadying himself with his hands on the countertop and Sherlock felt a bit of relief when he felt John return the kiss and pull him in closer.

They came apart and Sherlock leaned forward to rest his forehead on John's, the tips of their noses nuzzled.

"I'm sorry I got upset," John said at last with a deep exhale. "I know you were teasing but…sore subject."

"You don't owe me an apology, John. I can recognize when I'm out of line. Sometimes."

John smirked a little. "You liked it though?" The simple question made Sherlock smile, knowing the row wouldn't continue.

"Very much. Yes. And I'd like to try your lamb and baked rice. My mother used to make roasted rack of lamb when I was young but it was always too dry."

John nodded in agreement. "Next time I find it at a good price. I'll have a word with Abdul at the butcher shop."

Sherlock let his hand drop from John's waist and he interlaced their fingers. "Can we go back to bed now? I feel like I have something to make up to you."

John raised an eyebrow. The corners of Sherlock's mouth curled slightly. "And how do you intend to make it up to me?"

"Well, don't be alarmed, John but I may have to check your prostate. You know. For medical purposes." Sherlock crossed his arms over his chest and stepped backward to lean against the kitchen table. He crossed one foot over the other.

"I can't think of anything less appealing than a prostate exam, Sherlock." John pulled an awkward face. "Is that supposed to turn me on or something? You really ought to work on your pillow talk."

"I didn't mind it last night when you wanted to play doctor, John."

John rolled his eyes. "Have you forgotten that I actually am a doctor? I don't have to play at it." John cleared his throat and took a step closer to Sherlock, then another. They were a breath apart. "But you know how much I love making you shiver." John touched the tip of his left pointer finger to Sherlock's chest and lightly ran it all the way down to the waistband of his pyjamas. He tucked his
hand just below the fabric and stopped where Sherlock's hair began.

The game was on. First one to blink, loses.

A soft moan escaped Sherlock's slightly parted lips. He felt the tips of his ears burn and his cheeks flushed. John inched in closer until their chests were together and he teased his fingertips closer to Sherlock's rapidly stiffening cock.

"Would you like that, Sherlock? Do you want me to make you moan? Do you want to lose control, just a little?" John's voice was a husky, whispered rasp. He lifted himself up on tiptoe just enough to suck gently on his lover's collarbone. Sherlock was frozen on the spot, enraptured.

"Is that the spot? Just there?" John asked as he stroked back and forth with his tongue. He'd moved his left hand around to Sherlock's taut arse and was gripping it hard, forcing the taller man to stay put; not that we was trying to get away. John removed his other hand from inside his pyjamas and it swept up the back of Sherlock's t-shirt and he dragged his short nails along the impossibly soft skin of his lower back.

Sherlock's mind was set ablaze. He felt his skin burn everywhere he was touched. He felt fully consumed with a blinding need. His breathing was shallow, his heart rate elevated, his pupils dilated to the point that his vision was hazy around the edges. He was keenly aware that there was no quick escape, he was trapped between the kitchen table and John. There was a slight feeling of panic rushing through his veins. His fight or flight instincts were both trying to kick in at the same time. He heard a loud moaning which he realized had come from his own throat as John pushed his leg in between his thighs.

"You like not being in control, don't you?" John said greedily biting at Sherlock's chest through his t-shirt. He wasn't biting hard enough to draw blood, but it was more than enough to cause fireworks of pleasure to explode in Sherlock's mind.

"You love giving in to me." John had pulled Sherlock's pyjamas down exposing his pale arse and in one deft movement he lifted him onto the kitchen table, knocking Sherlock's abandoned teacup crashing to the floor. It never failed to surprise Sherlock when John manhandled him. In spite of their height difference, John was stronger, and a better fighter. They hungrily stared each other down as John whipped his pyjama bottoms the rest of the way off. He gripped Sherlock in a closed fist, carefully smoothed the foreskin back and began to pump him slowly. Rhythmic moans escaped Sherlock's throat and his back arched painfully.

John watched Sherlock squeeze his eyes shut tight and his knuckles turned white from gripping the edge of the kitchen table. With a devious grin, John lowered his mouth and drew a circle with his tongue around the head of Sherlock's cock, then took as much of his length into his mouth as he could manage. He kept a steady rhythm and felt Sherlock lifting his hips in time with his mouth. John touched himself and wet his middle finger with his own precum, then slowly pushed it into Sherlock eliciting a sharp intake of air. He hooked his finger carefully searching for his target. He found it and rubbed his fingertip up against it, all the while never altering the pace he had been keeping with his mouth. This was met by a hungry, guttural moan.

And then, nothing. John stopped everything and simply walked away toward the bedroom.

Sherlock's chest was heaving. The sudden deprivation of contact made him shake and he sat up wild-eyed.

"Wait…what…no…" He leaned up on his elbows.
"Suffer." John said walking away without a backward glance.

Sherlock clenched his jaw and tried to slow his pulse. "You…you…" He leapt off the table and his knees knocked each other as he got his bearings back. He tried to take a deep drag of air but his body was screaming at him, begging for release. Sherlock pulled his pyjamas back up and stomped to the bedroom throwing the door open.

John was laying on their bed, one arm casually propped behind his head as he leaned against the headboard. The remote control was resting on his chest. He didn't make eye contact but when Sherlock entered he saw an amused grin flash quickly on John's face.

"Are you really this…evil?" Sherlock asked slinking like a cat on a high wire over to the bed.

John raised a finger to his lips, "Shh, not now Sherlock. I'm watching A Bit of Fry and Laurie." John didn't look away from the screen.

"You've seen it before." Sherlock growled.

"Only about 100 times. I could recite this episode from memory, if you'd like. It's the one where Stephen Fry says that funny thing and Hugh Laurie says that other thing…" John was being a sarcastic arse on purpose, Sherlock knew that much.

The detective rushed over in a sexually frustrated rage. He grabbed the remote, quickly switched off the television and climbed onto the bed. Their mouths met again and again in a fury of passion. Sherlock made quick work of the few items of clothing John was wearing. He set his knees on either side of John's waist, and watched his expression burn with hunger as he indelicately spit in his palm and wrapped the long fingers of both hands around them both. John was still partially hard from their encounter in the kitchen, it didn't take long at all to get him back to his full hardness.

It was profoundly intense. In eight months, they had learned exactly how to get each other off quickly, as well as how to make it take agonizingly long. John let his head loll backward, knowing Sherlock was clearly in the mood for the former. He was quietly panting, watching Sherlock's every move, his eyes darting back and forth from the detective's face to his hand.

"Fuck…I'm gonna…" John let loose, bucking his hips as hot semen hit him in the chest. He took Sherlock by the waist and in one deft movement, flipped the taller man onto his back. He began sucking ravenously on every last inch of his cock while Sherlock's pubic hair tickled his face.

Sherlock dragged the fingernails of his right hand against John's scalp while he watched John's head bob frantically.

With a final grunt and upward thrust of his hips, Sherlock came down John's throat, making him sputter and choke. John wiped his mouth quickly on Sherlock's trembling thigh and flopped down on his stomach.

"Now would be a good time for a cigarette." Sherlock quipped, placing his palm on John's back.

"Not an option." John groaned into the pillow. Sherlock admired the curve of John's muscular backside and gave in to the need to grab ahold of it. He wiggled down slightly, wrapped one arm around John's chest, pulling him into a spooning position. He placed soft kisses along John's neck and behind his ear while kneading the flesh of his arse. John turned his head and dipped his tongue into Sherlock's mouth.

"You're gonna need to give me a minute if you want another go," he moaned softly.
Another few minutes passed as they lay there in that position kissing lazily. John rolled to his other side so they could be face to face. Their legs tangled together in the bed sheets while they explored the recesses of each other's mouths with eager tongues. Sherlock was gently stroking John in an attempt to coax him back to attention.

Suddenly, Sherlock's eyes burst open and he nearly punched John in the nose as he popped up to lean in his elbow. He faced the direction of the kitchen, indicating to John that he had heard something awry. Without a word, he disentangled his limbs from Johns' and made his way back to the kitchen.

"Oi! Where are you going? Sherlock?! OI!"

With a look of aggravation to be left in the lurch (not to mention left sporting an impressive semi so soon after coming once already), John groaned and grabbed for his boxers and dressing gown. He put both on and went in search of Sherlock.

He found him staring intently at the radio, which was now playing another of John's favorites –

_I look at the world, and I notice its turning, while my guitar gently weeps. With every mistake we must surely be learning, still my guitar gently weeps…_

"Ok, I'll bite, why did you get out of bed and why are you staring at the radio?" John asked, amused.

"Shh…listen." Sherlock threw a hand up at John to quiet him.

_I look at the floor and I see it needs sweeping, still my guitar gently weeps…_

Sherlock's chin jerked up and he spun on his heel. "Did you hear it?"

John cocked his head, "Do I hear the song? Yeah Sherlock – it's the Beatles…you know you're still naked, yeah?"

"The lyrics are wrong…” Sherlock said, holding his hand up again.

_I don't know how you were diverted, you were perverted too…_

"See? The lines are rearranged, it's all wrong."

John squinted, trying to remember the exact order of the verses. He shook his head, unable to fully recall. "I don't think so Sherlock. I mean, how could it be wrong? Oh, maybe it was recorded live and they cocked up the verses while they performed…"

"It's not a live track, John. You can't hear any ambient noise, no screaming girls – this is clearly a studio cut." Sherlock leaned back and steepled his fingers under his chin. "So why then…"

John placed his hands on Sherlock's hips. "Is this really important enough to get out of bed for? You were half way to wanking me off again and I'm left in this state for George Harrison?" John paused and chuckled. "I honestly never, ever thought that would be something I'd have cause to say to you." He moved in to kiss Sherlock's collarbone.

As if a light was switched on, Sherlock's chin juddered toward John. "What? Who?"

John's shoulders shook with a laugh as he leaned back. "George Harrison – the Beatles, the one who's singing this song – what did all details of modern music history go the way of the solar system out of your Mind Palace?"
"Shut up." Sherlock said with an eyeroll. "George Harrison sang that other song that was on when you were cooking earlier…"

John crossed his arms over his chest. "Yeah but that song was from later in his career as a solo artist. That one came out about a year before I was born, this song is from the late 60's before the band broke up."

Sherlock nodded his head in such a way that John couldn't tell if he was actually listening or not.

"Odd. Two George Harrison songs played in close succession and this one is all out of order."

John sighed. "Not everything means something, Sherlock. It's just a song."

"Yes, but the Beatles catalogue contains over 200 songs, not counting all the remasters released over the years. Why play these so close together?"

"I told you, My Sweet Lord was recorded during George Harrison's solo career, it's not a Beatles song." He began to lose patience. "Maybe it's the anniversary of his death or something; so they're playing songs of his in the same time slot."

"Ridiculous, he died in November 2001 and his birth day was in February. There'd be no reason to…"

"Oh for fuck's sake Sherlock – make your point already!" He snapped loudly. Sherlock's expression of smugness didn't change in spite of John's outburst. "Christ, I didn't realize you were so into George Harrison. I had you pegged for a Lennon fan, his lyrics were headier."

He rolled his eyes before dismissively replying, "Obviously Lennon was the best lyricist of the four, don't be absurd. Have you even heard Shaved Fish or the Double Fantasy album? I have original pressings of them here somewhere." He motioned toward the sitting room.

I've see where you sleep, seen the lovers there sleeping, and my guitar gently weeps…

"I never said I didn't agree with that – wait just a minute – why are we standing starkers in the kitchen talking about the bloody Beatles?!"

"Something is going on." Sherlock kept a keen ear tuned to the radio while John stared and sighed.

With ev'ry mistake…ev'ry mistake…ev'ry mistake… the line began to repeat as if a vinyl record was skipping.

"Ok, now that is weird. But..." John began to speak. Sherlock’s ears picked up a strange buzzing, whirring sound, he turned his head slowly and then…

"John! DOWN!" He grabbed John by the neck and shoulders pulling him down with immense force. John cried out in pain after his forehead collided with the kitchen floor and he felt something slice into his leg.

Rapid gunfire erupted in the kitchen for what felt like an eternity. John crawled closer to Sherlock and covered his head with his body. "Keep your head down, Sherlock – DON'T MOVE!"

"What in the fuck is going on?" John shouted, daring to lift his chin to find the source of the bullets. His mind raced to map an escape route as bullets ricocheted above their heads. He wished his gun wasn't so far away – he'd been keeping it locked away in the bottom of the bedroom cupboard for months.
As suddenly as it began, the assault on the flat ended. John scrambled to his feet and ran toward the window. The glass was shattered everywhere. He leaned out in time to watch the drone disappear behind the corner of the building across the way.

"Fucking hell Sherlock. A drone." There was no response. John's voice caught in his throat as he turned and saw Sherlock was still face down on the kitchen floor. A crimson puddle of blood was clearly visible nearby.

"SHERLOCK!" He screamed as he raced back across the sitting room, slid on his knees to be beside him.

"Are you hit? Let me see, let me see. Are you hurt? Sherlock turn over - let me see…" John was starting to panic, his past experiences working both in his favour and against him.

"I'm fine. I'm fine." Sherlock said softly. He pushed himself up to a plank position and then adjusted to sit with his back against the wall, he was visibly shaking and struggling to catch his breath. John pressed his hands to Sherlock's stomach and chest, examining him.

"The blood, where did all the blood come from? Sherlock where are you hit?!"

"It's yours. You're bleeding."

John knit his eyebrows together in confusion. He stretched his legs out in front of himself and found a huge chunk of broken china sticking out of his shin. At first it appeared that his tibia had broken in half and ripped through his leg. His flesh was split open and bleeding freely. That was when a trickle of blood ran into the corner of his eye from the gash on his forehead. Sherlock watched the colour drain from his cheeks as if someone pulled the stopper out of the bath.

His leg didn't hurt until he looked at it, he even reached over to yank the piece of porcelain out himself. Once his fingers made contact with it and he felt it scrape against bone, John felt like his ears were packed with cotton and his head was swimming.

"Sher…lock…I can't see... Are you there? I can't see…” he said sounding woozy. He had trouble swallowing and although he was sure his eyes were open, he couldn't see a damned thing. He never felt his head hit the cold tile floor.
Chapter 15

"John? John wake up. Come on, John. Come back to me. Wake up… Come back John…"

He heard Sherlock's faraway voice, the baritone wasn't quavering but it sounded like he was being
called whilst under water. It still welcomed him back to consciousness. He fluttered his eyelids and
slowly the grey orbs clouding his vision turned into Sherlock's face and became clear.

He cleared his throat. "I'm here." He squeezed his eyes shut, his head was throbbing and his
breathing shallow. "Where…what…happened?"

"You hit your head when I pulled you down with me and you have a rather large shard of my tea
cup in your leg. Your anti-adrenaline took care of the rest." John recognized the tone of relief in
Sherlock's voice. It wasn't until then that he realized his head was being cradled in someone's lap.

"It hurts like hell." He tried lifting his head but Sherlock stopped him. "Aaah, fuck. My head."

"Whoo whoa whoa, Doctor – go easy." A hand pressed against his chest preventing John from
sitting up. "An ambulance is on the way. They'll set you right. I unsuccessfully tried to catch you
before you hit your head again. Stay still."

"Help me sit up please." John coughed.

"I shouldn't – you shouldn't - not yet."

"Please, I'm having trouble breathing. Help me…sit…up…" John grunted as he struggled.

Against his better judgement, Sherlock locked a grip around John's wrist with one hand and pushed
him up to a sitting position with the other. John grimaced in pain trying to fill his lungs to capacity.
He was barely able to register how badly Sherlock's hands were shaking when the detective let go of
him.

"It's him." John said gripping his side, wincing in pain.

"I know. We'll attend to that later. For now, I'm concentrating on you. What hurts? And where is that
BLOODY AMBULANCE? It's been five minutes already!" He yelled in the direction of the front
door.

"I'm ok. I'm ok. It missed the anterior tibial veins, I think." He swallowed hard and finally got a few
deep breaths in. "That lunatic sent a fucking drone into our home, Sherlock. Mother'a Christ what the
fuck are we going to do?"

"We're going to get your leg sorted and go from there." Sherlock was rubbing John's back
reassuringly.

John squeezed his eyes shut again and his head hurt slightly less. Breathing was increasingly easier
and the pain in his ribs dulled. He looked down at his leg, the wheat blond hair of his shin and calf
stained crimson with blood. Sherlock had used the belt of John's dressing gown to tie a tourniquet
and it had stopped bleeding but the sight of the jagged piece of china sticking out of his torn flesh
made John feel like he was going to be sick.

"If an ambulance is coming here, you might want to put some clothes on."
"Mm? Oh. Erm. Yeah. Just a minute – do not move." Sherlock gently touched John's shoulders and they looked each other in the eye. John nodded quickly and Sherlock bolted to the bedroom. John swallowed hard and sucked in a deep breath. His fingers felt fuzzy as he reached up to feel the comfort of the St. Michael medallion. He gripped it hard and said a quiet prayer to himself.

Sherlock came out in a flash wearing the trousers he'd been wearing the night before and carrying a t-shirt. John groaned as Sherlock helped him pull the shirt down over his head when a knock came to the door.

Sherlock flipped the latch open and paramedics entered carrying equipment and a backboard.

Sherlock skirted the kitchen watching them tend to John's leg. "Mind his head, he fainted…I couldn't catch him…he hit his head…" Sherlock's mouth went dry and his hands shook.

"I thought you said there was a shooting." One of the paramedics said, looking in his direction.

"There was."

John howled as they pulled the chunk out of his leg, cleaned the wound and wrapped it with gauze.

"You're going to be fine, mate." The paramedic told John, tapping him on the back. "More 'in a couple a' sutures but nothing too bad. You'll want to stay off it for a while."

They strapped John down and began to carry him out the door to the waiting vehicle.

"Sherlock- are you coming with me?" John asked weakly. The pain was radiating off his brow like heatlines on the sidewalk in the summer.

"Mn. Right behind you, John. I…" Sherlock tried to take a step and found his legs had turned to jelly. He steadied himself using the back of a chair. As they carried John down the stairs, Sherlock rushed to the bedroom and grabbed a shirt from the floor and disconnected his mobile from the charger. He ran out of the flat after John and climbed into the ambulance while sending Mycroft a text.

Our saucy friend paid us a visit. En route to St. Bart's. SH

Will investigate. Are you intact?

I am. John is injured. Do more than bloody investigate. SH

Patience is a virtue.

What's virtue got to do with me? SH

The Headmaster at the embarrassingly expensive private school our parents sent us to would often ask the same question about you.

Fuck off, brother dear. SH

I see shacking up with a common soldier has continued to expand your already extensive vocabulary.

Sherlock growled at Mycroft's flippant responses. Calling for patience and jibing at his relationship with John as if he didn't know Sherlock's very sanity hinged on John's safety.

Upon arriving at the hospital, John was taken into an exam room and Sherlock was not allowed in.
He was relegated to the waiting room where Lestrade was waiting for him.

"What happened?! Did John get shot? The radio transmission wasn't clear." Lestrade asked, putting a hand on Sherlock's shoulder.

Sherlock swallowed hard and explained the events of the morning. The song with the out-of-order lyrics, the drone, and how the tea cup came to be lodged in John's leg. He left out the indelicate details Lestrade didn't need to hear.

"Lestrade, Jim Moriarty has made yet another attempt upon my life, on John's life. He's engaging me, inviting me back out to play a game." Sherlock sifted through his most recent cases, one of them must somehow involve one of Moriarty's associates and he intended to figure it out.

The police inspector nodded in agreement. "Certainly sounds like it's him, but how the hell do we find him?"

Sherlock's mobile chirped a text alert in his pocket.

_I told you the floor needed sweeping. Pity about the poor doctor's leg. Shall I send a fruit basket? Do let me know his room number. Time to play. Hugs and Kisses, Jim._

Sherlock's eyebrows knit together as he read and re-read every word.

Lestrade went to speak and found his lips covered by Sherlock's palm.

"He's got a recording device…a camera…something…he could see us...before the attack."

"How do you know?" Lestrade asked, trying to see that the message said.

"I look to the floor and I see it needs sweeping…" Sherlock quoted the song lyric from earlier.

"While My Guitar Gently Weeps…?" Lestrade added not understanding.

"He saw my broken tea cup on the floor of the kitchen… he saw…he knows about John's leg… " Sherlock clenched his fists. His cheekbones and the tips of his ears burned bright red thinking of the violation of their privacy. His phone chirped in his hand again. Sherlock glared at the message with a cold stare that threatened to break the screen.

_Had you pegged for a bottom, btw xoxo JM._

"FUCK!" Sherlock raged and motioned to lob his mobile across the waiting room at the wall but he thought better of it.

"'Had you pegged', he can hear what we say as well. John said he 'had me pegged' as a John Lennon fan his morning in the kitchen. There's surveillance equipment in my flat right now!" Sherlock's mind raced through each nook of the sitting room and kitchen trying to picture anything out of place that might have been placed there without his notice.

"I have to see John, we have to get home – Mrs. Hudson – Mrs. Hudson might be in danger…"

Lestrade grabbed his elbow. "Let them take care of John's leg. Donovan is at your place now."

"Donovan?! Sally Donovan isn't qualified to write parking violations- you sent her to search my flat with that madman on the loose?!"

"Whatever you think of her, she's a good cop, Sherlock. I'm going to head over there now to secure
the place. I'll look in on Mrs. Hudson and look for that recording device. Did you call your brother already?" Lestrade said.

"I'll deal with Mycroft." He checked at his watch. "He'll be having his second brandy at the Diogenes Club by now."

"Mr. Holmes? Sherlock Holmes?" The voice came from behind them. A nurse with a long ponytail beckoned to them. Lestrade squeezed Sherlock's arm in an attempt to reassure him before he left for Baker Street.

"You can go in now, he's stable. He's asking for you." She smiled warmly but Sherlock paid her no notice, instead pushing right past her and gruffly shouted John's name.

"He's here, sir!" The same nurse called to Sherlock, noticeably less warmly than a few moments before. He spun around and rushed toward the room she indicated with her pointed finger and an exasperated sigh.

"John, are you…"

He exhaled deeply seeing John sitting up in a hospital gown, his leg now sterilized and sutured, wrapped in a clean bandage. John was sipping water through a straw, a pitcher and empty glass were placed on his nightstand. He was connected to oxygen via a nasal cannula, which he yanked off as soon as he saw Sherlock.

"I sincerely hope you didn't give them too much trouble out there. I know how you get." Sherlock looked relieved to hear the strength had returned to John's voice.

"Did you get a message from him?" John asked, swallowing some water.

Sherlock nodded and showed him the texts he'd received.

"Yeah, give him my motherfucking room number all right, so I can kick his fucking teeth in. He saw us then? In the kitchen?" John grimaced. "What's the plan?"

Sherlock pursed his lips.

"Do you…have a plan?" John asked handing him his phone back.

Sherlock shook his head.

"Well that's just great. He can come into our home any time he likes, he can watch us fucking and try to murder us. Grand."

"I didn't say I wasn't formulating a plan. My darling brother has been notified of the attack. Things will come together – only I couldn't concentrate until I knew you were ok." Sherlock took John's hand.

"I've had much worse, it could have been much worse. The leg just fucking hurt and bled like hell. This is quite possibly the most English injury in existence – 17 sutures because of a tea cup. I promise I'm fine." John clasped his other hand over Sherlock's.

"You climbed on top of me…you could have gotten shot. That was…foolish." Sherlock said, sitting on the bed next to him.

"So, I'm supposed to let you get shot? Obviously I protected you. That's what I do." John looked at
him incredulously.

"How many times have I almost gotten you killed now?"

John shook his head. "Lost count. But hey, I'm still here. I'm not going anywhere Sherlock."

Sherlock looked over his shoulder before placing a chaste kiss on John's mouth.

"I thought I was going to lose you. I…"

"I know. Me too." John interrupted quietly and placing his hand at the back of Sherlock's neck.

"Ok, so Mr. Watson..." the nurse walked back in holding a chart.

"Doctor Watson if you don't mind -" Sherlock snapped. John rolled his eyes.

"Easy, Action." He put up his hand to quiet Sherlock. "I hold the rank of Captain as well and she
didn't call me that either, it's fine."

"Sorry, Dr. Watson," the nurse began again. "The record indicates that you hit your head in the
incident so we're going to pop you down to radiology to check everything out, alright?"

"Oh, I was hoping to get out of here soon…" John began.

"It will be quite quick, sir. Just a precaution, we can't release you until we've checked for trauma."

John knew very well the danger he could face from a missed concussion. "Alright, let's be off."

"You can't – you can't take him, we're talking." Sherlock held the rails of John's bed in place.

"Sherlock – I hit my head. They've got to look at it. Hey, hey! Look at me…"

Seaglass met ocean blue.

"I'll be fine – they have to check my head."

"What about me?" Sherlock asked quickly – John thought he sounded like a child not wanting to be
left behind.

"Could he come down with me? I'd feel better if he were there." John asked kindly covering for
Sherlock's pride.

"I don't see why not, as long as he stays clear." She sounded irritated but relinquished more easily
than John expected.

Sherlock didn't let go of John's hand as the nurse and a burly orderly wheeled John's bed down for a
scan.

About an hour later, John had some painkillers, a clean bill of health and was cleared to leave and
Sherlock was ordered to vacate the premises.

Once again, a taxi was pulling up on Baker Street to bring Sherlock and John home from St. Bart's
hospital. The cabbie had been watching the two men sitting in the back seat. They sat close together,
only a few centimeters of space between them. They didn't speak to each other much and they
looked out opposite windows. The taller man's hand casually laid on the thigh of the shorter man
with the disconcertingly large bandage on his leg.
John smiled to himself as Sherlock gallantly helped him ascend the stairs for the second time in recent memory.

As they got to the top, Sherlock turned to John "You know, if you're so keen to have me carry you over the threshold I'll happily do it without you injuring yourself. You're making quite a habit of this."

"Nah, you were right. You're the bride." John quipped. He reached back and pinched Sherlock's bum as he strolled into the flat, leaving Sherlock red faced but grinning.

Their smiles quickly faded as they entered and saw the state of their home. Their belongings were strewn everywhere, almost all of the cupboards were pockmarked with small bullet holes. John grimaced and raked his hand through his hair. He hadn't considered the mess they'd be facing once they got back home. Sherlock cast a cold glare at the broken window. He lifted his nose to the air and growled. He stomped toward the closed bathroom door and banged on it with his closed fist.

"I assumed you'd have this cleaned up for us by now. What have you been playing at?"

John was going to ask who the hell was in their bathroom but the tone of Sherlock's voice gave him all the information he needed. He walked past Sherlock to the bedroom and pulled on some clothes. They'd given him some medical scrubs when they discharged him but John wanted the comfort of something from his own closet. Sherlock was nonplussed about still only wearing yesterday's wrinkled trousers and his silk robe without shoes.

A moment later, the toilet flushed and they heard the tap run. As the door opened, the figure of Mycroft Holmes stepped into the hall.

"You thought I, myself, would be replacing your window? I was under the impression that Dr. Watson was the one with the head injury." He said coolly, wiping his hands on a towel which he then pinched between two of his fingers and held out to Sherlock to take. Sherlock had no intention of taking the towel and when his brother let go of it, it dropped to the floor.

"I trust they have done a sweep for the recording devices in the sitting room." Mycroft clasped his hands behind his back and walked down the short hall.

"Obviously." Sherlock made no effort to hide the annoyance in his voice.

"And they didn't find anything." Mycroft turned and was wearing his constantly smug expression.

"They didn't find fuck all." John said looking at the bullet holes in the cabinets. He narrowed his eyes and looked toward the windows. "Incidentally, I'm fine Mycroft. Thanks so much for asking. Sherlock, are there shells? On the floor?"

Sherlock looked quickly. "No. There's nothing."

John frowned. He opened a cupboard and reached in past the mess of broken dishes and pulled out a bullet. He recognized it immediately.

"Sherlock…" Both Holmeses went over to see what John was holding.

"This is from an HK-MP7. It's a German-made, high velocity, 4.6 by 30mm bullet. I know it very well. We should be dead."

"A submachine gun mounted to a drone? Honestly, John I think you should go lay down. Surely you're mistaken." Mycroft said with a mocking laugh. Sherlock silenced him with a cold stare.
"It's used in at least 29 countries as I'm sure you know, Mycroft. The MDP carry the HK MP7-SF as well as the Metropolitan Police as I'm also sure you know so cut the bullshit."

Mycroft scowled and glared at John. Sherlock coughed.

"It's not impossible."

Mycroft scoffed, "Unlikely. The recoil from a weapon like that wouldn't be sustainable on a drone that could fit through that window." Mycroft calmly gestured as he spoke.

"There would be less recoil from a lighter round." Sherlock said holding his palm out to John, who placed the bullet in his hand.

Mycroft glared. "I think, Brother Mine, you're mistaken."

"There is one tiny problem." John said, drawing the attention of the brothers back to himself. John took the bullet back from Sherlock and held it up between his forefinger and thumb.

"This bullet is pristine. The HK 30mm notoriously yaws upon impact. It's bottom-heavy. The back end comes forward and it tumbles at impact." John demonstrated the motion. "It leaves a giant hole, lots of damage. It wouldn't look like this." John examined it more closely. "There are three variations of the HK 30mm. The DM11 Penetrator, the hollow point and the 2.7 gram full metal jacket."

"And which is this?" Sherlock asked. He knew the answer but watching John show off in front of Mycroft was deeply satisfying.

"The hollow point. It's designed for penetration into hard targets: car doors, glass. It'll get the job done just fine but if it were me, the DM11 would be the better choice for soft targets." He tossed the bullet in the air and Mycroft caught it.

"Impressive, Doctor." Mycroft said sounding not at all impressed.

"Those tiny holes," John pointed at the cabinets, "were not caused by these bullets. Not in a million years."

"Obviously."

"Then…what…" John opened the cabinet door and peered inside. "Oh you are shitting me." John said as he pulled a small handful of copper colored lumps. "Well, he's not boring, that's for damn sure."

"What is it?"

"Austrian Kolibri, 2mm bullets. They don't even make these anymore…they haven't made these since the 30's. They are obsolete. The Kolibri semi-automatic pistol - it's basically comparable to a BB gun now. It was a terrible self-defense weapon even then, the bullets were too small for rifling; they had very minimal effect, comparatively. You'd do more damage throwing a rock. The pistols are quite collectible though – they only made about 1000 because they were so crap."

Sherlock's phone chirped. He pulled it from his pocket.

*Your boyfriend's gun knowledge is giving me a raging semi. Would you mind if I borrowed him for a bit?*

Sherlock scoffed and handed John the phone.
"Fuck you, Jim!" John shouted, looking around the room. "When I get my hands on you…" The next message came in almost immediately.

_Do tell him to calm down, Sherlock. Now are we going to play or not? I'm getting booooored._

Sherlock held his finger to his lips and turned to the sitting room. He scanned the room but with the disarray Donovan had left, it was difficult to tell what was out of place. He stepped over books that had been toppled from the shelves. He reached to the back of the shelves and felt nothing. He spun and looked at the kitchen table. He estimated the camera height and angle necessary to have a view of the kitchen in order to see the tea cup fall to the floor and shatter.

"So foolish, Donovan. Never send an amateur to do…my job." He ran his hand along the wall and there it was, no bigger than a thumbtack stuck into the wall. He dug his fingernails under it and pulled it carefully from the plaster, his thumbnail ripped away from the nailbed and a small drop of blood appeared on his skin. He didn't flinch.

He looked down at the device and his phone buzzed in John's hand.

_Peek-a-boo I see you. You've got spinach in your teeth._

John read it aloud and Sherlock reflexively ran his tongue over his teeth.

"Are there more?" Sherlock spoke, knowing very well that Moriarty could hear him.

_I honestly can't remember. But if there were, where you're standing is getting warmer._

Sherlock grit his teeth together and ran his hand longways on the wall creeping closer to the windows. His forefinger sank into one of the bullet holes he'd put there during a fit of boredom.

_Warmer._

He peered into each bullet hole and found another camera, larger in size, perched inside.

_That's almost all of them. Almost._

John went into a kitchen drawer, grabbed a meat tenderizer and stomped over to Sherlock. He took the larger camera out of Sherlock's hand, threw it to the floor and smashed it to pieces, regrettably leaving indentations in the floor.

He looked up to the four surprised eyes looking at him. "Not like we were ever getting our security back anyway." He brushed the pieces of the broken device into his hand and dumped them unceremoniously into the rubbish bin.

_Now I have a headache, Johnny Darling._ The text taunted them.

John puzzled a moment, "I shouldn't have done that. We could have traced it to the manufacturer or even the shop where he bought it…”

"That wouldn't be terribly useful, John. These devices are common fare in any number of spy shops. I doubt it would be of any use to determine which one Moriarty frequents."

Sherlock motioned to them both the be quiet. He gestured to John to ask him for the large bullet he'd found in the cupboard. John pulled it out of his pocket and passed it to him. Sherlock turned the bullet over in his hand, inspecting it. He flicked his finger against the side of it and grinned. Looking up at Mycroft and John, he twisted the bullet in half and it came apart. Instead of what one would
normally expect to find inside a bullet, there were wires and a tiny microphone. Sherlock tossed the
two halves of the bullet to John. He grit his teeth together and yanked the wires apart until they
snapped. He fit the two pieces back together and pushed it into his back pocket.

"So that just leaves the other sound transmitter." Sherlock turned and scanned the room.

"You sure there's more than one?" John swept the pieces of the recorder into the bin.

"There has to be a back up. That's what I'd do."

A knock at the door made John jump. Mycroft strolled to the door and let the workmen inside.
"Quickly now, gentlemen, quickly." He and Sherlock were clearly both expecting these men to
arrive but John felt irritated not to be told about it. They carried large sheets of glass and tools.

"They'll make quick work of the window, then they'll replace the cupboard doors. If my little brother
is going to insist on living in these…substandard accommodations, he will at least not live amongst
broken glass and splinters of wood." Mycroft cast a glare of disapproval around the room.

John realized two things in that moment. Both Holmes brothers were on his list of people he'd often
like to punch but Mycroft was most assuredly secure in his position at the top. He also realized that
his leg was throbbing. He took a painkiller with a glass of water and sat in his chair intending to rest
his leg for the first time since they'd gotten home.

He lifted his leg onto the coffee table and switched on the television. When Sherlock and Mycroft
began to bicker like two old women he accepted that there was nothing on telly that could have
compared with watching the verbal squash match of Holmes vs. Holmes so he switched it off again.

Sherlock continued to search the flat for the voice transmitter and Mycroft continued to bait him into
an argument. He was laying the smarm on thicker than usual.

"Why would he put it in there, Sherlock? That ought to have been the first place you checked for it. If
you were clever, which you are not."

"Mycroft, are you actually going to do anything useful or are you going to continue flapping your
gums in this futile effort to rile me up?" Sherlock asked as he rifled through John's desk by the
window.

"Helping would serve as evidence that I care, which I assuredly do not."

"Then please tell me, Dear Brother, why are you here?" Sherlock was moving methodically around
the room, checking every nook and cranny. John marveled at how they could call each other "Dear"
with such malice. Tonality is everything.

"Because the newspapers will have gotten wind of this and therefore, our parents will get wind of it
and I cannot abide another…" he paused, searching for the words.

"Because the newspapers will have gotten wind of this and therefore, our parents will get wind of it
and I cannot abide another…" he paused, searching for the words.

"I believe the phrase "a proper bollocking' from your mother is what you're meaning to say, Mycroft.
You're here because whilst you are the British government as far as I am concerned, you are still
afraid of what your Mummy will say if your brother's wellbeing is in danger and you don't do
anything to help." John snapped, taking no small pleasure in making Mycroft stiffen his back in
discomfort.

John saw Sherlock smirk at him over his shoulder while he examined the mantle. He ran his fingers
over the skull called Billy and coughed. He gripped the skull by the temple indentations and lifted it
up. In a rather macabre moment, the mandible remained on the mantle. Sherlock gave the skull a
flick of his wrist and heard the distinct rattling sound which proved Billy was hiding a secret. With a self-satisfied smile, Sherlock reached two fingers inside the hole where Billy's spinal cord used to be and removed the voice transmitter.

"I win." He spoke into it before switching it off.

The three men looked expectantly at Sherlock's mobile, waiting for Moriarty to confirm, or taunt or pose any reply. When it didn't come, the corners of Sherlock's mouth turned down and he sucked on the inside of his cheek.

"Are we sure that's all of them?" John asked looking from Sherlock to Mycroft.

"All but the camera in our bedroom." Sherlock replied. The word "our" made Mycroft suck air between his teeth.

"The bedroom? Are you sure? What makes you think he put one in there?" John's stomach dropped. Yet another intolerable invasion of their privacy all for the enjoyment of a psychopath who liked watching Sherlock squirm like a worm on a hook. Now, however, John was even more keenly aware that Sherlock wasn't the only one Moriarty was watching.

"He didn't just change the order of the verses to that song...he altered the lyrics themselves. I've seen where you sleep, see the lovers there sleeping..." he added that. He has..." Sherlock cleared his throat, "watched us in bed."

John looked up at the ceiling and gnawed on his tongue. "I can't – I can't stay here Sherlock." He stood up and went to the bedroom, planning on packing a bag. Sherlock followed and leaned against the door.

"Where are you going to go?"

John had a ruck sack open and he was throwing shirts, trousers, socks and pants into it without looking. "Dunno. Maybe Harry will let me stay with her. Shit - Sherlock, he called me 'Johnny'. You don't think he's going to go after my sister, do you? Either way, I have to get out of here."

"Is that strictly necessary?"

"He watched us, Sherlock. Sleeping and, and..." John grimaced, Mycroft had joined them in the bedroom.

"I don't want you to go." John felt the detective standing very close and suddenly there was a hand with long delicate fingers gently wrapped around his upper arm. John sighed and leaned back into the figure.

"Sherlock, I don't want to go. But being here is making my skin crawl. I feel so...invaded."

"Oi, Mister 'Olmes. We've finished with the windah, we'll move on to the cupboards after we go 'ave a cuppa." One of the workers called to Mycroft as they walked out the door.

Mycroft rubbed his sinuses with the pads of his fingertips.

"John, it is not recommended that you leave Baker Street. If Moriarty is going to come after you, isn't it better to keep the collateral damage to a minimum?" He proffered.

John sighed heavily. He hadn't thought of that and he knew Mycroft was correct, as much as he hated to admit it. He couldn't risk any harm coming to Harry or Clara for putting him up. No, he'd
just have to stay.

"Just…find the goddamned camera, Sherlock." He said, relenting.

Sherlock was about to turn away to obey John's request when he stopped, threw Mycroft a scowl and placed a soft kiss on John's neck. Mycroft mirrored his scowl and thrust his hands in the pockets of his bespoke suit and rocked on his heels.

"Are you that easily scandalized?" John asked him laughing softly.

"Not a bit, Dr. Watson." He replied unconvincingly.

"Liar." Sherlock said as he pushed past Mycroft. "He's always been a prude." He added as he began to search.

Mycroft scoffed "And by your estimation, little brother – a 'prude' is someone who –"

"Someone who cringes at the first sign of affection between two people. In short, Mycroft – you are my very definition of a prude."

A familiar just-sucked-bitter-lemons expression etched itself on Mycroft's face. He turned on his heel and went to inspect the new window. Sherlock took great satisfaction in watching his brother turn red in frustration.

"I wasn't…abandoning you. I just…fuck." John took Sherlock's hand and their fingers interlaced easily.

"I know. I know. It's unsettling, but there's no evidence that he's been surveilling us long-term. How is your leg?"

"It's fine."

"Ok."

"Where should we start looking?"

They spent the better part of an hour doing a full methodic grid search of the bedroom, while Mycroft sneeringly supervised the replacement of the cupboard doors. Moriarty hadn't indicated that there was anything more than a camera in the bedroom; nor had he hinted at any surveillance in any of the other rooms, but when John took a quick respite to the toilet, the thought of being watched made him so uncomfortable that he wasn't able to go. He grunted and pulled his jeans back up, flushed out of habit and was sure to throw up two fingers to the camera that may or may not have been there, just in case.

All the bending and stretching was making John's leg throb. He climbed up on the bed and flopped onto his back, declaring to Sherlock that he needed a minute.

"Can I bring you anything?"

John smiled, Sherlock was acting so much more…human since they'd become an item. He shook his head and laid back as his leg pulsated underneath the gauze. John hoped he hadn't ruptured any of the sutures but based on how active he'd been since returning home and the level of discomfort raging in his shin, it was unlikely.

*Sod it. I'm an army doctor, I'll suture myself if I have to,* he thought.
"Son of a bitch." John said. Sherlock stopped what he was doing and looked to John.

It was difficult to see with no light beyond the late afternoon sunshine that was coming in through the window, but John pointed at the small camera wedged carefully in the bracket which secured one of the blades of the ceiling fan.

Sherlock climbed on top of the bed and yanked the camera from its place. He closed his fingers around it and pumped his fist in victory. Sherlock dropped to his knees and planted a kiss on John's mouth. Mycroft cleared his throat from the doorway, and they came apart before either of the wanted to. The elder Holmes tossed the younger's mobile at the bed and walked away without a word. Sherlock smirked as he opened the new text message:

_I made it too easy. I'll be in touch. Ta-ta._

"Is that it then?" John asked hopefully.

"I suppose."

Mycroft stuck around into the evening but said very little. The workmen efficiently cleaned out each cupboard, cataloguing what was broken and replaced the damaged cupboard doors. A large pile of the 2mm Kolibri bullets accumulated in a cereal bowl.

They sat at the table, not speaking. Each of them going over the details of the attack in his own way. John took the HK 30mm round out of his pocket and was twirling it around in his fingers as he thought. One thing was very clear, Moriarty was popping his head up out of the ground and was going to come after them. All they could do was wait.
Chapter 16

John was watching a repeat of *Top Gear* in the sitting room when he heard Sherlock return from his early-morning errand. He turned his head around, hearing the detective humming something that sounded remarkably like *Somebody to Love* to himself.

"Sherlock – are you humming…Queen?"

Sherlock looked at John over his shoulder "I believe I asked you not to call me that," he deadpanned.

John laughed and rolled his eyes. "Where've you been?"

Sherlock didn't reply. He kept humming and pulled a box of powdered baby formula from a shopping bag. John got up from his chair and watched him with his hands on his hips.

"Oh, great! Did you go to Tesco's? I left the list on the table."

He received no reply. John cocked his head as he watched Sherlock open a newly purchased baby bottle. He then opened the formula, and added two scoops to the bottle.

"Can you hear me?" John asked a little louder.

Sherlock ran the tap, waiting for the warm water, which he tested on the inside of his wrist.

"Hello? What's with the baby bottle?" John waved his arms in an attempt to catch Sherlock's attention.

Adding enough water to the formula, Sherlock screwed the nipple on and shook it furiously to mix it. Once that was done, he reached back into the shopping bag and removed a blue tea towel. Still humming, Sherlock pulled the kitchen shears from the knife block and cut the towel in half. He held it out in front of him and seemed to be satisfied. He tossed one piece of fabric over his shoulder and dropped the other half to the kitchen floor.

John continued to watch but was rapidly becoming equal parts impatient and curious. He crossed his arms over his chest as Sherlock walked past him down the hallway to the stairs and he listened to the footfalls up to his former bedroom. He followed behind Sherlock slowly, avoiding the stairs that squeaked.

"What in the ever loving – " he said to himself.

He'd gone into John's old bedroom that they now used for storage and left the door open only a crack. John leaned in to listen when he heard Sherlock's voice begin to cheerfully talk to someone.

"Hello you gorgeous thing. I told you I'd be back soon. Ah, there you are. You know your Mummy, don't you? Now drink your bottle – there's a good boy."

"Oh, Sherlock please tell me you don't have a baby in there…" John sighed under his breath. He'd pulled some crazy stunts over the years but hiding a baby in their flat would be the absolute top.

John used the tip of his toe to push the door open and he stole a look into the room. Sherlock stood near the window cradling something in the crook of his arm. He was swaying side to side, rocking the baby as he cooed at it.

"There's a good boy…drink up."
Sherlock caught sight of John from his periphery and turned with a surprised smile. John's eyes widened in shock and he jumped away, hitting his elbow on the door jamb.

"Oh sweet Christ Sherlock – what the fuck?!"

Expertly wrapped in the custom-cut swaddle and happily sucking down the bottle of formula was a fluffy and alarmingly large, baby bat. The bat's black eyes darted around the room as John clapped a hand over his mouth the stifle himself.

"Isn't he lovely, John?"

"He? Love-lovely? Sherlock are cracked?! Have you at long last gone totally mental? Why in the holy name of fuck do you have a bat?!" John pressed himself against the wall.

Sherlock gave him a slightly wounded look and removed the bottle from the animals' mouth.

"I found him in the park last night when you asked me to step out for milk. All by himself, starving John. I thought you'd be pleased – we discussed getting a pet."

"Christ on a bike. I thought we went over this already when you were on that kick about turning this room into one massive honeybee hive. I meant a dog, Sherlock. I thought maybe we could get a dog, a cat; fuck - a bloody goldfish! Not a bat! People don't keep bats or bees as pets." He was slightly more at ease, seeing the bat was indeed still a pup and wasn't going to swoop at his jugular. He was also beginning to find some humor in it. Of course Sherlock, who didn't understand why John was so vehemently opposed to gallons of fresh honey, wouldn't see the distinction between adopting a normal pet from an animal shelter and taking a baby bat out of a tree.

"He's orphaned, John. I thought we could raise him up. He's lovely." Sherlock affectionately stroked the bat's head with the back of his fingers. The bat closed its eyes, seeming to enjoy his touch.

"He's probably going to give us both Ebola. Or turn us into vampires while we sleep." John said beginning to laugh with his hands over his face.

"Oh nonsense. Vampire bats have an undeserved and grossly exaggerated reputation. They don't suck human blood, it's bovine blood they're after. And anyway, Scruff isn't a vampire bat. He's a Pteropus alecto, a member of the Pteropodidae family of flying foxes – they're the largest bats in the world. Aren't you, Scruff? He's native to northern Australia and Papua New Guinea. So you know what that means."

"I'm sure I don't – erm...Scruff?" John rubbed his brow and placed his palm to his cheek, checking to see if he might be having a fever dream.

"Yes, Scruff. I had to name him something. I almost named him Kafka but look at that sweet face. Scruff is a much more appropriate name." As if he were responding to the name, Scruff made a squeaking noise and began to root for the bottle Sherlock was still holding.

"There you are, my hungry boy." Sherlock said as he held the bottle to the bat's mouth. Scruff took the nipple in his mouth and happily continued with his breakfast.

"Kafka is a more appropriate name for a giant cockroach, obviously." John quipped, then he thought better of it – "Which under no circumstances are you allowed to pluck off the street and bring home."

"Do you want to pat him? He likes it." Sherlock carried Scruff over to John, who sucked in a slow breath and held it.
"Go on then. He's a fruit-bat, John. As you are not made of pulpy citrus, he's not interested in biting you."

John held a hand tentatively over the crown of Scruff's head. He grimaced, but he touched his fingertip to the tuft of hair on top of the animal's head. Despite the hair looking wiry, John found it to be surprisingly soft. Scruff's eyes closed and he lifted his chin slightly leaning into John's fingers. Sherlock grinned proudly.

"I suppose he's…sort of…cute." John said reluctantly, continuing to pet Scruff behind his ears and then under his chin. "We can't possibly keep him, Sherlock. We'll have to call someone, get him back where he belongs."

Sherlock's expression changed and he pulled Scruff back to his chest. "Absolutely not. He's not a native bat to this area, John. He was smuggled in and abandoned!"

"And smuggling exotic pets into Europe is a huge, dangerous business Sherlock, but we can't keep a bat." John said trying to be patient.

"Scruff stays."

"He goes."

"I'm not getting rid of him."

John placed a gentle hand on Sherlock's arm. "Sherlock – he's a wild animal. He belongs in the wild. If we keep him, we're complicit in the smuggling. What happens when he gets bigger? Some of those Australian bats are gigantic when they're fully grown. We can't keep him in a birdcage. He's going to have to learn how to fly and find his own food. It's cruel to keep him."

Sherlock frowned. "But…but…" and he sighed. John's argument was sound, just like it had been when they argued about the walk-in beehive.

"Can't we just…a few days?"

John tilted his head and his lips curled into a lopsided kind smile. "You'll grow more attached that way. It'll hurt more to let him go."

Sherlock cheered. "So, yes?"

John laughed, "That's not at all what I said."

"You implied it."

"Fine. Two days. I'll call…shit- I dunno – not animal control but…I'll figure it out. Do you want toast?" John reached back to Scruff and stroked his chin without flinching.

"Five days, then." Sherlock said handing John both the baby bottle and Scruff.

"Aaaaah…" John grunted, he was only just getting used to touching Scruff, he wasn't quite ready to hold and feed him. Cradling the pup wrapped up contentedly in the tea towel, John exhaled slowly.

Sherlock kissed John on the cheek. "I'll make the toast and the tea. What's the name of the potential client we're meeting with his afternoon?"

"Erm – I can't remember, I wrote it down on my notepad. Something about a valuable painting stolen from an auction house, The Reichenbach something-or-other."
"Sounds possibly interesting. See you downstairs."

"Mind you wash your hands!" He called after him. "Your Mummy is barking mad, did you know that?" John spoke to Scruff and shook his head. "Still hungry?" He held the bottle up and Scruff opened his mouth. In the whole of his life, John Watson never had imagined many things he'd done since making the acquaintance of the eccentric genius he lived with and loved; caring for Scruff was no different.
Chapter 17

John was numb all over. He sat in Lestrade's police car wrapped in a grey blanket while the red and blue lights flashed in slow motion all around him. His eyes were glued to the spot on the sidewalk in front of Bart's that was marked off with yellow tape. Drops of blood stained the concrete and foolishly all he could think was if they could just put those droplets back into Sherlock's veins, he'd somehow be revived.

He didn't look away when they covered the body with a sheet, loaded him onto a gurney and took him away. John's brain was screaming at him to climb on top of Sherlock and demand that they bring the pair of them home. If his limbs weren't in a paralyzed catatonic state, he just might have.

Donovan and Anderson were noticeably keeping their distance from John. Anderson looked especially shaken. Seeing Sally Donovan brought to John's mind something she'd said to him at their first meeting at a different crime scene:

One day we'll be standing round a body and Sherlock Holmes will be the one who put it there.

That day had come but she didn't seem too keen to gloat about being right.

"John, erm – where can I drop you? At Baker Street?"

He shook himself to the present but Lestrade's words failed to make complete sense. He couldn't think of a place he'd less like to be than the flat where every last item inside would remind him of his lover who'd just jumped to his death in front of him.

"My um. My…sister…" His throat was dry and his voice harsh from disuse. Lestrade looked on helplessly while John's hand trembled as he reached into his coat pocket for his mobile. He kindly retrieved it for him and John dialed Harry's number.

"Johnny – hey. Listen I'm heading over to Clara's to get the dog. I'm just about to get on the Tube. Can I ring you in about 15 minutes?"

"Harry. He's dead." He could barely get the words out, they didn't make sense together; nothing made any sense at all.

"What? Who is?"

"Sher-Sherlock is dead." His voice caught in his throat and he was unable to speak further. Harry started hollering into the phone.

"Johnny what happened?! Where are you? What is going on? Hello? Hello?"

Without hanging up the call, John let the hand holding his phone drop from his ear to his knee. The Detective Inspector gently took it from him and spoke.

"This is Detective Inspector Greg Lestrade."

"Sir, is my brother alright? What is going on? What happened to Sherlock Holmes? He can't possibly be dead." Harry's voice was panicked. People around her were taking notice of the woman shouting into her phone.

"Miss Watson, can I bring John to you? He's not himself, as you might imagine." He stepped a few
paces away from John, eyeing him cautiously.

"Can you please tell me what in hell is going on? Sherlock isn’t dead. It can’t possibly be true." She sounded like she was trying to convince him there had been a grave mistake.

"I'm afraid it is. It's true." He proceeded to explain what had happened as far as he understood the details, Harry was shocked into silence; she clutched her throat and tears rolled down her cheeks.

"Miss Watson? Are you still there?" Lestrade hid a sniffle by clearing his throat.

"I'm walking back home. Bring John here please." She relayed her home address as she quickly retraced her steps from the Tube station back to her front door. All thoughts of the conversation she was planning to have with Clara were forgotten in the instant that Lestrade confirmed what John had told her.

She waited for them to arrive, sitting on her front steps and chain smoking. She wiped tears away from her eyes as fast as they came. Her heart was bashed into innumerable pieces over her brother's loss.

When the car came to a stop in front of her townhouse, she leapt from her place on the stairs and ripped the car door open. John gave her no indication that he saw her or knew where he was. She shook his shoulder and repeated his name. The tall policeman came around to crouch next to her.

"They gave him a sedative. God knows, he needed it. I could do with one myself. Did you know Sherlock?"

"Yes I did. Not intimately but well enough to know that something is clearly rotten in Denmark. Can you help me get him up the stairs?"

"Stairs, yes." Saliva dribbled out of one corner of John's mouth, Harry unhesitatingly wiped it away on her sleeve.

The two of them carried John up to Harry's front door, supporting the bulk of his weight as he was unable to coordinate his feet and legs. The front door swung open when Harry kicked it and they stumbled inside.

"Sofa's through there." She indicated with her chin and Lestrade obliged. They laid John down on the cream coloured sofa and Harry covered him with her favorite sage green blanket.

"You know he didn't commit suicide, don't you? He wouldn't do that." She grabbed his arm as he turned to leave.

"I'm sorry Miss Watson but all of the evidence suggests that he did. All of this Moriarty/Brook business seems to have driven him to it." Lestrade crossed his arms and avoided eye contact.

"Did you know Sherlock?" She snapped at him.

"I did. For many years. He wasn't exactly the most stable bloke, was he? Granted, he had been more…normal in the last few months." Harry felt his lack of empathy was inappropriate but then she realized something.

Oh god. He doesn't know about John and Sherlock.

She quickly decided to change the subject and get the DI out of her house as soon as possible so she could properly look after John.
"Thank you for bringing him here, Detective Inspector." She took a few steps toward the front door, hoping he would take the hint and thankfully he did.

"When John wakes up, please tell him I'm sorry." He smiled grimly and she nodded and closed the door behind him. She pressed her back to the door and buried her face in her hands.

"One time. One time he was happy." She said out loud to no one in particular. She rubbed the back of her neck with both hands and took a deep breath. Her mobile started ringing in her pocket.

"Shit –" She saw Clara's name on her caller ID and moaned before she answered.

"Cookie, Hi. No, I'm at home. John's here. Something...something truly awful has happened. Sherlock's dead."

xXx

The following day John woke up with a horrific headache. He couldn't believe the nightmare he'd had. It was so vivid; he could smell Sherlock's blood as it oozed out onto the pavement.

He reached for Sherlock in their bed and was puzzled to find himself on an unfamiliar sofa. His vision finally focused but that didn't help his confusion. He rubbed his eyes and saw that he was in Harry's sitting room and she was curled up under a blanket on the floor a few feet away from him.

"Harry?" He cleared his throat and called her a second time, watching her stir. She lifted her head off the throw pillow and looked at him.

"Johnny..."

His heart sank. The pitiful look on her face was all he needed to tell him that he hadn't been dreaming.

"It was real?"

There were very few things John could have said that wouldn't have broken her heart. Hearing his voice quaver as his blue eyes clouded over with panic and despair, Harry couldn't speak. She covered her mouth with her hand, stifling a sob and simply nodded her head.

John pushed the blanket off, moved his feet to the floor and sat up with his hands on top of his legs. He was silent and still a few moments as his heart sank lower and lower until it seemed to drop from his body completely. He closed his eyes and saw Sherlock standing on the roof of Bart's. He relived watching him spread his arms wide as he fell. He tried to take a deep breath but the scream choked him. He tumbled forward onto his knees on the floor, wailing with such sorrow that his very being seemed to crumble into pieces. He covered his eyes, pushing the heels of his hands into the sockets in an attempt to stop the horrific visual memory from replaying over and over.

When that did not work, he pressed his forehead into the area rug and pounded his fists into the floor as hard as he possibly could. He felt the burn on his face as the short pile wool dug into his flesh. His anguished howl sent chills through Harry's body. She didn't know if she should take her stricken big brother in her arms or run away.

It went on for what seemed like hours. It went on so long that his voice became hoarse and his throat burnt. She sat on the floor nearby, hugging her knees and rocking; wishing with all of her might that she could somehow go back in time and pull Sherlock back from the edge of the roof. Her hands started to shake with the growing urge to hide at the bottom of a bottle of vodka.
His back was arching up and down rhythmically with each tormented moan. As the volume of his cries subsided she crawled closer.

"Johnny –"

He started gasping for air as he spoke.

"I – I need – I need to see – I need to see Sher – lock."

She crawled to him and put her arms around his waist.

"Please – Ha-rry. T-take me to see him. Take me to Bart's."

She wiped the hot tears from her own eyes and swallowed the firm lump in her throat.

"Johnny, he's not there. He's – he's gone."

"Mortuary." His complexion was grey and he was trembling fiercely. Harry sat up and shook her head.

"I can't Johnny…"

"Harry – " he pleaded loudly, making her jump. "Please!" The uncontrolled look on his face filled her with fear. He never looked more like their father and it was terrifying. She put her hands up in front of herself in a defensive position.

"Ok, ok. Johnny, ok. I'll take you there. Ok."

His face relaxed and he rubbed her cheek with the palm of his hand. "Thank you."

John climbed out of his sister's navy blue Fiat and she took his arm as he led the way to the mortuary. The sterilized smell burnt into her memory when they entered.

The middle-aged man in a lab coat John had never seen before looked up from the female cadaver in front of him when he heard the door open. Harry stopped in her tracks at the sight of the body on the slab and averted her eyes.

"You're not supposed to be back here!" He shouted.

John's voice was gruff and sounded painful. "Is Molly Hooper here?"

The pathologist stopped advancing towards them. "Molly is taking an extended leave of absence. I'm Doctor Peter Brown. Can I help you?"

John croaked an inaudible reply. He coughed and tried speaking again.

"James Moriarty. I need to see the body." Harry looked at him wide-eyed.

"You mean Richard Brook? Do you have a warrant?" He walked toward the refrigeration unit and reached for a handle.

"No. I'm not with Metro."

"Are you here to claim the corpse?" He put his hands on his hips impatiently.

"No."
"Well, I'm sorry sir but I cannot –"

John composed himself and thought quickly. "I'm here to make a positive ID. I have reason to believe that Richard Brook is one of the soldiers under my command. He's been AWOL for the last two months."

The pathologist looked suspicious. "Do you have identification, Mr…"

"Captain. Captain John Watson, Fifth Northumberland Fusiliers. If you will show me the body I will only need a moment."

With a reluctant sigh, the pathologist decided it was a plausible enough story. What harm could it do? He opened the door and slid the rack out. The body was covered in a sheet. John's fingertips were tingling and burning.

"Leave us."

"But Captain Watson, protocol dictates –"

"Fuck your protocol! OUT. NOW."

When John and Harry were alone, he let his hand hover over the sheet a few seconds before he pulled it away. Harry turned her back and cupped her hands over her eyes.

He whipped the sheet back and was face-to-face with the infamous Jim Moriarty. There was no mistaking him. His cold black eyes were foggy in death but John recognized them clearly. The ashen skin of his face was burnt and bruised from the blast of the gunshot. There was dried blood and brain matter in his black hair. If it weren't for the gaping hole in the back of his head, John would have expected him to hop up off the slab and start talking to him.

"It's a shame you're dead. I would have loved to rip you limb from limb while you begged me for mercy." John whispered menacingly. "Hey, Harry?"

"Y-yeah?" She hoped that he wasn't about to ask her to look at the corpse.

"Would you kindly go retrieve our friend the pathologist?"

He didn't see her nod before she fled the room. He heard the latch catch when the door closed behind her. He balled up a fist and let it crash down into Moriarty's face, breaking his nose in the process. He grunted and spit at the hole in the back of the criminal's head.

John covered the body back up with the sheet and pushed the rack back into the refrigerator just as Harry and Dr. Brown returned.

"Were you able to identify your missing soldier?" He asked John with his arms crossed.

"No. It's not him unfortunately. He was missing a distinctive birthmark on the right bicep. Now…" John breathed deeply and swallowed hard. "I need to view the – body – of Sherlock Holmes." He set his jaw and squared his shoulders.

"The jumper?"

John squeezed his fists so tightly his nails dug into his palms. "Yes."

Dr. Brown looked disordered. He crossed to the wall where Molly organized her records and pulled a clipboard out from the others. He rapidly flipped through a few pages.
"I'm sorry, Captain Watson but, that body has been claimed and cremated citing religious practice."

"What?" John took a step back, clutching his medallion through his shirt. Harry rushed to his side and put her arm around his waist. She could feel his skin vibrating through his clothing.

"What about an autopsy?"

"Sir…he…he jumped off the roof. The family didn't think it was appropriate to put the corpse through further trauma."

His heart and mind raced, gritting his teeth he asked, "Who claimed the body?"

Dr. Brown looked back at the chart. "Mycroft Holmes."

xXx

"Where is Sherlock, Mycroft?" John shouted into his mobile as Harry drove them back to her townhouse.

"John? I understood that you were present for my brother's…exit."

"You claimed his body and had him cremated citing religious practice? Was that for my benefit or were you making a final dig at your brother the atheist?"

"John. In light of your relationship with my brother, I will overlook your rudeness. I can imagine you must be in your own pain at the moment."

"Pain? I watched it happen. I watched him falling. I'm not in pain, I'm in fucking agony. Why didn't you allow the autopsy?"

"It was our mother's wish to have him cremated. An autopsy wasn't necessary. We know how he died."

John's blood boiled. "He may have been poisoned! Moriarty might have drugged him! He might have been murdered Mycroft…"

"And, as Moriarty is himself dead, what purpose would an autopsy serve? For all we know my baby brother might have been so high on heroin that he tried to fly off the roof. I will not allow my mother's final memory of her son to be muddied by his drug addictions. The burial will be tomorrow if you would like to attend."

"You bastard. You cold-blooded creature. Do you feel anything? At all? I love Sherlock more than you can possibly fathom. He is my life…"

"Was. He was your life, John. Time for something else." Mycroft ended the call.

The primal cry of rage that escaped John threatened to shatter the windows in the small car. His fists collided with the console in front of him.

"Johnny – please stop. John! John, stop! You're going to hurt yourself!" She cried out and flung her hand out at him in an attempt to stop him from punching her dash.

"Who was on the phone?" Sherlock entered their mother's study straightening his cufflinks.

"No one of consequence." Mycroft turned to his brother and made a failed attempt to smile calmly. "Are you ready to go?"
"Can't it wait until after my funeral?" He put an impatient hand on his hip.

"Curious who'll turn up?"

"I...I want to see John. I'm rethinking this plan, Mycroft. I want to tell him now, myself. I don't know how long this is going to take. I don't want to wait until it's over to tell him."

"If you're seen, the whole plan will fall apart and it'll all be for nothing Sherlock. You asked for my help, you have to do this my way."

"Can I at least have my mobile back? I could text him."

"And if Moriarty's people see a message exchanged between your phone and his? For god's sake Sherlock, use your head for something other than a hat rack. You can't tell John, you know he'll be in grave danger if what is left of Moriarty's network finds out you're still alive."

"You didn't have to lay there on the paving pretending to be dead, listening to him. That was torturous. It was all I could do not to reach for his hand. I love John Mycroft."

Mycroft sighed and ran his hand over his bald spot, feeling the beads of sweat. "You may attend the graveside funeral service. You will remain in my car. You will not make any attempt to bring attention to yourself. Agreed?"

"Agreed."

xXx

John paced back and forth across Harry's kitchen with his medallion gripped in his fist. Harry stood in the hall watching him, unsure of what to say and slightly worried about what he might do.

"I need a favor." He finally stopped pacing. Harry stepped forward.

"Anything, name it."

"A suit. I need my black suit for the fune-for the service tomorrow. And a few other things. I can't go back to the flat. Not right now."

"Of course, Johnny. Do you want to make me a list then?" She dug through a drawer and came out with a notepad and pen. He accepted them both and sat at the kitchen table to write. He jotted a few things down and paused, sucking on the end of the pen.

"I need the blue dressing gown. The silk one on the hook in the bedroom. And the violin in the sitting room."

"But you don't play the vi-" Harry began to question him but her mouth snapped shut, realizing why John wanted it. He handed over his keys and went to lay down on the sofa.

She arrived at 221a Baker Street and knocked on the door. Mrs. Hudson's tear-streaked face saw her through the white lace curtains before she cracked the door open.

"Can I help you?" She wiped her eyes and tucked a tissue into the sleeve of her cardigan.

"Mrs. Hudson, I'm Harriet Watson, John's sister." She chewed on her lower lip.

"Oh, of course dear. I am sorry, I'm not myself...after the tragedy."
"It's understandable." She offered a small, kind smile.

"How is John?" She looked hesitant to ask and cast her eyes down.

Harry shook her head and pursed her lips. "He's –um…he's in pieces. He asked me to pick up some of his things." She held out John's keyring.

"By all means. Can I help you? Do you need a box? Anything?"

"A box would be great, thank you. I can't take everything today. I promise I'll be back to collect the rest of his belongings soon; he's going to be staying with me."

Mrs. Hudson assured her that she had no intention of re-renting the flat and Harry could take all the time she needed.

The morning of the funeral, Harry ironed his black suit and maintained a supportive, stoic silence. She chose a simple black dress and black heels for herself. Clara joined them also clad in black, but a pantsuit. Clara drove Harry's car to the cemetery with John and Harry in the backseat. Before they left, John took two extra anti-anxiety tablets to calm his frayed nerves but they were barely taking the edge off. Clara snuck him a few sips of whisky from a flask hidden in her purse when Harry wasn't watching.

John twisted the gold chain around itself until it threatened to choke him. The flesh of his neck caught in the links but he made no show of pain. As they pulled into the cemetery, John dropped the chain back underneath his dress shirt. He hid his puffy, red eyes behind dark sunglasses. They parked and walked together towards the burial site. Harry linked her right arm with her brother's. Clara wove her fingers with John's on his other side. Mike Stamford stepped out of his own car and approached the trio.

"Hi Mike." He cleared his throat and reached his hand out.

"John, I'm…" Stamford stammered as he shook John's hand.

"Thank you. Me too."

Two chairs were placed closest to the open wound in the earth. Mycroft was already seated when John arrived. They made eye contact and Mycroft silently motioned for John to sit in the other chair next to him. He hesitated, but proceeded to unbutton his jacket and sat. Harry and Clara stood close behind him, holding each other's hands.

"Your parents?"

"Too overcome," Mycroft replied simply.

The crowd that amassed around them was a mixed bag of people from different aspects of Sherlock's life; police (including a very sorrowful looking DI Lestrade), former clients, associates of Mycroft's, schoolmates and a few shady characters in disheveled clothing who John assumed were either members of Sherlock's homeless network or his drug dealers. Possibly both.

At the back of the crowd across from where John sat, a thin, graceful woman in impossibly high heels and a tight black lace dress was dabbing at her eyes with a silk handkerchief underneath a sheer black veil. She and John made eye contact and he recognized the shade of her red lipstick.

"Irene…" John whispered. He raised his hand ever so slightly in a weak wave and she nodded at him, touching a gloved hand to her lips.
The priest in white vestments arrived and opened a dog-eared Bible. "Et nomini patri, et filii et spiritus sancti."

"Amen," the crowd repeated robotically.

Partway through the service, John's heart started racing for no apparent reason. He felt like he was being watched. For a moment, he swore he could feel Sherlock's eyes on him, and he pulled off his sunglasses. Then came the sobering thought that Sherlock's eyes along with the rest of him were in the modest urn in front of them. A sob choked him. He reached up feeling for Harry's hand and she grabbed him. His palms were clammy and quaking. She thought that John ought to loosen his tie and unbutton his collar but she knew better than to tell him so.

"Excuse me, please." John turned towards the whispered voice of his former landlady and jumped to his feet. He buttoned his jacket and gestured for her to sit. She resisted him at first and with eyes full of tears, held him close.

"John I'm so-"

He cut her off. "Thank you. I am too." He let go of her and moved to the side so she could sit. With Mrs. Hudson openly weeping in front of him, John had someone to concentrate on caring for and could gratefully avoid dealing with his own grief for the remainder of the service.

The crowd disbursed, leaving only John and Mycroft. Harry and Clara escorted Mrs. Hudson back to her own car.

The urn containing the person John loved most in the world was about to be placed in the ground. John bit the outer edge of his tongue to keep himself from screaming. His knees felt like they were about to buckle and he steadied himself on the back of the folding chair. He didn't beg or try to craft a bargain with the god he no longer believed in to bring his lover back. Then, somehow the impossible happened. Somehow he didn't dive into the hole in the ground. Somehow the broken organ in his chest kept on beating.

He saw bumblebees buzzing around the floral arrangements on either side of the black marble headstone. John stopped believing in signs, but the presence of the bees made him feel warmer on the inside. He imagined Sherlock stepping away from someone else's funeral to watch the bees' frustrated efforts to collect pollen from cut flowers.

The bees reminded him of Sherlock's hair-brained scheme to turn the spare bedroom into a walk-in beehive and then he thought of Scruff, the baby bat now living happily in an exhibit with his own kind at the Dublin Zoo. He decided then and there to take a holiday to Dublin and pay him a visit as soon as possible. Bringing Scruff to his new home was the only non-case related trip he and Sherlock ever took together, not counting a few visits to the Holmes country estate and he desperately needed to get out of London.

Across from the gravesite, Mycroft's Rolls Royce Phantom idled waiting for his return. Sherlock pressed both of his palms to the mirrored window. He stared at John with such intensity that he was certain John could feel it. He whispered the same phrase so many times, it sounded like a Buddhist chant.

"Look at me John. Look at me. Lookatme lookatme lookatme…"

His breath caught in his throat when John looked up from the grave and in his direction. John removed his dark glasses for a moment and Sherlock gasped once he saw the raw, red eyes he was hiding. His beautiful, perfect John; his best friend; his protector; his lover was shattered. And it was
his fault. He didn't fight Mycroft hard enough when his brother suggested that John should be kept in
the dark about his plan. Yes, the suicide needed to look convincing and the only way to ensure that
John's grief looked genuine to any of Moriarty's men who were watching was for him to think what
he'd seen was real.

His own sobbing was thoroughly unavoidable. He dug deeply into his trouser pocket and retrieved
the little packet of powder. Careful not to spill it, or let it get wet with his tears, Sherlock tapped a
pile of heroin onto the webbing between his thumb and pointer finger.

His trembling shoulders made his hand shake and some of the powder tumbled from its place to the
black floor mat. He tried to compose himself and slow down his breathing. He tapped a little more
onto his hand and held it to his nose. He squeezed his eyes shut trying not to picture John laying in
their bed weeping but the visual was firmly imprinted in his imagination. He sniffed the powder up
his nose and repeated the process with the other nostril. He felt the drugs hit the back of his throat
and he coughed. He wanted to finish off the entire packet but he didn't know when he'd be able to
get more before his flight carried him off to pull to pieces the criminal network that was tearing him
away from John. He rolled the packet back up and dropped it into his shirt pocket. He rubbed his
nose and wiped his eyes on his sleeve before laying back on the leather seat and drifting away on the
waves of the narcotic.

The escape was sweet but short-lived. By the time he woke up, they were in the underground garage
adjacent to the private airstrip that would take him on his way. As he boarded the plane, Sherlock felt
instantly regretful; he would have done anything for one last look at John.

There was no collation following the service. John, Clara, and Harry retreated to her townhouse. The
women settled in the sitting room talking but both kept an ear out for John, who immediately shut
himself up in the spare bedroom.

He removed his suit jacket and shoes, then flopped down face-first on the bed and groaned. The
cranberry and cream colored quilt smelled clean, like it had been freshly laundered and John found it
disturbing. His entire being yearned for the scent of Sherlock. He had forgotten to ask Harry to bring
him the duvet off their bed.

"Fuck this hurts," he said out loud, rolling onto his side. He held his stomach, empty and churning.

The petite, whimpering bark startled him. He lifted his head up and saw the dog crate in the corner of
the room.

"Oh, Pippin. I forgot all about you, mate." Harry's four year old miniature Schnauzer with salt and
pepper fur scratched his paw at the latch on the crate door. John slithered off the bed, his exhausted
muscles protesting any extraneous movement. He crouched in front of the crate and opened the door.
Pippin started to jump up to John's face, whining excitedly and licking him. John rubbed his fingers
into the dog's neck and behind his ears; the short, curly fur felt soft and comforting in his hands.
Pippin ran to the opposite corner of the room, retrieved a plush elephant and leapt up on the bed
where he proceeded to chew on his toy.

John knelt on the mattress before he lay back down, curling his body around the dog who was
furiously trying to remove the plastic squeaker from inside the elephant's belly. He rested his hand on
Pippin's back, gently patting him gradually slower until he nodded off. Eventually, Pippin grew tired
of the toy and nestled himself against John's chest where he also fell asleep; resting his short-bearded
muzzle on John's bicep.

"I should go." Clara motioned to stand.
"Don't. Please stay." Harry placed her hand on top of Clara's.

"Harry, John needs you. I'm just in the way."

"John needs me, but I need you." She looked around the room quickly looking for some reason for Clara to stay when she saw the dog leash hanging patiently on its hook.

"How about we take Pip for a walk? Together?" She looked into Clara's eyes hopefully.

"In this?" Clara motioned to her clothing and heels.

"We wear the same size, remember? Borrow something of mine. Hell, pick whatever you like and keep it." Harry stood and reached her hand out, Clara accepted.

"I suppose a walk would be a good idea. Where is he anyway?"

Harry motioned to the spare bedroom but then realized that John was in there. She pursed her lips and chewed on the inside of her cheek, debating if she should intrude. Creeping slowly towards the door, she carefully turned the knob and opened it just a crack.

"I don't think he wants to go for a walk, Clarrie," She whispered over her shoulder.

Clara approached and put her hands on Harry's shoulders as she peeked into the bedroom. She saw John and the dog laying together on the bed, his hand still on the animal's back, rising and falling as it breathed.

"Do you think he'll be alright?" Clara felt Harry's shoulders tighten up.

"I don't know. I mean, I hope. I don't think he's ever been in love before and then this happens. It's so... unfair." She stepped back and closed the bedroom door.

"How're you holding up? This is a lot to handle." Clara brushed Harry's hair behind her ear.

"I'm fine, I just... I'm not used to taking care of John. It's always been the other way round. He's much better at it than I am." She smiled sadly.

"It looks to me like you're doing everything you can. Can I help you?"

Harry nervously slipped her hand around Clara's waist. "You're here. That's enough."
Chapter 18

John wiped the grass from his knees as he walked out of the cemetery gates. He looked both ways before crossing the street with his hands buried deep in his pockets, the collar of his coat turned up to block the wind from his neck. As he approached the bus shelter, he was momentarily distracted by a car backfiring. He lost track of where he was for a split second when – *wham*.

He'd nearly knocked her over. The petite blonde woman grabbed his arm to keep from falling and her cup fell to the pavement, the lid popped off and the coffee spilled all over her shoes.

"Oh fucking hell, *really?*" She shouted and used her hand to brush the liquid from the leg of her jeans. "Just great. Fucking brilliant." She crouched down to pick up the cup, lid and her purse, which had fallen from her shoulder when she and John collided.

All colour had drained from John's face. He bent down next to her to help.

"Shit. I am *so* sorry…it's all my fault."

"It's fine. It's the…gherkin on top of the shit sandwich that has been my afternoon." She pulled some tissues from her purse and was dabbing at her jeans.

"Let me replace it for you."

"No thank you. It's fine. It was cold anyway."

John pulled his handkerchief from his coat pocket and offered it to her. "Listen, this is my fault. You said you were already having a bad day; at least let the dickhead who made you spill coffee all over yourself buy you a new one."

For the first time, she looked up and saw his face. His deep blue eyes made her lose her breath momentarily. The left corner of his mouth twitched up into a friendly smile, which she returned.

"Alright."

He stood and held his left hand out to help her up.

"I'm John. Watson." He held onto her hand and squeezed it softly.

"Mary. Mary Morstan." She shook his hand until it felt awkward, then she pulled hers back but not before she quickly checked if he was wearing a ring.

"Well, Mary Morstan; again, I'm very sorry. There's a Caffe Nero just up the street, is that ok with you?"

She nodded.

The walk was blessedly short, neither of them was sure of what to say to the other. He held the door open for her and she smiled politely.

"Caffe Americano, please." She said the teenager behind the counter.

"What size, Miss?"

"Regular, thanks." She turned to John. "Did you want anything?"
"Hmm? Oh no, thanks. All set." John paid for her coffee and followed her to a table. They sat across from each other awkwardly.

"I wonder if that Caffe Americano is anything like actual American coffee." John said, gesturing his hand toward her cup. She had just taken a sip so she couldn't reply immediately, but she shook her head.

"This is espresso. American coffee is very different. And it's dreadful, incidentally." She casually moved the cup in a circle with her fingertips and tucked her hair behind her ear.

"I haven't been there, not yet anyway."

"I lived there for just a bit. Well, three years." She took another sip.

"Oh? Whereabouts?"

"Different places. I was in Rhode Island the longest." She lifted an eyebrow.

"Sorry, is that…New York?" He shrugged a shoulder, having absolutely no idea.

She laughed. He liked her laugh. "No – you're thinking of Long Island. It's a separate state. Very tiny. Have you heard of Brown University? Well, that's where it is; Rhode Island."

"Ah-ha. Yeah, I've heard of Brown University. What brought you to the USA?"

Mary shrugged and drank some more. "Wanderlust, I suppose. I guess you can say I was restless. I lived in Rhode Island, Florida and Colorado. I liked all three but they never quite felt like home."

John nodded thoughtfully. "I haven't been further west than Ireland. I've been to the East, well - Afghanistan, when I was in the army. Australia, too."

"Ooh, look at you Mr. Three Continents." The comment dripped with sarcasm without being rude. John blanched but she giggled so sweetly he made himself chuckle.

"Where did you visit in Australia?" She rested her chin on her fist and leaned in.

"Darwin. It's really beautiful but hot as Hades." He smiled back at her.

"Yeah, we English aren't very used to that sort of sun, are we?"

"That is a fact. There were certain days in the desert that I was sure I would melt."

_Chill out, whatcha yellin' for? Lay back, it's all been done before…_

John pulled a face at the song on the café radio. Mary nodded her head in time to the music.

"I absolutely _hate_ how much I like this song." She giggled, John laughed loudly.

"Oh, you should be unequivocally _ashamed_ of yourself!" He was teasing her.

"I know."

"This song is godawful."

"I know."

She was smiling again; her thin lips were red. There were the faintest hints of delicate lines beginning
to form at the outside corners of her light blue eyes. He slowly realized that he thought she was beautiful and the thought struck him a bit dumb.

The conversation lulled slightly. Mary came up with something quickly.

"So, John Watson. Who were you visiting?"

He cocked his head at her and she finished her coffee.

"Sorry, I saw you leaving the cemetery. Shit – is that too personal?" She bit her lip, thinking she'd made a serious faux pas but he waved his hand at her reassuringly.

"No, it's ok. My…um…my…Sherlock. My best friend. He um…" He rubbed the back of his neck and cleared his throat.

"Sherlock? Sherlock Holmes? The detective who jumped off the –"

"Yes. Him." John pursed his lips together and cleared his throat again.

"You're that John Watson?! I read all about it in the newspaper. That business with, shit what was his name? Jim something. My god, I'm terribly sorry. How awful. How long has it been now?"

"About eighteen months." John checked his wristwatch.

_Seventeen months, four days, six hours, and eight, no, nine minutes._

John looked away from her but she placed a hand on his, her thumb stroked the back of his hand. Her skin was soft and felt warm on his skin; the warmth spread up his arm.

"I'm sorry John."

"Thank you. It's not been easy, but at least they've all come to their senses now. I knew Jim Moriarty. He strapped a bomb to my chest. He sent an armed drone into my flat. He was extremely real. I know a lot of people believed Sher- he - was a phony but, I knew different." He tried to hide the bitterness in his voice, but he was deeply angered by the things that were said about Sherlock before the truth came to light.

Mary stared at him with rapt fascination before she seemed to remember something suddenly. She moved her sleeve up her arm and checked her watch.

"Shit. I'm late. I'm supposed to meet my friend Janine. John, listen. I never do this but," she opened her purse and pulled out a pen. She wrote something on a napkin and slid it across the table at him before hopping off the stool.

"Will you call me?" She adjusted the strap of her handbag on her shoulder.

John smirked at her. He unfolded the napkin and tore it in half. He folded the half with Mary's number written on it and put it in his jacket. He held his hand out for her pen.

"Not if you call me, first." He wrote his number down on the other half of the napkin and held it out to her. She smiled and accepted it. He noticed her delicate hands. Her nails were short and painted with red varnish.

"I just might do that. Thank you for the coffee."

"My pleasure, I hope it improved your afternoon."
"It did. Immensely. Do you text? I text." Again, she bit her lower lip and it made him chuckle.

"Yep. Text away. If I don't answer straightaway during the day, I'm probably with a patient."

"Patient? Are you a psychiatrist?"

He chuckled. "GP."

Her smile widened revealing the slightest of dimples on one cheek. Her mobile started to ring in her pocket and she pulled it out. She groaned in frustration before answering it.

"I have to dash, but I'll speak to you soon, ok?" John nodded.

She turned and opened the door as she answered the call. "Janine, hey. Yeah, I'm on my way, only I stopped for a coffee…"

He stood at the café window and watched her walk down the block. She put her phone back into her pocket and turned her head over her shoulder to look in his direction. He raised his hand to wave when she saw him looking her way.

xXx

Hi, it's Mary – the woman you covered in coffee last week.

Were your ears ringing? I was just thinking about you.

Amazing how that works. Are you at home?

Almost, I'm on the bus. It's been a long day.

I can relate. It's been long for me, too.

Is there another gherkin on your shit sandwich?

Haha. No. Not a bad day, just busy.

I love that expression, by the way. It had me chuckling the rest of the day.

Feel free to use it, a gift from me to you. Gratis.

Ta.

I was wondering if you might like to go to dinner with me.

Or not.

Well this is embarrassing.

Sorry! I was getting off the bus at my stop. Dinner sounds great, on one condition.

And that is?

If Avril Lavigne comes on the radio at the restaurant, we leave. ;)

You drive a hard bargain, but I'm amenable to that. Tomorrow?

I'm free. 7:30?
Perfect. Do you like seafood?

Yep.

*There's an oyster bar in the Marylebone High Street with an excellent wine list, have you been?*

No, but that sounds promising.

*Tomorrow night, Seven-thirty, then.*

See you then.

:) 

John entered the house, flipping the door latch behind him. He toed off his shoes and dropped his keys on the table by the door. He heard Pippin's nails clicking against the floor tiles as he came dashing at him, barking happily and jumping.

"Johnny?"

"Who else would it be? Hi, Pip."

He scooped the dog up in one arm and pet his head. Following the blue glow of the TV screen, he found Harry curled up on the sofa, a pint of raspberry ripple in her lap. John let Pippin jump down to the floor. He took the spoon from the carton and tried to steal a taste.

"Hey, get your own! It's in the freezer." She grabbed her spoon back and shooed him away.

"Thanks." He ruffled her hair with brotherly affection before retrieving his own pint of ice cream and sat at the opposite end of the sofa. Pippin leapt up next to him and starting sniffing and whining at John's jacket pocket.


"He knows I have something for him. I stopped at The Barkery on the way to the bus stop." John pulled a brown paper bag out of his pocket and Pippin sat up at attention. John pulled the dog biscuit out of the bag and snapped it in half. He tossed it across the room and Pippin shot out after it. He picked it up in his teeth and trotted over to his dog bed in the corner to eat his prize.

"You spoil him with expensive dog pastries." Harry smiled and shook her head.

"It's hard not to."

"He's getting fat." Harry pointed at the dog with her spoon.

John shrugged. "So I'll take him with me in the morning when I run."

"How was your day?"

He took a spoon of ice cream and closed his eyes, inhaling the flavour.

"Uhm. Same old, same old. They come in, they tell me they're sick, I tell them it's viral and send them home with a prescription for rest and chicken soup. Though I did have to extract a marble from a five year old's nose this morning."

"Such an eventful life you lead."
He snorted and had some more ice cream. "How was yours?"

She shrugged and ate, not taking her eyes off the TV. "I sold a £2,000,000 house."

"The place in Knightsbridge?"

"Yep."

"That's great. Good for you." He held his spoon out to her and she clinked her own against it. They sat quietly for a while. It had become their nightly routine since John had moved in; relaxing on the sofa watching repeats of *Fawlty Towers* or *Blackadder*.

"I actually just had something interesting happen." He scooped the remote control off the coffee table and pressed mute. Harry gave him her attention.

"I'm going on a date tomorrow."

She dropped her spoon into the carton. Some ice cream dribbled down her chin and she wiped it off on the blanket that was draped over her legs.

"A date? Johnny, that's great! Who with? Do I know her-them?"

"Did I tell you about the woman I had coffee with last week? I bumped into her and she dropped her cup…"

"Yeah, that sounds familiar. Blonde, blue eyes, red nails, right?"

"That's her. Not that there have been any other contenders."

Harry put the ice cream on the coffee table and shifted her position to face him.

"How did this come about? You just rang her up and asked?"

"Not exactly. She...she texted and asked me to dinner." Harry raised her eyebrows, impressed.

"I'm happy for you, Johnny. Get yourself back out there. You can't go on pretending that…" She paused, obviously rethinking what she was about to say.

"Pretending what?" He put his own pint down and sat cross legged. Harry sighed.

"Pretending that Sherlock is…" He held his hand up, stopping her.

"I know, Harry. I know." She leaned forward and crawled into him. She kissed his cheek as she wrapped her arms around his neck.

"Johnny, I only want you to be happy. Have you been seeing your therapist? Have you been taking your medication?"

"Yes to the therapist, no to the medication."

She pulled a disapproving face.

"Harry, Sherlock is dead. That's why I've been depressed. No amount of anti-depressants in the world can change that. I go to my therapist's office, talk and try whatever healing meditative exercises she recommends to me. Sometimes for the briefest of seconds, I forget that I watched the love of my life jump off a building. Whether I take the tablets or not, he's still dead."
"I didn't mean to upset you. You sounded excited about the date, I shouldn't have brought it up."

"It's fine. It's not as if I wasn't thinking about him and you reminded me." She shifted off of his lap and watched him carry his ice cream back to the freezer.

"Good night, sis." He whistled for Pippin, who obediently followed him down the hall to his bedroom.

John sat on his bed, raked his fingers through his hair and cleared his throat. When he hung up his coat, he gave Pippin the remaining half of the dog biscuit.

"Hey Sherlock. How was your day? Yeah, mine too."

He pulled the beige jumper over his head and unbuttoned his shirt.

"Dinner? Nah, I had a late lunch, I'm not hungry."

He stared a moment at his reflection. He'd lost more weight and his hair was getting greyer. He spoke into the mirror as if he were looking at someone else.

"I'm thinking of growing a mustache, Sherlock. What'dya think?"

He changed into a long sleeved t shirt and black joggers, kicked his discarded clothes into the corner and went to his wardrobe. He felt way in the back for the silk dressing gown and reverently took it off the hanger.

"I have something to tell you. I'm going on a date with that woman, Mary. Now I know what you're going to say, 'Yet another false start, John.'" He mimicked Sherlock's condescending tone.

He laid back on the bed and pulled the inside collar of the dressing gown to his face and inhaled the faint scent of Sherlock still clinging to the fabric. Pippin's ears perked up and he cocked his head.

"Christ, I miss you. I miss every last thing about you. I still love you. If I die in my 90's, riddled with arthritis and can't remember my own name, I'll still remember that I love you. But something is different about this woman. She's intriguing. She made me laugh straight off. I had just come from the cemetery and she was able to make me laugh, that's a good sign isn't it?"

Harry had switched the channel over to the evening news just before the doorbell rang, she briefly heard Pippin barking from John's bedroom. She cocked her head before going to answer the door.

Clara had changed her hair again, it was darker, cut to her shoulders and flat ironed straight. Harry's heart beat faster.

"Harriet." She said politely.

"Hi Clara. Um…"

"Is John home yet?"


"He didn't tell you I was coming?"
"No, but it's nice to see you." Harry's hopeful smile was not returned. "Can I get you a drink? Of water?"

"Please."

Clara followed Harry to the kitchen and nodded when she was handed a bottle of water. Without another word, Clara walked to John's room and closed the door quickly behind her.

John had replaced the dressing gown in its place of honour in his wardrobe and was propped up on his pillows reading and rubbing Pippin's belly when Clara entered. He looked up, almost surprised to see her.

"You forgot to tell Harry I was coming." She draped her coat over the chair at his desk.

"Shit, yeah it slipped my mind. I'm sorry." She waved him off, pulled her boots off and sat on his bed, leaning against the footboard. Pippin hopped into her lap.

"Hi Pip. Miss me?" She stroked behind both of his ears and he licked the tip of her nose.

"Was that awkward as fuck?" John grimaced while he marked the page and placed the book on his nightstand. She shrugged a shoulder and cracked her knuckles.

"It is what it is, John. We split up and you're my friend; she and I are going to have to be around each other on occasion. Granted, it was much easier when you two weren't living together; we could get together and she didn't necessarily know about it but, whatever." She stopped patting the dog and he proceeded to bite at the ring on her thumb until she started up again.

"She misses you."

Clara scoffed. "She probably should have thought about that before downing an entire bottle of champagne at my sister's house warming."

"She's trying, Clara."

"Are you still thinking about going through with it?" Changing the subject abruptly, she removed her grey cardigan, revealing a green silk blouse. Pippin switched his allegiance and sat next to John, who began scratching his back near the base of his tail.

"Does it help?"

She frowned. "Nothing really helps, John. You know better than most that this 'time heals all wounds' bollocks is all bullshit."

"Then why do it?" He crossed one ankle over the other.

"Physical pain can…distract from emotional pain."

He nodded, considering what she'd said and it made sense.

"When I got this one," She pulled her sleeve up revealing an amazingly detailed black and grey tattoo of three roses going up the inside of her forearm. "I was 21 and my Pappou had just died very suddenly; he grew the most beautiful roses. I was heartbroken when he died, getting this was…I dunno. Cathartic?"

"I guess I see what you mean. Don't forget that I've seen you in a swimsuit, you're the very picture of catharsis."
Clara rolled her eyes. "Well I didn't get them all for that reason, jackarse."

They chortled at each other. "Have you decided on a design?"

"I narrowed it down to either a bumblebee, or a bat. He had a thing for both. I think a bat might be too…"

"Gothic?"

"Exactly, yes. So, a bumblebee. Now I'm struggling with placement."

"Wrist is always a decent spot. If it's small enough you can hide it under a watchband."

"Is over my heart too on-the-nose?"

"Not one bit. I think wherever you decide will be the right choice, John."

"I suppose I should get it on my arse," John said seriously.

Clara's eyes opened wide.

"What? He always was a pain in my arse, isn't it apropos to memorialize him with a final pain in my arse?"

Clara clapped her hand to her forehead and laughed. "John, if you get a bumblebee tattooed on your bum, not only will I go with you, I will take photos and pay for the damned thing."

After two hours passed, Clara successfully avoided every attempt John made to turn the subject back to his sister. He walked her to the door and saw that Harry had gone to bed; there was no light shining underneath her bedroom door. They said good night and she left. Pippin had followed them and he sat on the mat, indicating that he expected to be walked before going to bed.

"Ok, ok. Let me get my trainers."

John pulled on his road tested red and grey Nike Air Max running shoes and secured Pippin's leash to his collar. He did up the zip of a black fleece and made sure his keys were in his pocket before he left. They followed their usual route; three blocks up, four blocks left, five blocks down, four blocks to the right and were proceeding the final two blocks back up when John caught sight of something that made him stop in his tracks and his heart raced. Someone tall with wild curls was leaning against a lamppost, sucking on a cigarette wearing what appeared to be a long trench coat he could see the collar was turned up.

Pippin stepped ahead of him and growled, baring his teeth.

"Easy, boy. You're not scary." John's heart pounded in his chest as he gently tugged the leash back towards him.

The man took notice of the growling dog. His face was completely in shadow. John saw him flick the cigarette to the ground and he walked slowly towards him. He had a familiar gait. Pippin growled again.

"Cute dog. Are you here for the meeting?" The man stepped into the light and could not have looked less like Sherlock if he were actively trying. John's heartbeat slowed down.

"Erm – Meeting?"
"We call ourselves The Empty Hearse." He squatted down to pat Pippin on the head.


"Believe in him. He's out there, somewhere." The man called out to John as he walked away.

"Bloody religious cult fruitcakes." John shook his head.

All through the next day, John's mobile felt as heavy as a brick in the pocket of his lab coat. He had thought of a hundred and one reasons to text Mary and cancel their date. Everything from a migraine to a bite from a tsetse fly to a late onset terminal illness. Every time he resolved to cancel, the memory of her lovely smile prevented him from doing so. Instead, he texted Harry.

Do I bring her flowers?

_Are you that out of practice?_

I could have brought S a jar full of eyeballs and he'd have been thrilled. Something tells me Mary wouldn't appreciate that.

_Fair point. You're meeting at the restaurant?_

Yes.

_No flowers. They'll sit on the table or on a chair and be awkwardly in the way._

This is why I ask your advice, I wouldn't have thought of that.

_Johnny, I'm divorced, a recovering alcoholic and still very much in love with my ex. Take all of my dating advice with a giant grain of salt._

He finished his caseload for the day and boarded the bus home. His knee bounced nervously and he was so distracted that he nearly missed his stop. He took the stairs two at a time and walked in the door just before six o'clock.

"Hey Stud," Harry joked with a wink when she saw him. Pippin ran up to John and promptly rolled onto his back.

"I don't know if I can do this." John knelt and rubbed the dog's belly.

"You can and you will. It's got to happen sometime. The most intimate contact you've had in the last year and a half has been my dog licking your face."

John looked up with a smirk. "You're saying I should let someone else lick my face?"

Harry rolled her eyes. "If that's your thing." She rested a hand on her hip. "The only way to move on is to move on, Johnny."

He raised an eyebrow at her and momentarily stopped petting the dog. "Have you moved on?"

"We aren't talking about me. Now get up and go get changed. I left a box of condoms on your bed."

John laughed. "We're just having dinner Harry. OW!" Pippin had nipped his hand, insisting on a longer belly rub.
She batted her lashes at him. "And you might want dessert."

"Don't you think you're getting carried away with the whole 'you taking care of me for a change' thing?" He stood up and Pippin whined at him.

"You never bought me condoms."

"Um…I am unaware of a time you ever needed them. Dental dam, maybe. Should I have bought that instead?"

"Christ, no. Where's the fun in that?" They laughed.

After a quick shower, he changed clothes, called for a cab and sat on his bed with the box of condoms in his hand. He felt his stomach doing gold-medal worthy acrobatics.

"Just in case." He pulled the box open and removed the strip of three condoms. He separated one from the rest and tucked it into his wallet as he headed for the front door to wait for the cab on the front stairs.

He arrived a few minutes early and found Mary was standing outside the restaurant waiting for him. She smiled and waved when she saw him. He paid the driver and waved back.

"You look 100% better when you're not dripping in coffee." John smirked at her as he spoke and she raised an eyebrow.

"You look nice too."

"John? John!" He spun on his heel and saw Irene Adler waving at him. John waved back but his face fell when he saw that the petite woman in the tight satin dress walking towards him was leading a man in a leather mask that covered his entire head on a dog leash. There were holes cut out for his eyes and nostrils and a zip across his lips.

Fuck. Why me?

"John, it is brilliant to see you!" She kissed his cheeks.

"Yeah, erm you too, Irene. This is um…" He looked to his date with panic carved into his forehead, he had completely blanked on her name.

"Mary…" she said patiently.

"Mary! Yes. Sorry. Irene, Mary. Mary, Irene Adler." His hands flapped nervously between them.

"A pleasure." Irene said sweetly.

"Won't you introduce us to your…friend?" Mary said chewing on her lower lip.

Irene laughed and tugged on the leash. "Oh, this little piggy doesn't have a name. Does he?" She addressed the man in the mask.

"No ma'am," he muttered. His voice was muffled by the thick leather and the closed zip.

"But you're on a date, John. I won't keep you. You should come round for tea! My assistant can set it all up. Any day. I keep my days free. So nice to see you. Mary, it was lovely to meet you. Enjoy your dinner."
The scene was utterly bizarre and people were beginning to stare. Irene kissed John's cheek before leading the man on the leash towards a waiting limousine.

John clasped his hands in front of him and turned back to Mary. Her arms were crossed over her chest and she had a difficult to read, but possibly amused look on her face.

"Can we possibly pretend that didn't just happen?"

"Sure."

"Really?"

"Not a chance." She turned and went inside, John exhaled hard and followed her.

xXx

After dinner, John suggested a drink at a rooftop lounge in Whitehall Place. He mentioned getting a cab.

"It's such a lovely night, let's walk."

"Are you sure? It's far."

Mary shrugged, "I'm not wearing heels."

John looked down and chuckled, "Yes you are."

Mary stepped out of her shoes and held them in one hand. She reached for John with the other. As her soft palm met his, John realized it was only the third time they had touched. He wove his fingers with hers and smiled.

As they walked, the conversation came easily. He liked hearing her laugh; it wasn't forced or fake or just out of politeness. He liked that she cursed as much as he did and she was equally as sarcastic. As they approached the zebra crossing near the lounge, Mary dropped her shoes and stepped back into them. John looked up and down the street and began to lead her across but she gently pulled him back.

"Everything ok?"

"Are we going to bump into another dominatrix from your past leading a man on a leash?" She suppressed a laugh with her free hand.

"Yeah about that…” He started to explain but she stopped him.

"I'm teasing, John. I Googled her name when I went to the ladies'. I have no doubt in my mind that it's a very complicated story involving your detective work that I don't need to hear." She leaned in and kissed him on the cheek. Before she could step back, he softly traced his fingertips across her cheek back into her hair and pulled her close. Their lips met once, then twice. During a third slow, lingering kiss he wrapped his arms around her waist. Their mouths came apart, their bodies stayed pressed close together.

"I've been waiting for that all night." She smiled and bit her bottom lip.

"I hope it was worth waiting for." He kissed her again.

"Hm. Six out of ten."
He raised an eyebrow.

"Ok, ok. Eight."
Chapter 19

Six weeks after their first date, John and Mary were regularly enjoying each other's company several nights a week. Generally speaking they settled quite easily into each other's lives. They both had a deep appreciation for expensive gin and cheap red wine and they shared an aversion to red meat. They made each other laugh and she fit perfectly under his arm when they sat on the sofa at her flat to watch a DVD with a shared bowl of unbuttered, lightly salted popcorn in their laps.

Their first intimate encounter (on date number five), was initiated by Mary and was slightly awkward at the outset. Depression had drastically lowered John's libido and besides that, it had been several years since he'd slept with a woman and he was nervous. He was deeply embarrassed by how long he fumbled with the catch of her bra before he finally got it unhooked but Mary found it very sweet. She assumed he was slightly less experienced than she but once his body began to respond, his aptitude took her by complete surprise. The old saying "it's just like riding a bicycle" came to mind and he had to force himself not to laugh as he slid his hand inside her knickers.

He found himself lasting longer with Mary; quite an advantageous discovery as he was completely out of practice. The sight of her flushed cheeks and trembling body as she erupted made him dizzy. Mary lived alone so most of the time if they were going to spend the night together John stayed at her flat, rather than the townhouse he was sharing with his sister.

On one occasion when she spent a Saturday night with him Clara was also there; she and Harry having reconciled yet again. John made dinner for the four of them, they played cards and watched a DVD. When John and Harry needed to use the loos, Mary stepped outside for some air and Clara followed her.

"They have the exact same tiny bladder." Clara joked and pulled the patio door shut. "You'll see. If we ever go on holiday, the four of us, they will be dashing for the loos at the same time, it's like clockwork." She sat on a wicker chaise lounge with a mint green cushion.

"How long have you and Harry been together?" Mary asked, settling into a deck chair.

Clara sighed and it turned into a chuckle. "This time, or in total? We met about 16 years ago. I was 20, working on my law degree and volunteering with the Human Rights Campaign. Harry was the property agent helping the HRC find a new building to occupy. I thought she was the most amazing woman I'd ever seen." She peeked back over her shoulder before opening her purse and pulling out an Altoids tin. She popped the lid open and instead of a curiously strong mint, she pulled out a tightly wrapped joint.

She took it between her lips and lit it. The pungent smoke left her mouth and she caught sight of a somewhat surprised look on Mary's face.

"Hey, I'm a barrister, not a saint."

Mary laughed. Clara offered it to her and she accepted, holding it between her fore and middle fingers.

"I will say you're not like any other barrister I've met. Your tattoos, for one. Now this." Mary took a second drag before she handed it back.

Clara shrugged. "I've never been one for convention." She laid back and bent her knees, her long skirt rode up revealing a sizeable watercolor style lotus tattoo on the top of her left thigh. She took a
deep drag and passed it back to Mary, coughing slightly upon exhaling.

"That one is beautiful." Mary pointed to the tattoo with the two fingers she held the joint in.

"Thanks. It's one of my favorites." She moved her skirt out of the way, showing Mary the entire tattoo. "I love the symbolism of the lotus. Its roots are in the disgusting, mucky, dark water and it has to push up out of that to get up to the light. When it blooms, it's spectacular. I got this one after a very difficult situation, it reminds me of what I can overcome."

"Really lovely." Mary exhaled and passed the joint to Clara.

The patio door slid open behind them.

"They're out here!" Harry walked outside and called to John over her shoulder. She squeezed herself behind Clara on the chaise lounge, sitting with one leg on either side of her. She pulled Clara back with her arms around her shoulders. Clara held the joint out to her and she accepted.

John pulled the patio door closed with his back to the women. "Hey, does anybody smell that? Oh. Of course it's you two." He turned, rubbed his mustache with the side of his thumb and shook his head. He pulled a chair close to Mary and sat down.

Without another word, Harry held the joint out to him and he took it. Before taking a drag, he looked at Mary from the corner of his eye to see if she approved and it appeared that she did. He offered it to Mary with a raised eyebrow and she took it.

With Clara's back pressed against her chest, Harry had a serenely happy expression on her face. She twirled some of Clara's hair around her fingers and kissed her temple sweetly.

"I still can't believe you two are divorced." Mary said with a smirk.

"You haven't seen us argue yet. It might make sense then." Clara turned slightly to look at Harry and they kissed.

Around midnight, they retired to their respective bedrooms and a short time later, Harry and Clara could clearly hear Mary moaning.

"You thinking what I'm thinking?" Harry said with a devilish grin.

"Pretty sure I'm louder than her." Clara winked.

Mary needed an interval in order to catch her breath when Clara's voice drifted down the hallway. Mary leaned up on her elbows, chewed on her lower lip as she turned toward the bedroom door.

"You know what they're doing, right?" She gestured with her thumb.

"As one of them is my kid sister, I'd rather not think about it if it's all the same to you." John grimaced and looked up from between her thighs. Mary laughed and lightly brushed her soft heel up the center of his back.

"That's not what I mean. They're making it a competition."

John screwed up his face. "Mary…"

She gyrated her hips. "Come on. Watson vs. Watson. It's a bit of a turn on isn't it?"

"Not if I lose." He laughed and nipped at her inner thigh.
The following morning, Mary woke up with John's arm still wrapped around her shoulder and her head was on his chest. She rested her chin on the top of her hand and watched him sleep. There was a small piece of lint stuck in his mustache and she carefully pulled it free and flicked it to the floor. She was relieved that he'd had an undisturbed night; the nightmares were finally stopping. He sounded so scared, quietly repeating the same few words over and over:

"Let me through, he's my friend…"

She placed a soft kiss smack in the center of the small bumblebee tattoo over his heart and he stirred. His eyes opened and focused on her, smiling at him.

"Good morning."

"Hi. I'm gonna go make coffee, do you want some?" Mary asked.

"Sure. I'll be there in a minute."

She got up, picked up her knee-length satin nightgown from the floor and dropped it over her head. The matching plum dressing gown was in her overnight bag. She found it and tied it loosely at her waist.

"Um, Mare?"

She looked up at John, who indicated that she should look down. One of her pink nipples was slightly peeking out from the neckline of the nightie. She adjusted it and winked at him before padding out the door.

She heard the music coming from the kitchen and paused at its entryway. Clara had pushed the kitchen table all the way against the wall and was dancing with her eyes closed. Her hair was split into two plaits and pinned up off her long elegant neck. She was wearing a cropped white t-shirt revealing her midriff and tiny black shorts that were barely longer than the hipster-cut style of women's panties. Her scant clothing revealed several more tattoos on her back and upper legs. She moved in time to the music with such grace and masterful skill, it was immediately clear that she'd spent many years training.

_Hold me closer, Tiny Dancer…Count the headlights on the highway…Lay me down in sheets of linen, you had a busy day today…_

Her feet made virtually no noise while she ad libbed across the polished wood floor. She jeted from a pas de bourree into a controlled demi-point fouette de tournant without so much as a breath of hesitation.

"She's incredible, isn't she?" Harry was suddenly behind Mary, also admiring Clara.

"She is astonishing," Mary replied without looking away.

"She was in the corps de ballet of a company for years. She tore her ACL during her audition for a principle role. Ruined her chance at a career."

"That's so tragic. How awful…they couldn't repair it?" Mary sighed and placed a hand to her throat.

"Not to the point that she'd be able to perform at the same level. Her father even sent her to Greece to see a relative who's an orthopaedic specialist."

"I can't imagine loving something that much and having to give it up," Mary looked on with a
pitiable expression.

"She fell in love with the law at uni, but dance is her real passion. She's a brilliant barrister, don't get me wrong but I think she'd have been much happier if she could have kept dancing. She volunteers her time teaching ballet once a week." Harry crossed her arms over her chest.

"Is that when she got the lotus on her leg? When she couldn't dance anymore?"

"Yes, exactly."

The song ended as Clara came out of a pirouette into fifth position, her arms fluttered down to her sides. Mary applauded and Clara's eyes popped open, suddenly aware that she was being watched. She blushed red as a beet, but bowed deeply for her appreciative audience.

"I didn't realize we were hosting a performance at breakfast, Cookie. I would have sold tickets."

Harry teased and wrapped her arms around her waist.

"Clara, you're amazing," Mary spoke with admiration.

"I was amazing. Now I'm old, out of shape and past it," she said humbly.

"You are not!" Harry kissed her neck.

"Oh, did I miss the recital?" John observed the table moved out of the way as he stumbled into the kitchen in his boxer briefs and untied dressing gown.

"Yeah, sorry John. Maybe next time." Clara started to pull the kitchen table back to its usual place in the center of the floor.

After breakfast, Harry and Clara went back to bed. John and Mary decided to visit an antique market. They wandered hand in hand from booth to booth, enjoying the fine weather, talking amongst themselves and admiring the various trinkets and assorted valuables. Mary took a liking to a turquoise bracelet set in silver and John bought it for her. She secured the toggle clasp to her wrist and kissed his cheek. She wandered away from him to look at a table piled high with used books. John walked a few stalls down and found an old leather bag containing antique medical tools. He haggled briefly over the price and shook the sellers' hand when they settled on a price. At an adjacent table, he saw something that made his heart stop. An antique Bausch and Lomb microscope identical to the one that was a permanent fixture on the kitchen table at the flat on Baker Street.

"John! Come here, look at this!" The spell the microscope cast on him was broken by the sound of her voice. He tightened his grip on the bag of tools he bought and walked over to her.

"Look at this book, Holmes. Think it's a relation?" She was holding a copy of *Theories of Mathematical Communication* by M.L. Mycroft-Holmes. John puffed his cheeks out and exhaled hard.

"It's his mother's book," John said quietly. He took a step back like the book might be an incendiary device. Mary's eyes widened and she gently placed the book down on the table.

"John, I'm so sorry… I don't know why I said anything." She pressed her palm to his cheek.

"It's fine."

She looked down at the item in his hand. "What's that you've bought? An old doctor's bag?"
"Yeah and tools. Just something to decorate my office at the surgery. Can we go? I just…sorry. Can we?"

"Of course. I'm sorry, love." She kissed him and he smiled weakly.

xXx

Unlike his most recent partner, Mary was not tired after sex in spite of having multiple orgasms. She was recharged and ravenous. Four months into their relationship, they spent a very long, steamy morning in her bed and when she finally put her feet on the floor, it was nearly one in the afternoon.

"Fancy a pizza?" She pulled on a pale purple chenille robe that fell just below her kneecaps.

John lifted his torso up to rest on his elbows and felt his stomach growl in reply.

"Let's do it."

Mary jokingly rolled her eyes, "Yeah, we just did that. Twice. Now I want pizza."

John laughed his boisterous belly laugh for the first time in ages.

"That's a new sound you just made; I've never heard you laugh like that before." She walked around the bed and sat next to him.

"You seem to have that effect on me."

She smirked and leaned in to kiss him. "I'll go shower. Won't be a minute." She popped up off the bed and he watched her hips swivel as she walked to the en-suite bath.

He stared at the ceiling of her bedroom, noticing that for the first time since he and Mary had begun dating, he didn't feel guilty. He didn't feel as if he were being disloyal to Sherlock. He missed him dreadfully but he knew that wasn't ever going to change. He recognized the moment his therapist had been promising would come since he'd gone back to see her nearly two years before. John was allowing himself to fall in love again.

The unassuming pizzeria in Mary's neighbourhood was nothing spectacular to look at from the outside but as soon as they stepped inside, John's olfactory senses went into overdrive. The scent of the food coming out of the ancient-looking brick oven at the back of the shop was nothing short of mouth-watering. Most of the tables were full of chattering patrons and everything was the best thing he'd ever smelled.

"Eh! La bellissima Maria!" A jovial man in a white apron with short cropped black hair called to her from a nearby table. He got up and walked over with a big smile of white, perfectly straight teeth.

"Enzo! Ciao!" She greeted him with kisses on both cheeks.

"I haven'a seena you in so long! Where hah' you been? Dov'è fai?" Mary laughed.

"I've been a bit busy," she gestured to John. "Enzo Giorgio, John Watson."

John offered his hand, which Enzo shook enthusiastically.

"Piacere, Signore! Piacere. Benvenuti!" Still holding onto John's hand, Enzo addressed Mary.

"Allora, lui non è italiano?"
"Lui? No, no guardalo! Lui è inglese, irlandese e...come si chiama, come si chiama..."

John knit his eyebrows together in surprise and a bit of alarm. He had absolutely no idea that Mary spoke fluent Italian.

"Come si dice 'Scottish'? Ah! Scozzese." She slid her arm in the crook of John's elbow.

"Allora. Ma, sei Italiana – cosa stai facendo con un Inglese pastoso?" Enzo raised an eyebrow at her and Mary laughed hard.

"Be nice, you!" She swatted at Enzo playfully.

"Mi dispiace Maria, mi dispiace. Sto scherzando con te." He laughed and put the palms of his hands up in submission.

"Lui é un fico, no? Allora, non é italiano, ma un fico. Si or no?" Mary gestured towards John with her thumb. He squirmed, knowing they were talking about him but not having the foggiest idea what they were saying.

"Si, Maria. Davvero. Come, sitta at my besta tavolo. Vuoi un tazzo di caffe?" He gestured for them to follow him and he placed two menus at a table near the oven.

"Do you want a coffee?" She asked John, who still looked deeply confused.

"Hmm? Oh, no. No, erm – grazie." John replied looking up at Enzo's still beaming face.

"I willa give you a couple'ah minuti. Maria, l'acqua minerale?"

She looked up from her menu, "Si, molto gentile. Grazie." He bowed and walked toward the kitchen.

"So...you...speak Italian." John said looking at her with a questioning expression.

"Yep. My grandfather on my mum's side was originally from Modena. He insisted that I learn."

John nodded and pouted his lower lip out while he thought. "Did you and this Enzo character have a thing? He seems to be pretty friendly, even for a restauranteur."

"Enzo?" Mary laughed. "John, Enzo is gay. Like, very, very gay. He likes me so much because when I came in here the first time, I ordered in Italian."

Enzo returned with two glasses of water, a basket of warm bread and a small round plate with a mixture of spices on it. Mary poured some olive oil from a bottle on the table into the plate and swished a piece of bread around in it. She closed her eyes and took a bite.

"Molto bene, Enzo. Delizioso." She raised her pointer finger to her cheek and twisted her wrist back and forth.

"Grazie mille, Tesoro." He tapped her shoulder before walking away again.

"What did he say about me? You told him to 'be nice', what did he say? Something about me being a shortarse?"

She smiled and shook her head. "Not at all. He asked me if you were Italian and when I said no, he asked me what I was doing with a pasty Englishman. " John licked his lower lip and smirked.
"Who's Louis?" He asked, still not having glanced once at his menu.

"Louis?"

"You both said the name Louis a bunch of times." Mary covered her mouth with her napkin and laughed hard.

"No – not Louis, a man. Lui means 'he' in Italian. I said 'lui é un fico', it means 'he is really sexy.'" In spite of the dig at his pale complexion, John liked Enzo and he liked Mary even more.

"What's good here?" John asked looking at the menu.

"Tutti, everything. My favorite is the pizza margherita. It's the best pizza I've ever had outside of Italy." She took another piece of bread and dipped it in the olive oil, then held it out to John.

"Here, try this. Enzo makes the bread."

He took a bite. The bread was crusty on the outside, soft and warm on the inside. The olive oil and spices spread across his tongue and made his stomach beg for more food.

"Wow. Ok. That's delicious, you've sold me on the margherita pizza." John took a sip of water to clear his palate.

"Enzo? Siamo pronti!" She called him over sweetly and ordered.

"So Signore John, anything to drink?" Enzo turned to John, smiling his perfect smile.

"Um…" John flipped the menu over and saw the list of beverages. "Birra Moretti, por favor." Mary giggled.

"No, no, no! 'Por favor' is eSpanish. Allora, 'per favore'? Ripeti, 'per favore'!" Enzo prompted John, who obediently did so, to his teacher's delight.

"Benessimi! Perfetto! Allora, Maria – this is a good man."

"I know." She smiled at John as she replied.

xXx

A month later, John and Mary gate-crashed one of Harry's open houses at a property in Bethnal Green. She always laid out a delicious spread of food at a Sunday afternoon open house. John gave her a wink as he and Mary pretended to be a couple in search of a £650,000 house and ate for free. Mary excused herself to the loo and Harry approached John, speaking quietly so as to not be overheard.

"Everything's going well with you two?"

He cocked his head. "I can't tell if that was a question or observation. Don't you like her?"

"I do! I like her very much, Johnny. Only…" Harry puzzled. "Can I ask you something?"

John nodded.

"How much does Mary…know?"
"You mean, in general? Quite a lot actually she studied at –"

"Shut up, you twit. You know what I mean." Harry looked around and lowered her voice. "Have you told her about Sherlock and you?"

"No, I haven't. I don't see why it matters," he shrugged. Harry looked at him sideways.

"It doesn't, but why hide that part of your life from her?" Harry put a hand on her hip and pretended to check her clipboard when a couple of potential buyers walked within hearing range.

"I'm not hiding. If she asked me directly, I wouldn't lie. I just don't think it's something she needs to know. I really like her, Harry. I don't know how to broach the subject. I don't want to saddle her with that information. 'Yes, I've been depressed for two years over the death of my best friend and oh incidentally, he wasn't just my best friend, he was my boyfriend.'"

"I see your point."

"I'm not hiding."

"Ok."

"What would I be hiding, anyway? I don't care who she's been with before me. Why should it matter who I've been with?"

"It doesn't. Calm down, you're getting worked up." Harry disguised her admonishment with a hushed tone.

After they ate their fill, Mary suggested a stroll through Victoria Park.

They weren't talking about anything in particular when something in John's periphery caught his attention. Two men seemed to be having an argument. The larger of the two was yelling loudly at the other. John stopped walking but Mary took two more steps before realizing it.

"John? What's wrong?"

"Nothing, just, hang back a minute."

She put her arms around his waist and kissed him softly. A light breeze slightly tousled her hair. This was what it felt like to be in love again. He brushed her blonde curls out of her face with his fingertips and gently held her cheek as he pulled her in for another kiss.

Just as they were coming apart, John saw the larger man take a swing at the man he'd been yelling at. The punch connected with a sickening thwack that they could clearly hear, in spite of being at least 10 metres away.

"Shit. Mary, stay here. HEY! Hey YOU! Leave him alone!" John looked like he was about to take off running so Mary grabbed at his elbow.

"You're not going over there!" Mary said incredulously.

"Yes I am. That gorilla is going to kill somebody, I'm going to stop him."

"John, that gorilla has more than half a foot on you…" The warning tone in her voice hid her fear for his general safety.

"Mary, no one else is going to stop it. I have to. Stay right here."
Without hearing another protestation from Mary, John ran towards the two men shouting.

The aggressor had his victim down in the grass and was standing over him.

"Hey, lardarse!" John yelled when he got close enough. He kicked the man's knee out from under him as he twisted his wrist behind his back, lifting the arm and pushed him down between the shoulder blades with his other hand, his shoulder threatened to dislocate. The giant man went down on the grass giving his smaller victim, bruised and bloodied a chance to get himself up. John noticed how much younger the injured man appeared to be – he didn't appear to be older than 15.

"Gerrof! Gerrof!" The taller man tried to shake John off but John was stuck to him like glue.

"You were warned." John twisted the man's arm a bit harder.

"I'm going to kill you, you little…"

"What was that? No, my friend. You are going to calm the fuck down and go peacefully on your way. Or do I have to kick your head in?" John lifted his arm up higher, making him shout in pain.

The smaller man was wiping blood from his nose on his t-shirt. His left eye was rapidly swelling and turning purple.

"Are you alright?" John looked up at him and he nodded unreassuringly.

"My girlfriend is right there, see the woman in the red coat? If you want to call Metro, she'll call them for you.

"No, no police, thank you. Really, thank you." His voice was as shaky as his legs. John nodded and turned his attention back to the other man.

"On the count of three, either you are going to apologize, or you're going to lose your arm. You get to choose. One…Two…"

"Fuck you!" He fiercely tried to break free of John's iron grip.

"Fair enough, you made your choice." He jerked the arm up until he felt it pop. The howl of pain was ear-splitting. John wrapped his forearm around and squeezed the man's neck tightly until he felt him go limp in his arms. John let him loose and he tumbled to the ground.

The shorter man kicked his now-unconscious attacker in the face, John pulled him away.

"HEY – you're not doing that. You're going to learn how to defend yourself." The young man took a deep breath and wiped the blood from his face on his own t-shirt.

"You ok, mate?"

"Yeah. I'm Colin."

"What was that all about, Colin?" John pointed to the unconscious man snoring loudly in the grass.

"He's my mum's fucking boyfriend. He hit my mother yesterday and I was trying to tell him to stay away from her."

John looked at the man on the ground with new found disgust. "You should call Metro, then. Have him locked up for assaulting you. We saw him hit you, we'll corroborate. I have a…friend. He's a Detective Inspector. I could call him directly, if you like."
Mary joined the two of them, taking John's hand in hers. They spoke to Colin and convinced him to call the police. It wasn't long before John tightened his jaw and swallowed hard when he saw Lestrade marching toward them.

"Haven't seen you in an age, John. You're looking well." Lestrade smiled and shook John's hand.

"You too, Greg. This is my girlfriend, Mary." Lestrade held his hand out and Mary took it.

"Greg Lestrade, pleasure to meet you."

"Likewise."

John and Mary reported on what they saw as the unconscious man began to wake up, already in handcuffs. He was dazed and docile as they pulled him away.

"Old habits die hard, eh John?" Lestrade motioned to the prisoner being taken away.

John chuckled quietly. "Something like that, I suppose yeah."

Lestrade rubbed the back of his neck, unsure of what to say. "It was good to meet you, Mary. John, we should catch up soon. Let's have a drink or something."

John said he'd call to set something up and they parted ways. Mary was chewing her lower lip as they walked.

"That was rash and dangerous and totally inadvisable – and inescapably sexy…" Mary grabbed his hand and began pulling him toward a secluded area of trees. Once behind the trunk of a tree that would obscure the view of any casual passersby, Mary grabbed John about the neck and was kissing him so fervently, he nearly toppled over.

He growled and pushed her back up against the tree and yanked her blouse up over her head tossing it to the dirt beneath their feet. Continuing to explore the insides of each other's mouths, Mary untucked his shirt and unbuckled his belt. Her arms were around his neck when he easily lifted her up and pinned her against the tree. Her skirt rode up as she locked her ankles around him at the small of his back. He used his fingers to swipe her wet panties to the side and they shuddered in unison as he entered her.

Mary grabbed at his shirt collar and muffled her breathy moans in John's neck. In the heat of the moment, neither of them felt the chain snap.

"John?"

"Mm?"

"I'm so sorry, this is amazing but the bark is digging into my arse, I can't."

Hearing that she was in pain had the same effect on him as would a bucket of cold water. He almost instantly went soft and he let her feet touch the ground again. He kissed her sweetly and looked at her back, there were some superficial scratches but no blood. He picked up her blouse and gave it to her and reflexively reached for his gold chain. To his shock and horror, it was gone.

"My chain! Where the fuck is my chain?!" His eyes were wild blue flames.

"What? What chain?" She pulled her blouse back on.

"My fucking gold chain, it's gone." He raked his fingers through his hair, not knowing where to turn.
"Are you sure you were wearing it?" She looked down at the ground.

"What? The fuck is wrong with you? Of course I was wearing it – I never take it off. Fuck!"

"John!" She yelped in her own defense.

"You must have broken it – I can't believe you fucking broke it."

"John!" Her ire was rising.

"Give me your mobile." He held his hand out to her while scanning the ground.

"Excuse me?"

"Give me your fucking mobile, please." He glared at her as he crouched down.

She pulled the phone out of her purse and dropped it into his hand. She crossed her arms and leaned against the tree, seething. He tapped her screen and turned on the light, giving him a mini torch to use as he searched.

"I can't believe this – I can't fucking believe it…where's my St. Michael?!" His nails dug into the dirt and he felt hot, desperate tears forming in his eyes. He stopped and pulled the broken chain out of the dirt – the medal wasn't on it. He held the chain in his fingers and looked up at Mary. She looked so offended that she might have broken it off with him that very second.

"Mary – " He took a deep breath and fixed a fist around the chain. "Sherlock gave me this for my birthday. I've never taken it off since the night I got it. I am very sorry I snapped at you but it's all I have left of him. You didn't know him but, he wasn't the gift-giving type. We only exchanged Christmas presents once; I bought him a collection of antique detective magazines from the 1920's and 30's and he gave me a shirt in his size. Just to spite him, I kept it." He smiled a smile that was very close to tears, though Mary couldn't tell why.

Her expression softened completely and she knelt beside him.

"John, I am so sorry. It was an accident." He turned to her and put a dirt-stained hand on hers. "I know. I know it was an accident. I'm sorry I yelled at you. I'm not upset at you, I'm upset that it happened. I need to find my St. Michael." He turned his attention back to the ground and she joined him.

"John, I feel dreadful. Let me take the chain to the jeweler. If they can't fix it, I'll replace it." He nodded without looking at her.

For a few frantic minutes John thought the medal was gone for good and his heart was about to disintegrate.

"John! I've got it!" She pulled the medallion out of the dirt and placed it gently in his hand. He raised it to his lips and closed his eyes in a silent prayer.

"I am…so sorry."

"Don't be. It was an accident. I'm sorry I yelled." They stood up and Mary reached her hand out.

"I'll put it in my purse." He handed her the broken chain and she kept her hand open, expecting the medallion as well.
"No. I – I've got it." He slipped the medallion into his pocket and did up his flies.

They took turns brushing the dirt and pine needles off of each other, walked quietly back to the Tube station and took the train back to Mary's flat.
Chapter 20

Hindsight being 20/20, he came to admit to himself that he ought to have had a contingency plan to account for variables. He wasn't prepared for John's ferocious reaction. He wasn't prepared for the blonde woman sitting across from John at the table with a diamond ring on her left hand. He wasn't prepared for the mustache. As Sherlock stood in the restaurant kitchen holding the dirty rag full of ice to his bloody lip, he contemplated which of the three would be the easiest to contend with.

When he entered the restaurant and saw John sitting across the room, his stomach began somersaulting with nerves and exhilaration. His initial reaction was "Dear god, what is that on his face?" but once that subsided, Sherlock's heart began to thump against his ribcage and it was louder than all of the ambient noise in the crowded restaurant. He was momentarily frozen in time; he'd thought about this moment for ages. He had been hundreds of kilometers away from John for two years, somehow, simply walking the final 6 meters was the most difficult.

The stunned look on John's face was replaced by something that was difficult to read. His blue eyes twinkled simultaneously with excitement to see Sherlock and the definite intent to cause him physical harm.

Once Mrs. Hudson stopped screaming and let him back into the flat, Sherlock flopped face down on the bed he and John had shared, finding it was disappointingly devoid of John's scent. He didn't bother to check the wardrobe or any of the drawers for John's clothes. His body ached all over; he'd taken a severe beating before Mycroft had pulled him out of the torture chamber in Serbia and John gave him a proper wholloping in the restaurant. He only lay on the bed a few minutes. He didn't expect to sleep a wink; perhaps not ever again.

He rocked on his heels with his hands clasped behind his back looking out the sitting room window watching the cars go up and down the street. He had searched the entire flat top to bottom looking for his violin, thinking that playing Bach or Beethoven would change his state of mind. Unable to locate his beloved instrument, he inexplicably ended up singing a Partridge Family song to himself. He couldn't get the angry words John spat at him out of his head.

"And now I am alone," he rubbed the back of his neck.

He plopped down in his chair expecting his 'too, too solid flesh would melt, thaw and resolve itself into a dew.' Suddenly remembering that he had his mobile, he pulled it out of his pocket and switched it on. Mycroft had generously returned it to him fully charged. As the phone sprang to life, it alerted Sherlock to 57 texts and over 210 missed calls. His thumb shook over the screen when he tapped on the envelope icon and saw that every last text was from John.

I love you.

I miss you so much.

Please come back.

We buried you today. This feels like a bad dream

Don't be dead Sherlock

I am so angry at you

I can't sleep without you.
I don't want to breathe without you.

I love you so much.

How could you do this to me?

It's not getting any easier Sherlock.

Stop this. Please.

I don't want to wake up tomorrow.

I'd do anything to have you back.

It was more of the same as Sherlock went on reading the messages. He knew before opening the list of Missed Calls that they would also all be from John's number. There were a few voicemails left, apparently by accident. John didn't speak; Sherlock heard him breathing and sniffling before the call ended abruptly. He was puzzled until the heartbreaking truth dawned on him: John was calling to hear his voice on the outgoing message. He dropped his mobile to the floor and covered his face with his hands, the tears snuck through his fingers and fell to the carpet.

Not knowing what else to do, he composed himself and retrieved his phone. He rang up the only person he knew for certain would answer when he called. His knee bounced impatiently.

"Hello?"

"I'm not dead."

"The car will be there in fifteen minutes."

Sherlock sat on the stairs outside 221b waiting for her to arrive. Fourteen minutes later, he smiled weakly when the pristine white limousine pulled up. He took a deep breath before opening the door and climbing in.

Irene sat opposite him wearing a crisp white dress and blood red heels that matched the colour of her lips precisely. She winced ever so slightly at his bruised cheek and split lip.

"Hi," he said sheepishly.

"Explain."

xXx

Harry was on the sofa watching television pretending to enjoy her tonic water with lime. Pippin was curled into a ball on her lap, sleeping. She jumped when her mobile rang unexpectedly. It woke Pippin who grunted, sounding somewhat put out. She cocked her head to see John's name on her Caller ID.

"I'd have thought you'd be fully occupied with engagement sex by now, Johnny…"

John said something she didn't catch. She gently nudged Pippin off her lap, muted the telly and sat up.

"I'm sorry, what?"

"I said, Sherlock is alive."
"Johnny…"

"I spoke to him. At the restaurant. He's alive."

Stunned, multiple questions flooded Harry's mind at the same time. The only question that made its way out of her mouth was, "But, did Mary say yes?"

"Yes I did!" Mary cheerfully called out to her.

"Are you coming home?"

"No." John ended the call without saying good-bye.

Harry bit the cuticle of her thumb while she thought of what to do. She pushed herself off the sofa and stomped to her bedroom, slamming the door behind her.

xXx

Irene listened patiently as Sherlock recounted the events leading up to his disappearance and the subsequent two years. Her expression didn't change, she was staring at him with a hardened, narrow glare while she sipped on a glass of 1995 Krug Clos du Mesnil Blanc de Blancs. She poured one for him and he downed it in one gulp.

"That's about £150 worth of champagne you've just chugged."

He didn't seem to hear her, he was too wrapped up in describing the scene at the restaurant earlier that night. His shoulders slumped with the weight of his conscience and she nodded.

"Well. That's a fine mess you're in. What are you going to do about it?" She finished her drink and crossed her arms.

"I…I don't know." He rubbed his brow, sighing with frustration.

"Come here."

She held her arms out to him and he spread himself out on the long bench seat, resting his head in her lap. She stroked his hair as they rode along in silence.

At least an hour passed as he rested his mind and his head in Irene's lap.

"It's good to see you, Sherlock. Your funeral was lovely." She cooed softly at him.

"I know I have to set things right, I just don't know how."

"Do you think you're ready to go home now, darling?"

"Yes."

Without another word, Irene knocked on the black acrylic partition that separated them from the driver, signaling it was time to return to Baker Street.

He was still laying in her lap when the car slowed to a stop 45 minutes later.

"Are you expecting company?" She asked, looking out the window.

"No." He sat up and saw Harry sitting on the stairs.
"Is that a friend of yours?"

"I assume I'm about to find out."

"Call me later." She placed a soft palm to his stubbly cheek before letting him leave the car.

Sherlock stepped out of the limousine and shoved his hands deep in his pockets. He approached Harry with a nervous smirk on his face. She sat up straighter and squinted at him, as if she refused to believe her own eyes.

"Harry, I…"

"Upstairs." She cut him off and pointed to the door. He nodded and allowed her to lead him up to the flat. He unlocked the door and held it open for her to enter before him. She sat in his armchair and crossed her arms. He recognized the angry expression on her face, it was almost identical to John’s. He looked down at his shoes.

"What the fuck do you have to say for yourself?" She demanded.

"I'm sorry."

"That's all? You're sorry? You bastard."

"I don't know what else to say, Harry."

"How could you do that to John? You let him think you killed yourself right in front of him. How could you?"

"I did it to protect him. Once Moriarty shot himself, John's life was in danger every second that I was alive. It was the only way to keep him safe until I could dismantle Moriarty's network."

She laughed sarcastically and threw her hands up in the air.

"Is that what you think you did? You thought you were keeping John safe? Sherlock, he didn't get out of bed for weeks. He didn't eat. He didn't go to work. He didn't sleep. All he did was cry and stare at the walls. I was afraid to leave him alone in the bloody house - I thought I'd come home and find him dead on the floor! And you think you were keeping him safe."

Sherlock had no reply. The dug his fingertips into his scalp and when he looked up at her again, Harry was standing only a few steps away. She pointed her finger at his chest as she spoke.

"Whatever you're about to do, tread lightly. Because if you ever hurt my brother again, I will kill you."

After she left, he lay on the sofa for the rest of the night, staring at the ceiling.

He made several unsuccessful attempts to get back into John's good graces in the days and weeks that followed. He thought he had made at least some headway when John shaved off the ridiculous Fuller Brush-like mustache. The blistering burns on his hands he received when he pulled John out of the bonfire on Guy Fawkes Night were the least of the punishment he deserved for what he'd done. He ignored the pain, understanding it all part of his penance. The icy responses he had been receiving from John at last began to thaw after the business with the bomb on the Tube. As usual, John was almost a casualty due to his association with Sherlock.

A few days after the attempted bombing, there was an unexpected knock at the door of 221b.
Sherlock looked up from his microscope and heard it again. His heart began to pound, he recognized the pattern of John's insistent knocking.

"Come in."

John entered the flat and Sherlock met him in the sitting room.

"You have five minutes."

"John, I…"

"Shut up!"

"But you said –"

"Shut the fuck up!" John snapped. "How could you do that to me?"

John lunged at Sherlock pushing his shoulders hard. There was a troubling mix of malice and glee in his eyes. John grabbed him about the waist and they tumbled backward, slamming into the armchair and knocking the side table over. Sherlock's grappling skills had improved in the intervening years and he easily fought John off. His strength and ability only fueled John's anger and he rained down a tumult of blows at his ribs. He wrapped his forearm around his throat and punched everything he could make contact with. His fury was fueled by two years of mourning and the deeply conflicted feeling that formed in the pit of his stomach once he could smell the familiar scent of Sherlock's skin again. Sherlock did his best to merely defend himself and not fight back but he lost control. Seizing John by the shoulders he charged forward, knocking him into the opposite wall and tore his shirt in the process.

"Enough!" John shouted while pushing him away.

Sherlock had a fresh scratch on his cheek and his scorched palms throbbed. He held them up in front of his chest in a defensive pose. John swallowed hard when he saw the red, raw flesh. He realized how much pain Sherlock must have been in. Sherlock lowered his eyes and saw the bumblebee on his chest and the medallion swinging on a thicker gold chain. John realized his shirt was torn open and his tattoo was exposed. He exhaled hard as he pulled the shirt closed.

"I'm sorry."

"You let me suffer. For two bloody years. Is that all you are going to say?"

"I love -"

"Don't you DARE say those words to me."

"Fine, I won't say anything." He took catlike steps towards John until they were nearly touching. John squared his shoulders and lifted his chin defiantly. Sherlock dared to gently caress John's cheek with the back of his hand. John pursed his lips in resistance, but he leaned into Sherlock's hand with his eyes closed. He held his breath, certain that Sherlock could feel how hard his heart was beating. Sherlock touched a finger to the bumblebee tattoo on John's chest, recognizing the depth of its meaning straightaway. He wet his lips and leaned in to kiss him but John jerked his head out of the way at the very last second.

"Don't. Mary. I'm getting married to Mary." His voice crackled and the light flickered in his eyes.

Sherlock's feet carried him a safe distance away.
"I know."

"Do you want your violin?"

Sherlock cocked his head. "What?"

"Your violin – do you want it?"

"Please. Do you also have my –"

"Dressing gown. Yes. I'll bring them by."

John turned for the door and was reaching for the knob when Sherlock spoke.

"I got your texts. All of them. Mycroft confiscated my mobile while I was gone."

John stopped and hung his head. "Yes, well."

He sighed and pulled the door open slowly.

"I would have waited. If you told me what was going on, I would have waited for you."

Sherlock's vocal cords refused to allow him to say anything and he helplessly watched John walk out the door.

They never spoke again about his two year absence and things slowly returned to a semblance of normality. Mary proved to be a completely unexpected ally in his mission to repair his relationship with John. By the time he was asked to be Best Man, Mary involved him in the wedding planning, asking his opinion and for his help. She encouraged them to spend time together. Despite the decision he made early on to detest Mary, Sherlock discovered that was an impossibility as the wedding date crept closer.

xXx

John sat on the bench in the back garden, staring up at the stars. Mary had felt him get out of their bed and heard him walk down the stairs and pull the sliding door open. She sighed and lay there awake for a few minutes using her thumb to twirl her engagement ring around her finger while she thought. She checked the clock, it was 3:34 AM. When she looked out the window and watched his shoulders shake as he sobbed for the fifth night in a row, she knew what needed to be done.

He quietly crept back inside and slid between the sheets, careful not to disturb her but she was still awake. Mary tried not to squeeze her eyes shut as she feigned sleep.

At breakfast a few hours later, he was pretending everything was normal; it was almost convincing. It was almost like it used to be before Sherlock returned from the dead and brought havoc and turmoil into their otherwise happy lives. He kissed her on the cheek before leaving for the bus stop.

"See you for lunch?" He asked as he slung his messenger bag across his chest.

"Oh, not today. Sorry, I forgot to tell you. I'm meeting with the florist this afternoon."

His fake smile faded at the mention of anything wedding-related.

"Oh, alright. I'll see you tonight then, Mare." He turned and made for the door.

"Good-bye John. I love you."
He stopped and turned back to her, "Love you."

She nodded, smiling weakly. She watched him from the front window. As soon as he turned the corner on his usual route to the bus stop, she ran for the telephone. Her hands shook as she dialed. She nervously tapped her fingers against the wall while counting the rings. Finally, he answered.

"Hello?"

"Sherlock, it's – "

"Hello Mary." He perked up slightly when he recognized her voice. "Everything alright?"

"Well, no. Not exactly."

"What's wrong? Is John – are you alright?" She heard him knock something over.

"John's…fine. I need your help, can I come by?"

"Of course. Are you coming now?"

"If it's convenient."

"Of course. I'll leave the door open for you." He hung up without saying goodbye.

She avoided looking at herself in the mirror while she brushed her teeth. She dressed and slipped into her coat, grabbed her keys and exhaled deeply as she pulled the door shut behind her.

When he hung up the call with Mary, he estimated that he had 25 minutes until her arrival; it was just enough time to make the flat presentable. Sherlock made a mad dash around the flat to tidy up. He wasn't prepared for company and he had requested that Mrs. Hudson stop picking up after him. All the dirty glassware from his recent chemical experiments could be hidden in the empty pantry. The piles of unwashed clothing were concealed behind a closed bedroom door.

His physical appearance would be more difficult to conceal from Mary and nearly impossible to explain. She somehow saw through him more easily than John. She'd been the only one to notice the fading slice marks from a razorblade on his forearm. He yanked his sleeve down and wouldn't look at her. He assured her that he'd stop when she promised not to tell John what she'd seen. In private, she periodically asked to see his arm, just to make sure he'd kept to his word.

He ripped open a brand new box of eye drops and squirted the saline solution into his eyes liberally. He looked into the bathroom mirror; he face was gaunt and grey except for the redness in his eyes. As he heard the door open, he was contemplating pricking himself with a needle. Rubbing blood on his cheeks was always a useful way to counteract his peely-wally complexion.

"Sherlock? It's me." Mary called out.

"Here." He called back simply. He sighed one last time and went to meet Mary in the sitting room with a charming, plastic smile on his face. She had removed her coat and draped it over the back of John's chair.

"There's my favorite girl," he said giving her a kiss on each cheek.

"I'm sorry for the early morning call, I need your help with something."

Sherlock went into the kitchen and switched on the kettle, Mary followed. "I wasn't sleeping, it's fine. I'm at your service always. Have you finally decided to change the colour of the bridesmaid
dresses? I've been thinking that the aubergine –"

"It's not the dresses."

"Oh. Right. Well, the napkins then – "

"It's not the bloody napkins, Sherlock," she snapped.

"What's wrong?"

She was avoiding eye contact. He studied her face as he prepared her cup of tea; noting how frightfully nervous she appeared to be as she sat at the table.

"Mary, what is it?" He placed the cup in front of her and put his hand on hers.

She wiped her forehead on her sleeve, smiling weakly with an anxious chuckle.

"Sherlock – I'm going to ask you a very straightforward question. You aren't going to want to answer it. You're going to try deflecting, mocking, or otherwise avoiding giving me an answer. In the name of our friendship, I'm asking you to please skip over all that bollocks and go directly to giving me an answer, ok?"

The expression on his face was nothing short of grim. He nodded, agreeing to her terms but he stood from the table and walked to the sitting room and sat in his chair.

"Go on, then." His fingers were steepled under his nose and they hid a nervous twitch on his lips.

She approached him, dragging one of the kitchen chairs with her. She plopped it next to him and took him off his guard. Her smile was still anxious and her hands were cold when she placed them on his, pulling them from his face to his lap.

The words were dying on the tip of her tongue. Her brain and heart were fighting a battle within her. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath and spoke.

"Sherlock, are you still in love with John?" The words tumbled out of her mouth and it felt like she had hurled herself out of an aeroplane without a parachute. She studied his countenance closely.

His jaw went slightly slack and his mouth dried up. He swallowed hard.

"Mary…I…we… John and I…"

His reply was a much longer than 'No.' Her suspicions being confirmed, she nodded and curled her lips inward and bit down. Tears flooded to her eyes, she looked away refusing to let them fall.

"I've finally put all the pieces together. He never told me and I obviously don't all of the details but I know you two were in a relationship before you – went away." She couldn't bring herself to say 'before you died.'

He cleared his throat.

"John was functioning only at a very basic level when I met him. Withdrawn. Pale. He didn't act like a man who had buried his best friend. He acted like a widower. His grief was so…profound and beautiful. It's what drew me to him. A man who felt so deeply…" She cleared her throat to keep the tears at bay.

"I know for a fact that he slept on your grave more than once. He started coming the church with me
on Sundays and he'd turn up at my flat with grass in his hair and on his clothes; all red in the face like he'd been crying. And his clothes were wrinkled. You know as well as I do that John is –"

"Fastidious," they spoke at the same time. Sherlock looked away and rubbed the back of his neck.

"Exactly, he wouldn't have put on a wrinkled shirt and trousers, he'd obviously slept in them. Gradually, he started smiling more; gradually he…"

"Forgot about me," Sherlock interjected.

"No, dearest," she touched her icy fingertips to his cheek. "He didn't forget. He just…accepted that you were gone. He gave himself permission to move on."

They held each other's eyes and Mary smiled weakly.

Sherlock crossed his arms, putting up his guard. "He seems very happy with you."

Mary stood and began to pace around the room. "He's been having nightmares. They went away for a time but they've started up again. Thrashing around in his sleep."

"And speaking in Arabic?" Mary shook her head and wrinkled her nose.

"Arabic? No. Calling for you, saying your name, calling for help." Her voice broke. "Mostly, he says 'he's my friend, let me through.'"

Sherlock took in a deep breath and held it. A barely audible choked sigh escaped through his façade when he exhaled. Mary stood behind him, afraid to look him in the eye.

"It wasn't until a couple of months ago that…it didn't seem like I was competing for John's love with a ghost anymore. And then, all of a sudden, there you were. Everything changed. He's so conflicted. You know how he feels about loyalty, you either are loyal or you are not. I don't want him to be in the position that he ends up being unfaithful."

"Mary – " He interrupted.

"I can assure you that while of late my relationship with John is…deeply complicated, you can trust me. I would never try to come between you. I know he loves you. I can see it. He…used to look at me like that."

"Oh Sherlock. Don't misunderstand me. That isn't what I meant at all. We only met eight months ago and you're alive. He loves you. If you still love him, then he'd be cheating on you with me. I can't live like that. I love John but I don't want to be anyone's second choice. So, I ask again: are you still in love with John?"

He took a deep breath and heaved a sigh that crumbled his shoulders, the wall came tumbling down and his voice was a whisper. "Yes, obviously."

Mary nodded and hugged herself. Her eyes clouded over for a moment but the Sherlock watched them flicker with anger.

"If you love him, how could you let him think you'd killed yourself – right in front of him? How?"

"It was the only way to keep him safe."

"Your brother, your parents – that Molly at the mortuary – they all knew the truth. How could you keep that from John? I am fucking infuriated at you for that. You don't know how he suffered for
two years."

"He's not the only one who suffered. I wanted to tell him, desperately wanted to tell him. I couldn't risk being seen, I couldn't risk someone listening in on a phone call or opening a letter. Moriarty planted audio devices and cameras in the flat before, I just couldn't risk anyone finding out I was alive. They would have killed him to get to me." He flopped exhaustedly into his chair and combed his fingers through his hair.

Mary looked away, nodding, weighing and deciding. Then with tears still hinting at her eyes she kissed his cheek, exhaled and smiled again.

"So now I know what I need to do." She put on her coat. He watched her, frozen to his chair. Before she walked out the door, she turned back to him.

"I'll see you around, Sherlock."

"Mary –"

And then she was gone.

xXx

John my love,

By the time you read this, I'll be gone.

I know you've been crying in the back garden in the middle of the night and I know why.

Please understand that as much as I love you, I cannot in good conscience go on with this charade and marry you, knowing that you want someone else. It isn't fair to any of us. I was content with you continuing to be in love with Sherlock when he was dead. I can't ask you to choose me now that he has come back and I don't want to have to compete with him.

So very few of us ever get a second chance at lost love. Please John, don't waste any time looking; you won't find me. I can't stay here anymore. Sherlock never stopped loving you and you've lost enough time already.

It's better this way. I want you to be happy, John. You deserve happiness and deep down you know you won't have that with me. I hope you can pick up where you left off and I hope you have a beautiful life.

Always,

Mary

John read the note three times. Mary used sellotape to attach it to the fridge door, knowing it would be his first stop when he returned home. When he read the first sentence, he looked up and saw that everything of Mary's was gone. He dropped the bottle of water he'd pulled out of the fridge.

He dashed madly around the flat calling her name – it had to be a joke. Every trace of her had been cleared away, as if she was never there. Empty clothes hangers hung in her wardrobe and swayed carelessly when he swung the door open. The only proof that Mary had ever been there lay in the crystal dish by the sink in the bathroom; her engagement ring.

His heart pounded heavily in his chest when he collapsed on the sofa. He stayed there motionless for
over an hour. His blood pressure pounded in his ears and he discovered that he had been rocking himself front to back.

His ears were still ringing and he was lightheaded when he finally sat up. He didn't know what to do. Mary said not to look for her, but clearly he had to try. Didn't he?

He went to the bedroom and sifted through his sock drawer until he found his keys to 221b.

xXx

"Sherlock? Are you in!!"

John's voice brought him out of his Mind Palace as he soaked in the bath. He sat up quickly and water splashed over the rim of the tub onto the floor.

"Give me a minute," he shouted in reply. He got out of the tub and dried himself off. He rubbed his hair quickly with the towel and used his hands to slick his curls back. He dressed quickly, grateful that he'd thought to bring fresh trousers with him when he went to bathe. He left his shirt open and padded in his bare feet out to meet John, his damp feet leaving prints on the wood floor.

"Mary's gone. She left me." John was holding his keys in one hand and a piece of paper in the other. Sherlock narrowed his eyes and reached his hand out for the note. John stepped tentatively closer and handed it to him.

John watched Sherlock's face very closely as he read. He saw the detective's tongue pop quickly out of his mouth to moisten his lips.

"What in the hell did you say to her? Did you know she was going to leave me?" John's voice didn't sound as angry as his words suggested he was, but he was demanding an answer.

"She- she asked if I still…if I still loved you. I didn't know she was thinking about leaving." Sherlock avoided looking at John's face by pretending to re-read Mary's letter.

John's growl escaped from deep in his chest and he grabbed the letter out of Sherlock's hand and tossed it to the floor, a corner of the paper remained held fast in Sherlock's fingers.


The kiss transcended passion. Transcended love. Transcended everything.

The room vanished along with every variable that might keep the two of them apart ever again. John dragged his nails up the length of Sherlock's torso, feeling the bump of each rib. Sherlock's hands locked on John's hips as he began to walk, forcing John to blindly walk backward until he felt the sitting room wall behind him. Their tongues and bodies took over control of the situation; it was plainly obvious that their brains weren't functional. John bit Sherlock's lower lip and Sherlock responded by sucking John's tongue into his mouth as he worked his arms out of his shirt.

John's fingers had no trouble whatsoever with the closure of Sherlock's trousers. A guttural moan vibrated in Sherlock's throat when he felt the palm of John's hand make contact with his erection. He ground his hips into John and began sucking on his neck. The salt of his skin alone could have sustained Sherlock for weeks.

John took hold of Sherlock's curls with both hands and pulled his mouth away from his neck. Sherlock moaned and pushed his thigh between John's legs, pinning him against the wall.
"I missed you so bloody much..." Sherlock said while he ripped at the cardigan and shirt John was wearing.

"Don't ever fucking leave me again." John punctuated his words with moans and wet kisses. He couldn't control the hot, angry tears that flowed from his eyes but they didn't stop him from unfastening his own trousers and letting them fall to the floor.

"Never." Sherlock held John's face in his hands as their kiss continued. He intended to hold on as long as possible. John nearly tripped with the trousers around his ankles as he struggled to kick his shoes off. Sherlock yanked John's cardigan and shirt down off his shoulders and cast them aside.

With both hands applying pressure to his shoulders, John pushed Sherlock down to his knees. He tucked his fingertips into the waistband of John's boxers and pulled them down slowly while he looked up hungrily. He felt the shiver go straight up John's body when he ran his tongue up the shaft. John sank to his knees and buried his tongue in Sherlock's mouth while his hands gripped his arse. They toppled over backward onto the floor, Sherlock took the opportunity to get on top of John.

"I want you…I want you..." John moaned as Sherlock sucked on his skin, working his way down his torso.

"You have me." Sherlock took the length of him into his mouth and he felt John's thighs tense up as he keened. John held him by his wet curls, tugging forcefully whenever he felt his cock hit the hollow of Sherlock's throat.

"Sherlock…I want…I want you…inside me..." He begged and spread his legs.

John's moan echoed off the walls and the ceiling when he was breeched by two long, thin fingers. Sherlock continued sucking his cock while he pumped his fingers in and out. John's nails made tiny claw marks in the floor the first time Sherlock's middle finger stroked his prostate.

"Please..."

Sherlock pulled his fingers out and knelt up, panting. He peeled his boxers and trousers off. Positioning himself between John's legs he pressed the head of his cock to his opening.

"You're sure? Shouldn't I go get the -"

"Please..."

He lifted his knees up and Sherlock pushed inside him making them both cry out. It hurt. More than John thought it would, but only until they found a rhythm. John locked his ankles at the curve of Sherlock's arse and held for dear life.

"I'm sorry, I love you, I love you – fuck – so much..." Sherlock moaned into John's mouth as he thrust his hips.

John's body was undergoing a sensory overload and his brain was threatening to short circuit. He felt his release building with every collision of Sherlock's cock against his prostate. He wasn't prepared for it when it hit. He cried out in a frenzied groan followed by a series of unintelligible grunts. Sherlock thrust twice more before he straightened his arms and arched his back in pleasure as he came.

Both sweating, shaking, panting and aching men stared at the other before the satisfied smirks crept across their lips. John croaked his discomfort when Sherlock gently pulled out of him.
"I hurt you… You should have let me prep you…"

"Physical pain distracts from emotional pain." John said softly with his eyes closed. He pulled Sherlock down next to him and lovingly wound his hair around his fingers.

"Promise you won't leave me again," he whispered.

"I promise."
Chapter 21

The series of phone calls to vendors, friends and relatives cancelling the Watson/Morstan wedding were awkward but thankfully short. Harry and John sat around her kitchen table with the guest list in front of them and for the first time, John noticed how few people Mary had invited.

John saved Mary's short list of guests for last. He wanted to ask her friends if they knew where she was, or if they had heard from her. John called his own friends and associates, Harry was in charge of calling their family.

"Hi Aunt Muriel. It's Harriet. Harriet. HARRIET, RAYMOND'S DAUGHTER. Yes, it has been a long time. I…" Harry held the phone far from her ear to have a buffer from their aunt's booming voice. She could barely distinguish the old lady from the television blaring in the background.

"Oh, no. I'm not married. No, I suppose you're right; I definitely have not met the right man yet." She rolled her eyes and John chuckled.

"Well the reason for my call is, unfortunately John's wedding has been – John. My brother – yes, the doctor. His wedding has been cancelled. Yes. Yes it is a shame." She drummed her thumb on the table impatiently waiting for the opportunity to gracefully end the call.

"Yes, dear. I will. Ok, bye-bye."

She swiped her finger across the screen, ending the call and dropped her forehead to the table top.

"Ye gods, how is she still alive? Isn't she over 1000 years old by now?"

John snorted. "Granny's youngest sister, she must be 80, 85 if she's a day."

Harry made a tick mark next to their aunt's name and groaned. John looked at the next name on the list; it was their father's brother.

"Uncle Richard. You called Muriel, I'll call him."

"Thanks. Where did those two go off to?" She looked around for Sherlock and Clara. John pointed to the back door.

"They're bonding – which I am honestly not sure is a good thing or not."

A conspiratorial smile crept across Harry's face. "Can I tell you a secret?"

John shrugged, "Of course."

"Clara started hormone treatments. We're going to try to have a baby."

John sat back in his chair, smiling wide. "Harry that is…wow. That's wonderful! Does that mean you two are, um…" He gestured to his left ring finger.

Harry waggled her hand meaning 'maybe'. "I'd do it in a heartbeat, if she'd have me."

"Well if she's going to be having a baby with you; that probably means she's in it for the long haul, Burton," he teased.

"Hey! What makes me Richard Burton?!"
"No, no…adagio, adagio! Do you even hear the music?" Sherlock scolded. He kept his violin perched underneath his chin as he waved his bow at Clara. She adjusted the strap of her sport bra and stretched her arms behind her back.

"Sherlock –" she grunted. "This was supposed to just be a bit of fun. Besides, you're playing it slower than it's written. It's supposed to be andante."

He scoffed. "I beg your pardon, I am most certainly not playing it incorrectly."

Clara crossed her arms and raised an eyebrow. "Want to bet?"

"Winner buys dinner." He tucked his bow under his opposite arm and extended his hand for her to shake.

"You don't eat dinner," she laughed and shook his hand, sealing the deal.

"John eats enough for two. Which you will be doing soon as well, I imagine."

He kept shaking her hand while she stared at him wide-eyed. "How do you – Harry told John already?"

"No. Look at your puffy ankles in your pointe shoes - you're bloated. Your complexion is normally clear but you have makeup on covering a few spots on your forehead. And, you've been rubbing that same irritated spot on your abdomen, which I assume is the injection site. Your breasts are spilling over the top of your bra and you've been squeezing your eyes shut after every fouette turn, indicating that you either have a headache, or you're feeling dizzy even though you're spotting your head properly; both of which are also side effects of most commonly used fertility drugs."

Her jaw dropped and she raised her eyes to the clouds. "Why do you know these things?"

He smirked at her. "The same reason I know that the tempo of Bach's Violin Sonata number 2 is adagio."

"Oh, not that Brain Castle nonsense again."

"Mind Palace, thank you very much."

Clara walked to the patio table where she'd left her phone. She opened a browser tab and searched for the piece of music. She held it up triumphantly, showing him the search results.

"ANDANTE! What do you have to say for yourself, smartypants?"

He swiped the phone from her hand, read and handed it back to her, grumbling under his breath.

"Aww, don't be a sore loser – even a broken clock is right twice a day." She winked at him.

The search for Mary was fruitless and brief. There were 7 names and numbers of friends on her list and each one expressed their utmost surprise when John said that the wedding was cancelled and that Mary had left. Thankfully, none of them questioned him too much about the fight he fabricated as the reason for the split so he didn't have to improvise many details.

There were two names left; her best friend Janine and the pizzeria owner, Enzo Giorgio. Sherlock
and Clara came back inside the house and continued to bicker playfully.

John dialed the number on the list and hoped Enzo would answer.

"Pronto."

"Hello, this is John Watson. Erm - Enzo?"

"No, Lorenzo non é qui. Sono Matteo. Chi é questo?"

"Erm…” John held his hand over the phone. "Sherlock, a little linguistic help?"

"What region of Italy?"

"I don't know."

"Well, I don't know which dialect to-"

"Just do your best, alright?" John sounded exasperated and handed Sherlock the phone.

"Ciao, mi chiamo Sherlock Holmes. Sono un amico di Mary Morstan."

"Chi? OH! Maria, sì!"

"Si. Mary e John non si sposano, il matrimonio é cancellato."

"Quest’ è una triste notizia..."

"Si, davvero. Allora, Mary ha chiamato Enzo? Lo sai?"

"Eh, no. Non lo so."

"Lei è in piedi di fronte a te?"

"Si."

"Per favore, dille che mi dispiace."

"Si, certo."

"Grazie. Arrivederla."

"Ciao ciao, Signore."

Matteo put the receiver back in the cradle. Mary was still standing in the doorway watching.

"Who was that?"

"The one with the nome pazzo." He drew a spiral in the air next to his temple with his finger.

"Sherlock?"

"Yes. E haked me to tella you that he is esorry."

She took a deep breath. "Thanks for doing that. I'll only be here another day or so. I appreciate you letting me stay."
"Hov course we want to 'elp you. Only, are you sure you aren'a gonna tell 'im?"

Mary bit her lip and absentmindedly ran her palm across her abdomen. "I can't. It's too complicated. It would be different if I knew before I left but, I can't go back now."

xXx

"Janine, you're her best friend. You mean to tell me it's been five days and she didn't tell you she left me? I'm sorry but I find that impossible to believe." John tried not to shout into the phone but he couldn't shake the feeling that Janine was lying.

"Nah, I swear didn't know, John. What did you fight about? There musta been skin an' bones flyin' if she legged it."

He sighed. "Listen. If you hear from her, please send me a text or something. You don't have to tell me where she is. I just want to know that she's ok. That's all. She doesn't ever have to speak to me again if she doesn't want to."

He heard Janine clear her throat. "Fine. If she calls, I'll phone you."

"Thanks."

She ended the call and opened up a new text message.

*John called looking for you. He sounds really concerned. Can't I just tell him I've spoken to you and you're fine?*

Mary's response was simple and succinct:

*Ok.*

xXx

Mary tied her newly-coloured chocolate brown hair back into a ponytail and blinked hard against the dark contact lenses; they were irritating her eyes. Her knee bounced nervously as she sat at the bar with an Economy Flex ticket to Rome in her hand. Alitalia flight AZ 209 would transport her from Heathrow to Fiumicino airport and she would hide there until she decided what to do next. She knew she'd eventually have to return to England. She asked her friends not to speak to John and was confident that none of them would.

She looked up just in time to spot him walking towards her. She closed her eyes and exhaled, knowing there wouldn't be anywhere she could go to escape him. She downed what was left of her drink in one gulp. He stopped 15 paces in front of her and subtly indicated for her to follow him with a tilt of his balding head. She nodded and he turned away, walking towards the BA Executive Lounge; he waited for her at the door.

He flashed some kind of identification and told the woman at the door that Mary was with him and he'd only need a moment. They were both allowed to enter. Mary's stomach was in knots as she dragged her bag behind her but being in a public place made her slightly more comfortable – at least he wasn't going to kill her with hundreds of potential witnesses.

"Sit, please." He sounded gracious and motioned to an overstuffed recliner. She sat carefully and pushed the telescoping handle of her bag down all the way.

"How did you find me?" She folded her hands in her lap.
"I hardly need to dignify that question. I was asked to, so I did." He sat across from her and she nodded at him, understanding.

"I understand why you're leaving. I can't say that I blame you. My question is, after your associate was killed for making indirect contact, why ever did you chance it?"

She swallowed hard. He knew far more than she assumed he would.

"When Eamonn died, Jim designated me as his replacement to follow them. Then Jim was gone. I don't know why I continued to follow John. I never planned on making contact. Once I did -"

"You knew you'd made a mistake?" He patiently crossed one leg over the other.

She shook her head and looked away. "Not a mistake, really. I just – I wanted to know him. He loved Sherlock so deeply; I've never had that. I wanted to know what it was like."

"Rosemund –" he began to scold her.

"Mary, thank you." She snapped at him.

"Mary. How long did you think you could keep up the farce?"

"It wasn't a farce! It may have started that way but – I genuinely fell in love with him. I never lied. I was myself, I just omitted…certain inconvenient truths. Jim was the only one who knew my identity and he was dead; AGRA was disbanded. Nothing was ever going to lead back to me, he never would have known. I admit I got nervous once you brother reappeared but I thought I could handle it."

Mycroft uncrossed and re-crossed his long legs, shifting his weight slightly to the other side. He was silently contemplating. She looked to the clock on the wall over his shoulder, her flight wouldn't be boarding for at least another 45 minutes.

"Knowing what I am capable of doing if you should go back on your word, I need your assurance that you won't interfere in their lives again. My brother has been through enough. While I am indifferent on the subject of what becomes of John Watson, Sherlock is in love with him and therefore he falls under my protection. If you're going, stay gone."

"The last thing I want to do is hurt John, that's why I left. He'll never love me as much as he loves Sherlock. I thought what they had was just a fling. Once Sherlock was back and I realized the depth of John's feelings, I knew I would lose him eventually. They're already back together?" She only needed a cursory glance at Mycroft's face to know the answer; she smiled and nodded.

"So I know I'm doing the right thing. You won't hear from me again. I'll keep my distance." She stood and extended the handle of her bag to its full height. He didn't stop her from leaving but he waited at the gate and watched her board the plane, giving her a final wave as she entered the jetway.

xXx

Two weeks after he and Harry completed all of the calls cancelling the wedding, John paid off the remainder of Mary's lease on her flat and moved back in to 221b. He carried the last of his things that fit into the cab up the stairs and used his foot to close the door behind him. Looking around the flat cluttered with stacks of boxes he felt a bit overwhelmed. His clothes still on their hangers were draped over the arm chairs and the sofa. He put the box he was holding on the top of a stack by the door and shook his head. He didn't know where Sherlock was, but he clearly wasn't keen to help.
Exhaling, he grabbed a handful of hangers and hefted them over his shoulder, carrying them to the bedroom. He used his elbow to flick the light on and proceeded to the wardrobe. He forcefully nudged Sherlock's clothes to the side and hung his own on the bar. He turned to retrieve more clothing and found Sherlock laying on the bed wide awake and fully clothed with his hands folded on his stomach.

"Bored."

"Jesus fuck Sherlock, you scared the shit out of me." He jumped and pressed his back flat against the wardrobe doorjamb.

"Bored."

"You might not be so bored if you'd help me unpack." He put his hands on his hips.

"That doesn't sound remotely stimulating."

John rolled his eyes and went back out to the sitting room. He brought in two more arms full of clothing while Sherlock remained on the bed, not moving a muscle except to occasionally blink.

Finally, he slammed the wardrobe closed. "Damnit Sherlock, aren't you happy I'm home?"

Sherlock sat straight up and cocked his head. "How could you ask that? Of course I'm happy. I've wanted nothing more since the day I got back to London."

John tsked at him. "You have a funny way of showing it; sitting on your arse doing nothing while I dragged all my worldly belongings up the stairs and now I'm putting everything away by myself."

"What should I do?"

"How about help me?"

"Oh, did you want help?" He pushed himself off the bed, went into the sitting room and opened a box. He found some books and he quickly unpacked, putting them on the empty shelf alphabetically.

John watched him with his arms crossed. "What are you doing?"

Sherlock continued unloading the box of books and didn't look back at John when he spoke. "Helping."

John gave a frustrated groan and covered his face with his hands. "Now you're helping?"

Sherlock paused and turned to John, holding a dog-eared copy of *Grey's Anatomy*. "Don't you want me to?"

"I wanted you to help me an hour ago when I was hefting boxes up the stairs."

"Then why didn't you ask me? As you are wont to say, John, I am not a psychic. If you don't ask for my assistance, I can't be expected to know when you require it."

John opened his mouth to argue, but decided his energy would be better spent by continuing to unpack. With Sherlock finally contributing to the effort, many hands made light work and by nightfall, they were breaking down the last box to bring down to the bin.

John sat on the sofa exhausted. He folded his hands behind his head and looked around, satisfied. Sherlock lay down with his head in John's lap.
"Bored," he sighed heavily.

John chuckled and massaged his hand into the sea of dark brown curls on Sherlock's head. "What do you want to do?"

Sherlock grazed John's cheek with the back of his hand. "Monopoly?"

"What?"

"I like Monopoly." Sherlock shrugged. Without another word, he went to the cupboard and pulled out the game box.

"We've never played this together, I didn't know you liked it. This was always my favorite game." John smirked and pulled the coffee table closer as Sherlock opened the box and began setting it up.

"Well after the Cluedo incident, I thought it would be best to avoid playing board games with you for a while. Do you want to be the banker?" Sherlock held out the colorful strips of money and John accepted. He dealt out the opening sums for them both and arranged his money in descending order. Sherlock kept his money in a pile.

"I'm always the top hat," Sherlock said.

"Battleship." John pointed at himself with his thumb.

Sherlock put the two game pieces on the opening space and handed John the dice, letting him roll first. He rolled two.

"One, two." He tapped the metal battleship in the first two spaces and landed on Community Chest. He took the top card off the pile and read it out loud:

"Life insurance matures, collect £100." He took a yellow £100 note from the bank. He had rolled doubles so he went again. He rolled double threes and landed on Euston Road; he bought the property. He rolled again, got three and moved to Pall Mall, which he also purchased.

Sherlock bought The Angel, Islington for £100.

On his next turn, John bought Marylebone Station for £200 and Sherlock scoffed.

"Yes?" John said with a smirk.

"You're going to spend all of your money like a drunken sailor and I will win by default."

"Ok, Sherlock. Just play."

Over the next few rounds, John bought Leicester Square, Oxford and Bow Streets. Sherlock bought Marlborough Street, the Water and Electric utilities, Mayfair and Kings Cross Station. His buying streak was put on hold when he landed on Free Parking.

"This is the most useless spot on the board," he grumbled and dropped his top hat on the corner square.

"The House Rules Harry and I always played with put the Income Tax money and anything collected from the Chance cards there." He suggested they adopt the same rule.

"We will play the game exactly as the rules are written." Sherlock thrust the dice into John's palm.
"Whatever you say, Sir." John rolled his eyes, then he rolled an eight and bought Trafalgar Square. Sherlock rolled two fours and landed on the Water Works utility. "I don't want it." He took the dice back in between his fingers.

"That's a shame, because you already own it," John chuckled.

"Oh. Right."

He rolled again and purchased Liverpool Street Station.

A few moves later, John had purchased Regent Street, Vine Street, and Piccadilly. Sherlock bought Pentonville Road, Coventry Street, and Bond Street.

John passed Go, collected his £200 salary and landed on Community Chest.

"Advance to Go, Collect £200 salary," he smirked. He picked up his battleship piece and waved it all the way around the board with a long, sustained whistle before dropping it back down on Go.

Sherlock bought Old Kent Road and on his next move, he landed on the Electric Utility.

"I want it."

"You already own it," John said patiently.

John rolled a three and landed on the Electric Utility. Sherlock grinned and asked for £30. John pulled out one £20 note and one £10 note. Sherlock dropped them onto the pile of bills on the tabletop in front of him. He rolled a four on doubles and landed on Bow Street; paid John £14; then he landed on Trafalgar Square.

"20 quid. Pay up," John held his hand out.

Sherlock shuffled through the disorganized stack of coloured bills in front of him.

"Why don't you lay them out like I do?" John motioned to his neatly systematized piles of money arranged in ascending order.

"I know exactly how much money I have and in the exact denominations." Sherlock handed him two £10 notes.

Sherlock had to pay John for two of his next three moves. On a fourth move he landed on Marylebone Station, which he wanted to purchase. He shuffled through his money.

"I don't have enough here," he grumbled. "I'll mortgage Mayfair."

"Actually, I own that. £25 please," John winked.

A few moves later, Sherlock proposed a trade.

"I'll give you Bond Street for Euston Road." He held the green card out to John.

"Are you sure about that?" He raised an eyebrow.

"Obviously."

John shrugged and handed Sherlock the property he asked for. "You know that was a dumb trade,
right?"

"Nonsense."

John rolled doubles on his next two turns and landed on Go to Jail. He failed to roll doubles on his next turn. Sherlock rolled a 9 and landed on Pall Mall.

"£10 please."

"You can't collect rent from jail, John."

"Damn, you're right."

A few minutes later when Sherlock landed on Bond Street, John chuckled.

"Regretting that trade yet?"

"Shut up." Sherlock pushed £28 at him.

The next time John landed on Community Chest, the card said to collect a £25 "Consulting Fee".

"Oh, the irony," he laughed.

Sherlock pulled a face, "That is not remotely ironic."

The game continued and they talked less. Sherlock was concentrating on the board as if it were as predictable as chess. When John landed on and purchased Fleet Street, he whistled the opening line to the Sondheim musical, *Sweeney Todd*.

"Must you?" Sherlock looked up, irritated.

"Yep. I must."

Two rounds later, Sherlock purchased Park Lane for £350.

"Sherlock, are you certain you want to do that?"

"Obviously. I now own the two most expensive properties on the board."

"But, we've been playing for," he checked his watch. "Two hours and neither of us have landed on that space yet." Sherlock waved him off.

On his very next turn, John rolled three and landed on Park Lane. Sherlock gave him a satisfied smirk.

"Not one word," John grimaced and handed over £50.

John landed on Community Chest on two of his next four moves; he inherited £100, and picked up a Get Out of Jail Free card.

Sherlock rolled seven and also landed on Community Chest. His jaw clenched when he read the card to himself. He pinched his fingers around his top hat and dropped it on the Jail space.

John rolled five and landed on Chance, finding a second Get Out of Jail Free card.

Sherlock held out his hand. John smirked and shook it.
"You're funny." Sherlock impatiently kept his hand held out, palm up. John, deciding to be an arse, placed both dice in his hand.

"I am obviously waiting for a Get Out of Jail card; why are you being thick about it?"

John cocked his head. "And why would I give that to you?"

"I'm in jail."

"So?"

"You have two." Sherlock crossed his arms.

"What will you trade me for it?"

Sherlock grit his teeth.

"I'll take..." John lifted his chin to look at the property cards laid out in front of Sherlock. "Liverpool Street Station or the Electric Utility."

Sherlock bent the corner of the Tube station card as he lifted it and handed it to John, who in turn gave him a Get Out of Jail Free card. He rolled a five and landed on Marylebone Station. John snorted a laugh.

"100 quid, please."

Sherlock rolled 10 on his next move and growled deep in his throat. John laughed out loud watching Sherlock tap the top hat the ten spaces to land on Fenchurch Station.

"100 quid again, please."


"I'll give it to you for Kings Cross." They made the exchange.

A Chance card had John's battleship pass Go in order to advance to Trafalgar Square. Sherlock rolled five and landed back on Marylebone Station. John clapped a hand across his mouth to muffle his laugh.

"200 pounds, please."

Sherlock groaned. "I don't have 200 pounds. I have 173."

"Well, give me that and Coventry Street, we'll call it even. To show you I'm not a total prick, I'll even let you roll again."

Sherlock set his jaw and obliged.

John placed his newly acquired yellow property with the other two he already owned and grinned. "Before you roll again though, I'm going enhance my investment and build houses on Leicester Square, Coventry Street and Piccadilly."

He counted out the price of the houses and dropped the little plastic buildings on the game board.

"Proceed," he gestured to Sherlock with his open palm.
Sherlock rolled 12 and his eyes bugged out. He dropped his token next to the green house on Coventry Street.

"That'll be £110, please," John smirked. Sherlock narrowed his eyes and groaned.

"Oh, are you still out of money? That's alright. I'll take all of your lite blues – or you can concede that I am better at Monopoly than you are."

"You're not." Sherlock clenched a fist.

"Well, I'm the one sitting here with the most money, all four Tube stations and more properties. The evidence clearly indicates otherwise."

Sherlock tilted his neck to each side, stretching.

"Listen, you can stop the bleeding, you merely have to declare my superiority."

Sherlock exhaled a deep groan and spoke under his breath. "You're better than me."

"What was that?" John cupped his hand around his ear. "Louder, please."

"Don't push your luck." Sherlock cocked an eyebrow.

"You have to say 'I, William Sherlock Scott Holmes declare that John Watson's skill at Monopoly far exceeds my own.""

"How about I suck you off instead?" Sherlock offered, taking John off-guard.

"Deal." He shook his head and his shoulders bobbed with a laugh. He leaned forward and kissed Sherlock on the mouth when the doorbell rang.

"That'll be Harry with my trunk." He kissed Sherlock's forehead and stood up, his knees cracked as he straightened his body. Neither of them had moved since sitting down to play the game. He went to the door and let her in.

Sherlock sat back on the sofas and observed the carnage, wondering how in the hell John managed to defeat him that badly. He had never waved a white flag over a board game in his life until that point.

Harry looked into the sitting room and laughed. "Oh god, Sherlock! Don't tell me you played Monopoly with John?"

"I did, actually." Sherlock moved to his armchair.

"And naturally, I gave him a beating."

Harry shook her head. "He's a Monopoly master, Sherlock. If you can't beat him, no one can." She pecked Sherlock softly on the cheek and he returned the show of affection.

"He won't beat me a second time." Sherlock put his fists under his chin and leaned forward, still looking at the board. "Because he won't ever challenge me to another go."

"I don't need to, I massacred you the first time. I can quit while I'm ahead," John said cheerily. He perched in the arm of Sherlock's chair and combed his fingers through his hair. He tugged the thick curls back gently and touched the tip of his tongue to the Cupid's bow of Sherlock's lips. Sherlock gently took hold of the back of John's neck and kissed him hard. He climbed into Sherlock's lap, not letting their lips part.
"Hey, hey, hey guys – get a room!" Harry laughed, returning from the kitchen with a glass of pop.

With his lips still pressed against Sherlock's, John began to laugh. He leaned back and wiped his mouth on his arm.

"And where is your better half tonight? I thought you were both coming?" John stood up and walked to the kitchen.

Harry frowned and slouched into John's chair. "She wasn't up to leaving the house."

John pulled two bottles of water from the fridge and walked back over to Sherlock, handed him one and perched on the arm of his chair.

"I'm sorry, sis. Can you try again?" John twisted the cap off and took a long drink. Harry nodded.

"We can. She wants to."

"But you don't?" Sherlock sat forward in his chair.

"Sherlock…" John used a warning tone but Harry waved him off.

"It's fine, Johnny. Honestly, I'm torn. I want her to have everything she wants and she really wants this. I wish there was more that I could do to support her. We were over the moon when the home test came back positive. It was exhilarating; we were screwing on every surface of the house – we were so fucking happy. She was looking at baby clothes online and we talked about names. When the doctor said it was a false positive…" She shook her head and threaded her fingers through her hair.

Sherlock cleared his throat, looking uncomfortable.

"It doesn't always work the first time but there's no reason to believe a second round won't work," John reassured her.

"I know. We know that. I'm worried about the toll it's taking on her. We'll do it as many times as she wants to."

John bit his lower lip. "Make sure you're taking care of yourself. The stress…you don't want to relapse. If you even think about taking a drink – you call me, understood?"

Harry nodded with a smile. "Thanks Johnny."

"Promise?"

"Promise. Can we get the trunk out of the boot? I want to get back to Clara."

Sherlock jumped from his seat and headed down the stairs. Harry looked over her shoulder and then back to John.

"What did I miss? Is he upset about something?"

John shook his head and walked to the door. "He isn't the best empath and he knows it. He cares, believe me, but he doesn't always know the right things to say. He avoids these awkward conversations so he won't say the wrong thing."

"That's very human of him." Harry gave him a weak smile.
"He's getting there." John winked and walked down to the car to help Sherlock with the trunk.
Chapter 22

The car with the blacked out windows pulled to a stop at the kerb in front of Speedy's. Two men in navy blue suits stepped out and went into the café. They removed their sunglasses in unison and scanned the room.

Charlie looked up from his roast beef sandwich at the newcomers. He didn't much care for the way these strangers looked and he'd come to think of the proprietor of the café as a friend. He felt the need to cut the strangers off at the pass.

"Can I help you gentlemen?" He stood and wiped the horseradish spread off his lip.

"John Watson?"

Charlie cocked his head and crossed his arms. "Doctor Watson? What would you be wanting with Doctor Watson?"

All sorts of strange, desperate folks were always knocking on the door, looking for the detective and his assistant in the upstairs flat but they usually only mentioned Sherlock by name.

"That's classified." The second man spoke. "Is Doctor Watson here?"

Charlie opened his mouth to speak but Mrs. Hudson had overheard when she stepped out of the kitchen wiping her hands on an apron.

"Excuse me, I'm Doctor Watson's landlady. He lives upstairs – may I ask who you are?"

"Ma'am do you know if he is at home?"

She narrowed her eyes at him suspiciously. "That depends a great deal upon who you are and what you want with him."

Charlie stood up and took a couple of steps toward Mrs. Hudson. He wasn't a violent man but if he needed to intervene, he would.

xXx

"Christ that's so good…" A bead of sweat dropped from John's forehead to Sherlock's chest. He pulled both of Sherlock's legs up from where they'd been on his hips and rested them over his shoulders. He seated himself deeper.

Sherlock gripped the headboard with one hand and stroked himself quickly with the other.

"I'm gonna…John…I'm gonna…"

His orgasm crested with a loud crescendo of pleasure racing through his body. The bucking of his hips almost sent John over the edge. He saw Sherlock's face contort in pleasure and relax in release. His pink cheeks glistened with sweat and his lips were red and swollen.

Sherlock arched his back and watched the rising flush move from John's chest and shoulders up to his face.

"Fuck…fuck…"
"Come for me John. Let me see you come…"

John pulled himself out of Sherlock and with only two forceful strokes of his hand he reached a hard, toe-curling orgasm. His own cum comingle with Sherlock's on the detective's stomach, pooling in his navel.

With his body effectively transformed into jelly, John collapsed on top of his lover. Mouths and tongues met lazily in post-coital bliss. Sherlock hooked one of his legs around John's thigh to hold him in place.

"We made a mess again." Sherlock observed with a grin. He could feel it being spread across his abdomen the more John writhed on top of him.

"There is no one I'd rather make a mess with." John said as he sucked on a trail of sweat from Sherlock's neck.

"Charming."

John rolled his eyes and lovingly brushed sweaty, matted curls from Sherlock's forehead.

"You were thinking the exact same thing."

"Maybe I was."

John licked his lower lip and grinned before placing a chaste kiss on Sherlock's mouth.

"Any appointments today?"

"A couple this afternoon." John replied as he pushed himself up to stand next to the bed.

"Smashing. I hope we get something good; that last one was deadly dull."

"Yes, I'm sorry the Runaway Nunnery didn't prove to be as exciting as it promised." John rotated his bad shoulder forward and back. The light shining in through the window reflected in Sherlock's eyes off of the St. Michael medallion.

"Mind if I shower first?" Sherlock stretched his arms above his head.

"I thought we could shower together…" John pulled a short black dressing gown from its hook on the back of the door; Sherlock met his eye with a grin.

"Even better."

John retrieved Sherlock's dressing gown from the second hook and draped them both over his arm. Sherlock climbed off the bed and followed him to the bathroom. Sherlock turned the water on and they stepped in.

"Ow! Sherlock, you like the water too goddamned hot."

"You know I don't feel clean without scalding hot water." He shrugged and reached past John for the bar of soap. He dipped his head back to wet his hair at the shower head. John stepped closer, put his arm around Sherlock's waist and kissed his chest.

"Can you turn it down, just a wee bit for me?"

"I suppose." Sherlock made the quick adjustment and allowed John to get under the stream of water.
Sherlock finished washing first and gave John a quick kiss before he stepped out and began to dry himself with a towel. He popped his head behind the shower curtain to ask John if he wanted some tea.

"Ta, yeah. I'll just be a minute."

Sherlock wrapped the towel around his narrow hips and draped the dressing gown over his shoulders. He stepped out of the bathroom and was padding to the kitchen when the doorbell rang. John had said they weren't expecting any potential clients until later in the day but they had people pop in unannounced from time to time, so he didn't think too much of it.

Not realizing the average person would find it odd that someone would answer the door naked except for a towel and dressing gown, he swung the door open and was surprised to find two men in suits standing in the hallway.

"Can I help you?"

"John Watson?"

"No, Sherlock Holmes."

"Is Doctor Watson at home, sir?" The two men looked at each other from the corners of their eyes.

"Maybe. Who's asking?"

"Sir, we'd really appreciate your cooperation."

"And I'd really appreciate knowing who the hell you are and why you're looking for John."

They heard the bathroom door open and John called out to him as he walked down the hall.

"Sherlock, I don't know why I let you talk me into buying this ridiculous thing, it barely covers my bits – OH, oh. Shit." John self-consciously pulled the short dressing gown down at the sight of the two men at the door.

"John Watson?"

"Yes, who're you?"

"Sir, do you know a Miss," he consulted a notepad that he'd pulled from his inner jacket pocket. "Miss Mary Morstan?"

John and Sherlock both froze and shared a similar wide-eyed stare at each other before looking back to the two men.

"Um, yes. Mary was my fiancée. But she left me months ago, what's all this about?"

"Sirs, I think you should both get dressed."

John nodded and gestured for them to enter and sit down. He and Sherlock retreated to the bedroom and silently pulled on clothing. Sherlock squeezed John's hand before they went back out to the sitting room.

"Ok, so I'm dressed. Where is Mary? What is all this about?" He plopped down in his chair and interlaced his fingers across his stomach.
"Sir, I'm very sorry to inform you that Miss Morstan died yesterday."

John's jaw fell to his chest. He blinked hard, not sure that he'd heard properly.

"There must be a mistake," he said; deeply confused.

"No, we received a positive identification from another party last night," the taller man interjected.

"My god…Mary. What- what happened?" Sherlock slowly stood and placed a reassuring hand on John's shoulder.

"Sir, this is a highly unusual situation and I'm sorry to have to ask you this but, you say you were engaged; do you know if you are the father of Miss Morstan's child?" The two agents looked at each other apprehensively. John's response took them both off guard.

He laughed, looking relieved.

"Now I know you've made a mistake. It can't be her. Mary doesn't have a child." He took Sherlock's hand and squeezed it before kissing his thumb.

"Then you were unaware that Miss Morstan was pregnant?"

"She…what?"

John only heard drips and drabs of the rest, but he got the gist. Mary was admitted to hospital with pain in her right side and a debilitating headache. While in hospital an excessive amount of protein was found in her urine and her blood pressure soared dangerously high. Unfortunately, the diagnosis wasn't made until it was far too late.

"Preeclampsia." John whispered. "Fucking preeclampsia – all the signs were there – what backward fucking hospital could possibly misdiagnose that?!" He bent forward, feeling faint. He rested his head in his hands, his fingertips digging into his scalp. It wasn't real. It couldn't be. Mary wasn't dead, not his Mary. John felt a pang of guilt in his stomach, still thinking of her as his Mary.

Sherlock knelt on the floor next to John's chair while the agents were talking.

"The baby – what about the baby?" He was afraid of the answer.

"The baby was transferred to the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit at University College Hospital overnight. She is premature, only 29 weeks gestation and she is very small, but the doctors are optimistic."

"She – she, John. You have a daughter…" Sherlock rubbed his back in an attempt to reassure him.

"Can I see her? Can we – Jesus Christ – can we do a DNA analysis? Mary didn't tell me. If she knew she was pregnant the day she left, she did not tell me." John hugged himself tightly.

"Miss Morstan was brought to hospital by one of her friends, Janine?"

"Yes, Janine Flaherty. I know her."

"Yes, sir. Miss Flaherty is the one who made the positive identification of the body and pointed us in your direction, Doctor Watson. Miss Morstan had named you as the father."

"She didn't tell me."
"We are very sorry for your loss, sir. If you'd like to accompany us, we can take you to the hospital and you can give a DNA sample. The sooner, the better."

"Absolutely. Absolutely. Come on, John. Get your trainers on." Sherlock jumped up and grabbed John's running shoes from their usual spot by the door. He dropped them on the floor next to John, who appeared to have been turned to stone.

"Mary…Christ. Mary, why didn't you tell me? I could have done something. If I saw all those symptoms, I could have added it up. She might be… Sherlock…Sherlock…” John felt lightheaded and he held his hand out looking for Sherlock. He started to hyperventilate.

"Should we call paramedics?" One of the suits asked as he reached for his phone.

"No. Not necessary. Kindly wait for us outside. We'll be right down." Sherlock waved them off and knelt in front of John and held him tight.

"John, look at me. Breathe. You need to breathe. It's not going to do any good to anyone, including the baby, if you don't keep it together. You have to calm yourself."

John was rocking himself again and began to babble.

"Janine knew she was pregnant and she didn't fucking tell me. Sherlock, I didn't know – you know I didn't know." He was wide-eyed with panic.

"Of course you didn't," he nodded his head.

"You said Mycroft couldn't find her." John gripped Sherlock's hand.

"He couldn't. He kept trying to track her down even after you moved back in." Sherlock kissed John's forehead.

He shook his head side to side as if trying to evict negative thoughts. "Sherlock, do I have a daughter?"

He smiled at him. "You might. Let's go find out." Sherlock took hold of John's face and pulled him in for a kiss. He pressed their foreheads together.

"University College is a good hospital." Sherlock sounded optimistic and John nodded and pulled his trainers on.

"It is. They have a Level 3 NICU, probably why they transferred her there."

"Level 3…is that serious?"

"There's no Level 4, let me put it that way."

"Whatever happens, I'm with you;" Sherlock said. He kissed his forehead and went to retrieve his own shoes. John tightened the laces of his trainers, grabbed his mobile off the charger and met Sherlock at the door. They walked down together and climbed into the back seat of the black car.

xXx

She was so small, just over one kilogram. After a technician swabbed the inside of John's cheek for his DNA sample, he put on the facemask, latex-free gloves and paper gown they gave him and followed the nurse towards the Plexiglas incubator where Mary's daughter was sleeping. A small card was taped to one side. Along with her date of birth and vital statistics, it read:
"She's too small and not quite stable enough to hold just yet; but you can put your hand in there and you can touch her. Just mind the wires." She had a comforting hand on his shoulder. John turned in time to see Sherlock adjusting his own facemask and he approached them. They stood on either side of the box and peered in. She wore a yellow crocheted hat with a pink bobble and an impossibly tiny nappy. John found himself counting the number of times he saw her tiny chest move up and down steadily as she breathed.

John swallowed hard and slipped his hand into the small opening near the baby's left hand. He hesitated to touch her, she resembled a newly-hatched bird more than a human. He slid his little finger into her palm and gasped when she gently closed her miniscule fingers as far around it as she could.

He looked up to Sherlock, beaming with tears in his eyes. Their voices were muffled by the masks when they spoke to each other.

"She's mine, Sherlock. I can feel it. She is mine."

"How can you tell?" He was no judge of babies that small but she didn't resemble John or Mary or indeed any person Sherlock had ever seen. He hated himself for thinking that she looked like a plucked chicken.

"Have you ever just, known something?"

"Constantly." Sherlock smiled back at him and it faded into an insecure frown.

"This will be the longest 24 hours of my entire -what?" John eyes darted back and forth between the tiny, pink creature in the incubator and his lover's pained expression.

"Nothing."

"Hey Sherlock?"

"Hmm?"

"She needs two parents." The meaning behind his words sunk in and Sherlock grinned. His chest puffed out and he looked down at the baby with newfound pride.

"Oh, erm, nurse?" John looked over his shoulder, he still hadn't taken his finger away from the baby's hand. The nurse came back over with a warm smile and placed her hand back on John's shoulder.

"Yes sir?"

"What's her name? It only says 'Baby Girl Morstan' there." He nodded his head in the direction of the card. The nurse's eyebrows came together in a pitiable expression.

"Well her... her mum never got to name her. We've been calling her Diana after Diana Prince – you know, Wonder Woman's secret identity? She's the smallest preemie we've had in here in ages and she's very strong. We usually have to administer a lot more steroids for lung development when they're that small. This little one is a fighter." She gave him a reassuring smile.

Sherlock watched John holding back the tears welling up. He swallowed hard and clenched his jaw. He hated every second of watching John in pain, knowing there wasn't fuck all to be done about it.
"Thank you," he said quietly to the nurse and she left them again. "She doesn't have a name, Sherlock. Mary never got to see her...I can't handle this." He wanted to run away but he couldn't bring himself to pull his hand out of the incubator.

"If she's yours, she's mine, too. We'll give her a name and we'll give her a home."

John looked at Sherlock as if he couldn't believe what he'd heard him say.

"I love you Sherlock."

"I love you, too."

"So, how about marrying me?"

"Obviously."

xx

"For the last time, Sherlock. We are not naming her bloody 'Dumbledore.'"

"But John, it's such an unusual name. And in Olde English it means 'bumblebee'…"

"No."

"Belladonna."

"Bella-what the fuck?"

"It means 'beautiful woman' in Italian."

"Isn't belladonna a poison?"

"Fine then, let's hear your list." He flopped down on the bed, tossing his notepad to the floor.

"Willa."

Sherlock leaned up on his elbow and raised an eyebrow.

"Fine, Penelope."

"Penel-NO-pe."

"You know, she's my daughter, I don't have to give you a say at all." He crossed his arms and shot Sherlock a half-joking angry expression.

Sherlock grimaced and rolled his eyes. "How about Saiorse?"

"I love the name but, no. Ex-girlfriend from uni."

"John, if we avoid the names of every single woman you've bedded, we'll be left with…boys names. Except Simon."

"Oh, you are too fucking funny," John laughed sarcastically. He lay down on his stomach next to Sherlock and went down the rest of his list. He'd never done something as important as naming a person before. He was overthinking it and underestimating it at the same time. Sherlock untucked John's shirt, pushed his arm underneath it and began to affectionately scratch his back.

"I'm sensing a theme," Sherlock said sarcastically.

"Yeah, I kind of got stuck on flower names."

"Belladonna is a flower."

"A poisonous flower. No."

"Have we officially decided against both 'Mary' and 'Diana'?"

"I think so, maybe for her middle name." John rubbed the bridge of his nose.

Sherlock stood up from the bed and padded to the sitting room where he fingered some of the books on his side of the bookcase. John followed. Sherlock pulled out a dusty tome so old that the words on the spine were completely faded away. He flipped through some pages and paused.

"Ok. So. Violet?"

John paused. "I like that."

"No ex-girlfriends named Violet?"

John rolled his eyes, "No."

"I think it's lovely. Mary's favorite colour was purple."

"How – why do you remember that?"

Sherlock shrugged. "It was the colour of the bridesmaid's dresses. Well, they were lilac…but purple."


"I like Violet Mary Diana - that is, if my vote counts."

"Yes, of course it does. Violet. I kind of love it. What book is that?"

"It's an antique edition of Hamlet. It belonged to my granddad," Sherlock replied. "All the flower names on your list made me think of Ophelia's speech in the third act."

John grimaced, "You mean when she has gone completely mad after her boyfriend murdered her father?"

"Well, yes and no. She's not completely mad - the flowers she talks about all had very specifically chosen meanings to them."

"Pray tell, what's the meaning behind the insane woman handing out violets?"

"Well, she doesn't. She doesn't hand them out at all. She says they all withered when her father was murdered."

"Oh, that's cheery. You're putting me right off."

"My, but fatherhood has shortened your already inadequate attention span– violets are a symbol of
faithfulness and fidelity. She was saying that those things ceased to exist when her father died."

John was considering the revelation when the phone rang.

"Hello? Yes he's here. One minute." Sherlock held the receiver out to John.

"Your sister." When John took it from his hands, he went to stretch out on the sofa.

"Hallo, Harry."

"Hi Daddy. Just checking in on my little niece." She sounded sober and happier than he'd heard her in months.

"She's getting stronger by the day, Aunt Harry. How's the expectant mother feeling today?"

"She's been vomiting all morning. She couldn't even keep an apple down – honestly, who throws up apples?"

John tsked. "It should subside around the end of the third month. Is she taking the vitamin tablets at breakfast?"

"She's taking them but I don't know if they're staying down."

"They might just be too heavy on her system. Tell her I said to take them before she goes to bed instead. Might help."

"I will, cheers. Are you going to see the baby today?"

"Yeah, we're going to head there in a bit."

"Any progress on her name? It's driving me crazy not to know what to call her except 'my brother's daughter'."

"Yes, actually. We've just decided. Violet Mary Diana." He chewed the inside of his cheek. Harry's reaction would give him a way to gauge what others would say.

"That – that's perfect Johnny. I love it. Little Violet. I wish I could visit her. Photographs just aren't enough."

"I know. Hospital policy, I'm afraid. You don't know how many times Sherlock has nearly been barred from the NICU because they say he's not a relation."

"That's discriminatory!" She sounded indignant.

"No, I don't think it's that. Well, it might be, who knows. It's mostly with the per diem nurses who don't know us, they don't know that Sherlock and I are her parents. One of the regular staff nurses is usually there to let him in."

"Maybe you should, oh, I dunno – get married?"

John rolled his eyes. "One thing at a time. It'll happen. We've got to put Violet first. Seems to me that you two skipped that step as well," he teased.

"This is still just, so…wild, Johnny. All of it. God, what a whirlwind you've been through."

"And the new whirlwind will begin the minute we get her home, I reckon."
"Any idea of how long that will be?"

"Not really, nothing we could mark on a calendar. The nurse Emilia told me once the babies can reliably breath on their own, take a certain amount of breastmilk – or in Violet's case, formula per feeding, and weigh at least 3 kilos, they send them home. Might be a month, might be two."

"Another two months?! If I'm getting impatient, you and Sherlock must be absolutely climbing the walls."

"You're right about that. Well, I am. He's been keeping himself busy with baby proofing the flat and with decorating the nursery. Paint swatches, area rugs, curtains, throw pillows – you'd think that Princess Charlotte was going to be living here with all the trouble he's going through. She's a baby; she's going to be in a pram in our room for a while. She won't ever notice if the nursery walls are banana yellow, canary yellow, butter yellow, buttercup yellow..."

"I'll have you know," Sherlock called from the sofa, "that I've decided on Silver Spoon, Snowstorm and Malted Mint with dashes of Amethyst. I went off the entire yellow family ages ago; good god man, do try to keep up. It's no small wonder to me that you ever learned how to tie your own shoelaces."

"This is better than Princess Charlotte, this is Princess Violet." He heard Harry holding back a laugh.

John promised Harry that she could come for a visit as soon as baby Violet was well enough to be discharged.

xXx

Exactly one month and three days later, the occupants of 221b Baker Street were in a tizzy. All of the build up to Violet's homecoming had reached a crescendo and the day had finally arrived. Violet had moved out of the NICU and soon after was cleared to leave.

Mrs. Hudson stopped them on the way out the door.

"Oh! Boys, are you off to collect the baby? Did they discharge her?"

John beamed. "Yep, today's the day."

"Bring her round when you get back, won't you? I can't tell you how desperate I am to give her a cuddle!"

They agreed and rushed out the door, leaving Mrs. Hudson still gushing her excitement.

"Have we got everything?" John asked as he slid into the driver's seat.

"Car seat, nappies, extra clothes, formula, blanket." Sherlock listed off the items on the back seat. "We only need our Violet."

John started the engine and rested his right wrist on the steering wheel, exhaling nervously. Sherlock linked their hands together and squeezed before John put the car into gear and merged into traffic.

The security officer in the lobby nodded at the familiar faces of John and Sherlock as they made their way to the lift.

Such a nice couple. Poufs, but very nice.

John was shaking with anticipatory nerves – he could do this. Couldn't he? Not alone, certainly.
Parenthood hadn't come to him the way he'd ever expected it might; but then again, so few of the most important things in his life came in a predictable way.

Above the nerves, he was wondering if he had what it took to be a father, if he made the right choice to take a leave of absence from his practice at the surgery to concentrate on being home with the baby and working cases with Sherlock. Somewhere in the back of his mind he worried that the nature of Violet's premature birth would have some heretofore unknowable long-term effects, but he pushed those fears back down. They'd cross that bridge when and if they came to it.

Beyond everything else, he felt grateful. Grateful that Violet was healthy and able to finally come home. They entered the nursery hand in hand and Emilia was there waiting for them. She was reclining in the rocking chair next to Violet's pram and she was fast asleep on her chest.

"I wanted to get one last snuggle from my favorite patient." Emilia whispered.

"Thank you, for everything. I don't know how we would have managed without you." John said, crouching down next to them. He stroked the baby's pink cheek with the back of his fingers. She squirmed at his touch and yawned, a soft sighing noise left her mouth as she settled down again.

"Here you are." Emilia delicately transferred Violet to John's arms. By that time he was very seasoned at the proper way of holding her and supporting her neck. The first time Emilia placed Violet on his bare chest several weeks earlier, John was petrified. He'd never held a baby so small, he struggled to remember the last time he'd held a baby at all.

John cradled her in his arms. He clicked his tongue gently at her and blew a light breath of air at her chin until she opened one perfect blue eye to look at him.

"Hey Babydoll. It's time to go home," He softly cooed. Violet yawned again, looking unimpressed.

"John, there're just a couple of forms to sign before you take her." Emilia called to him from her station.

"Here, let me. You go sign," Sherlock held out the crocheted blanket his mother had sent to them and reached for her and John made the exchange. Sherlock wrapped the soft cotton around her and rocked her gently.

Violet was suddenly wide awake, having been disturbed by so much movement. Her fingers curled together and her arms straightened off in different directions in the desperately uncoordinated way babies stretch and she looked at Sherlock.

"Hi there, Honeybee." Sherlock gave her a soft kiss on the nose. "Ready to get out of here?"

They thanked Emilia one last time, said goodbye and carried Violet out to the car. John opened the door for Sherlock who carefully unwrapped the baby and let the blanket drop into John's hands before he secured her in her pastel purple car seat.

"Would you mind driving?" John asked, "I want to sit in the back with her."

"Course. But I get to hold her as soon as we get home."

"Deal."

xXx

The doorbell rang and John scrambled out of his chair to answer the door before it rang again and
disturbed Violet's afternoon nap. Mr. and Mrs. Holmes beamed at him when he opened the door and she pushed five brightly-coloured gift bags into his arms as they entered.

"Where is the little angel?" She excitedly cried as she kissed John's cheeks. Mr. Holmes grabbed John's hand and shook it eagerly.

"She's upstairs, Marceline. Sherlock will bring her down shortly." John smiled and carried the collection of presents to the sitting room. "You didn't need to go through all of this trouble! This is too much!"

"Nonsense!"

"John my boy, don't try to dissuade my wife from spoiling a little girl. It's a fools' errand," Mr. Holmes joked and sat on the sofa.

"How are you boys holding up? You don't look half-bad for a new father." Mrs. Holmes elbowed her husband in the ribs.

"We got lucky, she sleeps really well. She wakes up once or twice a night for a new nappy or a bottle and she goes right back out again. You hear horror stories about long, sleepless nights but honestly, I can't say that's the way it's been. She doesn't cry without a reason. Once we've taken care of whatever it is, she's content."

"Goodness, that is a lucky strike. Mikey's colic was so dreadful he didn't sleep until he was at least 7 months old, it drove me mad."

"So Mycroft has always had that effect on people." Sherlock quipped as he entered from the hallway. He had Violet cuddled upright against his chest, wrapped in a blanket. She wore simple grey cotton pajamas with white and blue spots. A matching floral headband was on her head. Her hands were covered with white mittens.

A sharp intake of air made everyone look towards Mrs. Holmes, who sat on the sofa next to her husband. She had a hand up to her mouth but it did nothing to conceal the giant smile on her face. Her other hand rested over her heart.

"Oh Will, don't you look sweet holding a baby." Sherlock smiled and stood a little taller.

"Are you ready to hold her, Granny?" His parents looked at each other and then back at Sherlock and John.

"What? She's my daughter and you're my parents. That's typically how families work." Sherlock rolled his eyes.

"I hadn't considered that…"

"That's rubbish, Lina! You've been telling everyone we've met in the last month that your son and his fiancé recently had a baby." Mr. Holmes chuckled.

"I don't tell everyone, Bertie."

"Yes, she does." He assured John and Sherlock with a nod. John's shoulder shook as he laughed.

"I think Violet can count herself quite fortunate to have you as grandparents." John pushed his hands into his trouser pockets.
Sherlock gingerly placed Violet in his mother's waiting arms. Violet opened one eye and looked at
the new faces peering at her. She yawned wide and squeaked out a sigh. She blinked both eyes
awake. Her eyebrows, the faintest whispers of blonde hair, bobbed up and down.

"Look at those eyes! Oh John, she is lovely." Mr. Holmes smiled up at them.

Mrs. Holmes sniffled. "Not even 30 seconds in and I'm smitten," she joked. "Hello Violet, my love.
She is absolutely delicious!" She eased the blanket out of the way and tucked the tip of her ring
finger into Violet's hand. At the sound of her voice, Violet smiled and squawked.

John leaned his back against the sitting room wall, Sherlock had gone into the bedroom and came
back with his mobile.

"Up here Mum, Dad." Sherlock turned his phone sideways and aimed the camera at them. His
mother shifted in her seat slightly to point Violet towards the camera and smiled. Mr. Holmes rested
his hand on her arm and didn't take his eyes off of Violet for the photograph.

Sherlock snapped a few photos before putting the phone back in his pocket. He stood next to John
and put an arm over his shoulder, pulling him into his chest. He kissed the top of John's head.

Mrs. Holmes handed Violet to her husband. He sat back and rested her on his lap, fitting his thumbs
into her fists.

"So boys, the wedding," she began.

Sherlock gave a deep-throated laugh and turned to John. "I told you she'd bring it up before dinner."

They both sat in their armchairs. John went to take Violet from Mr. Holmes but the old man was still
staring at the baby, enraptured.

"Something small, Mum. We don't want or need a fuss. Honestly, we could just do it here in the
sitting room." Sherlock tossed his curls off his forehead, his mother looked scandalized.

"William you will not rob your mother the opportunity to dance with her son at his wedding," she
straightened her back and squared her shoulders.

John leaned on one elbow attempting to hide a smirk with his fingers. Mrs. Holmes turned to him.

"And of course I'll have a dance with you too, John." He nodded appreciatively.

"Why don't we have it in the garden, Lina? It's a lovely spot and they could still keep it quite as small
and intimate as they wish." Mr. Holmes pulled Violet to his chest and didn't look up from her face
while he spoke.

"Done. That is a superb idea, Bertie. I'll just need your guest list boys and leave it all to me. Shall we
say, three months from now?"

Sherlock hid his face in his hands, he knew there was no use in resisting his mother's wishes.

"I think we should hold off until Clara has the twins. Then we can have photos of the whole family;
all three of the little ones. Besides that, Clara would have my head if we got married and she still, to
use her words, 'looked like a big fat whale.'"

Mrs. Holmes stood and swept over to Sherlock, giving him a kiss on top of his head and then looped
around to John, kissing his cheek. She retrieved the gift bags from the corner and brought them over
to the sofa.

"Now, Violet are you ready to see what Granny and Grand-dad brought for you? Oh, that is such fun to say!"

xXx

"Johnny! Where's Sherlock?! His Mum said it's time to take pictures!" Harry called to him from the bottom of the stairs.

John knew perfectly well where Sherlock was; on top of him.

"Isn't – fuck – today supposed to be about – fuck - us?" Sherlock whinged. He dropped his mouth to John's, crushing their lips together as he rutted against John's thigh.

"To be fair, we did say we were coming up here – oh god - to fix the button that popped off my sleeve…" Sherlock cupped John's groin and sucked on his neck.

"I doubt anyone actually believed that one. For one thing, you're wearing cufflinks…"

"We should get back down, Sherlock. I don't want to have a cum stain on my trousers in family portraits…"

Sherlock groaned and rolled off to the side, the tile floor felt cool against his back. John leaned up on his elbow and looked at him grinning.

"What?"

"We got married today." John's smile grew wider.

"Glad to know you were paying attention, John."

John rolled his eyes and pulled Sherlock to him by his tie. "I love you. Very much. Let's get ourselves together." He kissed him one last time and pushed himself up to his feet. He adjusted himself and smoothed the front of his shirt. The clasp of his suspenders let go on one said and he reattached it. He straightened his tie.

Sherlock stood behind him and put his hands on John's waist.

"You really are unbelievably good looking," he said as he leaned forward and kissed John's cheek.

"William Holmes! Don't think I won't box your ears, wedding day or not!" His mother's voice was on the other side of the bathroom door.

"Mother, for the quadrillionth time could you please call me 'Sherlock' like everyone else does?" Sherlock opened the door and John followed him out.

"I just changed Violet's nappy, can we get some photographs before one of the babies starts crying again?" She ignored him completely and the trio walked down the stairs out into the garden.

The modest group of guests were happily conversing under the white tent, enjoying the three piece band, hors d'oeuvres and cocktails. John and Harry's Aunt Muriel had cornered Mycroft and was regaling him for the fourth time about the drive from Leeds. He excused himself, pretending to take a call and escaped to stand next to his Father. Clara and Harriet sat on the stone bench near the fish pond, each holding one of the twins who were clad in coordinating white and navy sailor outfits. They chatted happily with Mr. Holmes who had Violet, kitted out in an off-white dress with a silk
sash in her namesake colour, balanced on his hip.

"Ah, there are the men of the hour!" Clara said with a wink when Sherlock and John got closer. Violet saw Sherlock, reached her chubby arms out and started grunting for him.

"Uh-oh, Papa's Girl saw him!" Harry joked as Sherlock scooped Violet from his father's arms. John pretended to pout.

"That's just fine, Violet darling. You don't have to like Daddy best. I'm Ellie's favorite, aren't I?" He took baby Elena from Clara's lap and blew a raspberry on her cheek.

The other twin started to cry. "Uncle Johnny, it's not such a great idea to show favoritism." Clara chuckled. Harry stood up and let John kiss baby Yianni on his forehead.

"It's just you and me, mate. Surrounded by all these girls." he joked.

Mrs. Holmes was attempting to calm Sherlock's curls before the pictures.

"Mum, can you please stop fussing...there are three babies right here who'd actually appreciate the attention." He took two steps backward and kissed John sweetly.

"Alright everyone, those came out really nicely. Were there any other pictures you wanted, Ma'am?"

The photographer approached the group looking down at the screen of the digital SLR camera as he walked.

Mrs. Holmes turned to him. "What do you mean? You haven't taken any pictures yet!"

They gathered around him and he slowly clicked through the candid photographs he'd taken of the Holmes and Watson families.

Mr. Holmes was the first to speak. "Splendid. Thoroughly splendid."

John handed Ellie back to Clara and kissed Violet on the cheek. He motioned to Mrs. Holmes. "Marceline, could you?"

She nodded and took Violet from Sherlock's arms.

"Take some photos of me making a complete arse of myself on the dance floor." John nudged the photographer's elbow.

Without another word, John took Sherlock by the hand and pulled him towards the tent. Seeing the happy couple return to the dance floor, the singer began singing the completely clichéd Etta James song John requested.

"Can you believe we did this? We actually did it. You and me." He lovingly stroked his fingers through Sherlock hairline at the back of his head. Sherlock laced his fingers together at the small of John's back while they danced the simple box step he was able to teach him.

"Obviously. We're here."

John rolled his eyes before he spoke. "This is what I wanted. Just exactly this." John licked his lower lip and pulled Sherlock in for a kiss.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!