Proving A Point

by elldotsee, J_Baillier

Summary

Invalided home from Afghanistan, running out of funds and convinced that his surgical career is over, John Watson accepts a mysterious job offer to provide care and companionship for a disabled person. Little does he know how much hangs in the balance of his performance as he settles into his new life at Musgrave Court.
If you are concerned about what might happen in this story, please read our comments at the end of chapter 1, and/or make note of our content warnings (or, lack thereof).

Betaed by the splendid 88thparallel.
"Off out, Mrs Hudson! Don't wait up!" Sherlock bellowed as he sprinted down the steps. He paused at the bottom to flip up his coat collar — a flimsy barrier against the pouring rain pelting the nearly-deserted streets of London.

“Sherlock! It’s absolutely teeming down! You’re not planning to go dashing off—”

The rest of her sentence was severed by the slam of the heavy black door as Sherlock hurdled down the set of steps onto the pavement, arm already outstretched for a cab.

Things with the case progressed just as he’d hoped. Two hours later, the squelch of his shoes could barely be heard over the pounding of his pulse as he raced down Buckle Street, skidding around a corner onto Leman Street, hot on the heels of the most recent criminal that had managed to slip through the fingers of Scotland Yard’s finest.

Blinking rapidly to keep the rain out of his eyes, Sherlock ducked his head and sped up, cursing as the black hooded figure disappeared into an alley across the street. Without hesitation Sherlock leapt off the kerb, eyes trained on the entryway.

He didn’t see the cab until its headlights were upon him, its driver blaring a much too late warning on his horn.

John blinked as he was wheeled into the weak October sunshine, bending his head to scowl at his lap. He curled his twitching hand into a fist on his knee, stiffening his elbow to try and quell the shaking.

“Here you go, Mister Watson!” The nurse behind him said brightly. He didn’t bother to correct her. He certainly didn’t feel like a doctor anymore.

"George here will take you to your new little place," the nurse announced cheerily, joining John at the kerb to gesture towards the van adorned with the centre's logo waiting there. "It's right in London, and I hear it's in a lovely area!" Undeterred by John's lack of response, she patted his good shoulder, then turned and walked back into the rehabilitation centre, done with her charitable deed for the day.

John summoned the numbness he had adopted as his consolation, staring blankly out the car window at the colourless confines of East London’s streets. The building they parked in front of was nothing to write home about, a block of flats like any other in the less wealthy boroughs of the capital. He hadn’t picked it — what was the point of surveying the market if he couldn’t afford anything very enticing?

While George unloaded his meagre belongings from the boot, John made his way up the ramp of the squat building, the rubber tip of his cane thudding dully. He fitted the key into door number three, and shuffled onto the threadbare carpet, taking in his bland surroundings with an impassive glance. Without turning around, he gave a dismissive nod to George, who set his bags just inside the door and left, undoubtedly grown accustomed to the oppressive silence of invalids with
abruptly shattered lives.

Instead of unpacking, John removed his shoes and sank onto the grey sheets of the single bed, gazing at the chipped plaster walls until the light from the window dimmed around him.

From the window, Sherlock watched the woman hurry down the long drive, cheap parka pulled tightly around her narrow, hitching shoulders. *Mid-forties, unhappy marriage, a string of lovers, three cats*...

Behind him, the door slammed shut.

"Another one? Do you think I have an endless supply of these people at my disposal? That's the third one in as many weeks!" Mycroft's normally stoic facade cracked, and he threw his hands up in exasperation. "Would it kill you to—" Mycroft bit off the words, snapping his mouth shut. His nostrils flared.

Sherlock sniffed.

“Hardly my fault she hadn’t bothered to be tested. Chlamydia is easily treatable with a round of antibiotics…” Sherlock muttered, not bothering to turn around.

A nearby shout made John clench the handle of his cane more tightly, surveying his surroundings with a practised eye. He ducked his head and willed his damn leg to carry him home as fast as possible. Ella had suggested taking an alternate route home from his therapy appointment, somewhere public to help his assimilation back to civilian life. He'd made it halfway home on the underground before hurtling himself through the closing train doors and stumbling blindly up the piss-soaked stairs and into the grey London light. He'd decided to cut through the edge of Victoria Park, where there was at least the hint of grass, even though it was January. The faded greenery and the crisp, cold air helped ground him. *There certainly wasn’t much green in Afghanistan*.

He made his way to a bench near the footpath circling the perimeter.

His shoulder throbbed. His leg ached, in its strange, irritating and unpredictable way. He couldn’t decide if he should sit down; trying to get up from the bench wouldn’t be pleasant if he sat for so long in the cold that his muscles got stiff.

Another shout, closer this time, and there was something vaguely familiar about that voice.

“—Watson! John!”

John paused, turning in confusion as a portly man came puffing up at his elbow, his face red from exertion. He gestured to himself with a wry grin.

“Mike Stamford. Yeah, I know. I got fat.”
John accepted his offered hand, wanting nothing more than to turn away and continue walking. Mike had always been a good friend; they'd done part of their Foundation training together within the Barts NHS trust before John had enlisted in the army for his core surgical training. He recalled that Mike had planned to apply for Internal Medicine, but they hadn’t kept in touch.

John scratched at the back of his neck as Mike continued talking.

“Didn’t know you were back in London. Last I heard you were overseas, getting shot at, or at least patching up those unluckily enough—”

“I got shot.” John cut him off, his voice flat.

Mike chuckled, the sound trailing off as his gaze travelled to John’s cane. He indicated the bench with a tip of his head. John followed.

“So… what are you doing in these parts?” Mike asked after several moments of awkward silence.

“I uh. Live around here. Just for a bit. ‘Til I get my feet back under me. You know.”

“Oh. Yeah! Of course. Probably a bit of a shock, coming back to civilian life. Where are you working these days?”

“I… Yeah, I’m not.” John coughed.

Mike’s grin was disbelieving. “Come again?”

“Not working.”

“There’s plenty of trauma positions available. This is London!” Mike spread his arms out. “I’ll keep an eye open and let you know as soon as I hear of any postings—”

“No.”

Mike’s smile slid from his face.

“I’m not going back to surgery. It’s just... I think I’m going to be looking elsewhere. Maybe outside of medicine.”

“Plenty medical things outside of clinical work you could be doing,” Mike suggested, still sounding confounded. “Teaching, admin…”

“That’s not for me.” He’d never wanted to be anything but a surgeon. If he couldn’t be that — if he wasn’t cut out to be that anymore — what was the bloody point?

“That doesn’t sound like the John Watson I know.”

John shook his head, his jaw clenching. “Yeah… well. I’m not that John Watson anymore.” He cleared his throat. “Listen, it was good to see you, Mike. I’ve got to get home. Maybe I’ll see you around.”

Mike nodded, amicable as always. He dug out an old receipt from his pocket and a pen from his bag and jotted down his mobile number.

John reluctantly accepted it, shoving it in his trouser pocket without so much as a glance.

“Alright, well listen, let me know if I can help. I’ll keep an eye on the postings. I bet I can find
“something well-suited for you,” Mike insisted.

John wrenched himself off the bench to his feet, sniffed and stuck out his hand. “Not sure what that would be. But thanks.”

After a brief, uninspired handshake, he turned and began limping down the paved path toward his flat.

“I mean it, John—let me know if I can help,” Mike hollered after him.

John raised a hand in acknowledgement without turning to look back. He felt the weight of his former colleague’s eyes on him until he turned the corner.

“Switzerland?” Mycroft’s frown brought a wrinkle to his nose.

“Yes,” came the reply, quiet and flat. “Six months. Don’t try to change my mind. You won’t.”

A heavy silence descended between the two men. After several moments, Mycroft sucked a sharp breath in between his teeth and stood.

“Very well then.” With that, he marched stiffly out of the room, letting the door slam behind him.

Later, in the privacy of his own office, he pressed trembling fingers against his mouth as he appealed to the universe to change his brother's mind.

Two weeks later, sitting on his bed in the morning and kneading his achy left bicep with sleep-fumbling fingers, John knew he couldn't put off facing the reality of his finances any longer. The lump sum he was entitled to as part of his medical discharge would take time to process, and his military pension only barely covered the rent.

He needed a job.

He still held his medical licence; he could contact a locum agency. He could work shifts at A&E departments, but he hadn't worked in London in years and feared he would have forgot much of the routine knowledge needed to manage the urgent patient flows of a big hospital efficiently. He was much more accustomed to and felt comfortable within the autonomy of a consulting military traumatologist, so going back to being the last in the pecking order in a civilian unit as a locum would be soul-sucking. And, he knew he'd be overwhelmed by the intensity of the work in his current state. Having a short conversation with Yassiri who manned the nearest newsagent next to the Tube entrance felt like enough human interaction for the whole day — how could he even consider managing medical work right now? The core of acute trauma surgery was beautifully simple: identify what is broken, then repair it with your hands. Now, he couldn't be counted on to do even that.
“Adjust”, his therapist kept saying. “Explore options. Be positive.” John always replied with a pinched, pretentious smile and a glance at the wall clock to internally curse how much of the appointment he still had to endure.

*How long will it take for things to get easier?* He wondered, standing up from the bed and curling his toes on the draughty floor covered by the worn, beige carpet.

The uncertainty was the worst part of where he had ended up.

No locum agencies, then. No medical work for now. But going to the Job Centre hardly felt like the thing to do, either. John doubted their patronage included many doctors. Even physicians who opted out of medicine seemed to find alternate paths themselves without queuing up at some council office with woodworkers, waiters, engineers and other professions not as cushioned by such prestige as doctors enjoyed.

He had programmed the number Mike had given him to his phone. Not wanting actually to talk to anyone, he typed up a message, saying that it had been nice to run into the man and if Mike happened to come across a job posting John might want to consider, he'd be grateful for the info.

Two days later, his phone rang.

They met up at the canteen of the hospital Mike worked at for a quick lunch. The offerings were hardly gourmet, but still better than the ready-meals John had mostly been living off to save money and avoid having to go to restaurants alone. The tiny kitchenette at his so-called flat wasn't exactly inviting in terms of cooking, nor was it adequately equipped for anything other than boiling a pot of water. John knew he should get a proper tea kettle. He knew he should be doing a lot of things.

Once they had finished their portions of pasta, Mike dabbed sauce from his mouth with a napkin and dug out a slightly rumpled, printed sheet from his pocket. "Found this tacked to a notice board in the basement outside of the locker rooms. You said you were looking for something to tide you over. Even if not as a doctor, maybe it could still be something to do with healthcare?" he suggested. "I thought these sorts of ads went to the Job Centres; don't know why they're trying to recruit from here. A colleague working for a local private hospital said they'd received the same."

He pushed the sheet of paper across the table.

‘*Care and companionship for a paralysed individual,*’ John read out loud. ‘Like a personal assistant? Or a nurse?’

Mike shrugged. "Doesn't say on the tin. But look," Mike tapped the bottom of the paper with his forefinger. "It's really good money. Seems to be a private individual who's the employer and not a care home. And it's temporary — just a six-month position. Might be just the thing to get you back on your feet?"

John studied the paper, “I don’t know, Mike. What does the ‘care’ part even mean? I hardly need to tell you I’m not a nurse.” *I’m also in no shape to lift patients or do any other kinds of physical stuff.*

"They're not calling for a nursing degree, are they?" Mike pointed out, scanning the text with his finger and then shaking his head. "Sure, you're overqualified for this, but maybe that will help you get the job. I don't know how long it's been up on the board, but the fact that someone's going through the trouble of spreading these all over probably means there haven't been many takers." His head swivelled around to gaze longingly at the cashier counter. "Tea?"
“No, thanks.” John got stiffly to his feet, stuffing the paper in his pocket without so much as a glance. “Yeah. Sure. I’ll, er— give ‘em a call. Ta.”

Mike rose and followed John to the exit, clapping him on the back with a sympathetic smile. “Always happy to help a friend. Really, I am. Keep chugging along; each day will get easier. I hope this one works out for you. Give a ring if you get the job and we’ll go out for a pint to celebrate, just like the old days.”

John clenched his hand against his thigh and then shook it out, saying nothing. They both knew the good old days were a thing of the very distant past.

Mike cleared his throat as he shuffled toward the door. “Take care, John.”

With a noncommittal hum John walked out, his cane echoing against the scuffed lino.

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Gunfire ricocheting off the hot sand

*Everywhere, all around him – above, below, on every side – are the fallen*

*Friends, brothers, comrades*

*A scream, shrill above the syncopated barrage of bullets rips from his own throat*

*Pain — above, below, inside, outside — engulfs him, claws at him*

*Drags him under, the cacophony soon muffled and dissonant…*

John woke with a strangled cry, every muscle taut, back arched, head pressing hard into the pillow. Tears trickled into his ears, and for a moment, he was sure he was drowning as the ceiling above him blurred, ambient sounds muffled. His lungs begged for air; his muscles screamed for him to move while the last vestiges of his mind’s connection to reality barely kept him from launching himself off the bed.

He gripped the pillow around his head and squeezed his eyes shut, clenching his jaw and trying to suck air in through his teeth. His entire body trembled as adrenaline coursed through him, the clatter of the headboard against the wall injecting his consciousness like bullets.

*This is London. I am in London. I am at home. I can feel… I can feel the bed beneath me, the pillow in my hand. They’re cool and smooth, not hot and gritty. I’m safe.*

*London; Safe,* he repeated like a mantra until the words became nothing but a jumble of letters in his head. Finally, he forced his eyes open and pulled in another breath, listening to the way it stuttered in his lungs. He tried to focus on a crack in the ceiling. Its edges were crumbling, bits of plaster raining down whenever someone upstairs walked with heavy steps.

Outside, a siren wailed, and a dog barked its response. A car drove by with its bass thumping.


*Home?*
John scowled at the thought of ever calling these miserable four walls by such a favourable term and shoved the tangled bedclothes off his feet, pushing himself up to a sitting position on the edge of the bed.

He glanced at the clock, blinking rapidly to clear the blurriness: 2:13 am. *Not even two hours of sleep this time.*

John groaned, letting his face fall into his hands, elbows propped on his knees. His breathing was still ragged, his leg muscles locked up tight. *This is going to be a long fucking day.*

Struggling to his feet, he swiped angrily at the cane propped against the wall and knocked it over. It took several tries and a load of swearing before he was righted again, painfully leaning on the metal stick as he made his way stiffly to the other side of the room that doubled as a kitchen. He made himself a cup of tea and settled into the hard, wooden chair at the small desk.

He’d now been back in London for four months — nearly six, if he counted the seven-week stay in hospital and rehab — and he hadn’t slept a stretch longer than three or four hours since getting medevac’d out of Helmand. Even worse were the nightmares that plagued him while he was awake; the flashbacks and bouts of disassociation that were triggered by seemingly innocent things: thunder, a backfiring car, and the sudden slam of a door in the corridor. His therapist had given him things to do to combat such triggers before they turned into *episodes.*

He hated that word. He hated the therapy sessions, hated the homework, hated the calming exercises. Hated how slow progress was — if this could even be described as such? John had no idea what progress even meant.

He was useless, damaged, an invalid. No longer a soldier or a surgeon — lost were both identities he had clung to for all of his adult life. Now he was just a tired, broken man who felt ancient beyond his years. His shoulder had nerve damage and hurt all the time, his hands shook, and the contents of his head were such a mess that it made him limp despite the lack of an actual injury to his leg. Worst yet, he could no longer practice medicine the way he wanted, and the notion of finding another path felt humiliating in a way he didn’t want to inspect too closely. What he was now trapped in was just the sort of quiet, comfortable existence that he loathed, one he’d spent his entire life trying to avoid.

Last week, his therapist had pointed out that the future was still uncertain; no one could tell how much dexterity he could regain if he really gave the PT exercises his all. She said that it was an essential part of the process to adjust to the idea that his fast-paced days of trauma, always with the enticing thrill of danger lurking close behind, were over. This was his life now; quiet, civilian, solitary.

She was right, and it infuriated him.

He took a sip of his now lukewarm tea — how long had he been brooding?

Motivated mostly by just a desire to be distracted from the contents of his head, John pulled open the drawer of the desk. He stared down at the only item inside—a cheap laptop he had picked up at the suggestion of his therapist. She had insisted he start a blog, *‘like the electronic version of a diary’.* At the start of every session, she inquired about the status of the project she’d forced on him and each time, he lied and said he was working on it. And each time, she called his bluff, making him feel like a disappointment to her. There were probably others queuing up to see her, others who would put up with her plastered-on positivity and obediently do all the exercises she assigned them instead of wasting her time.
John powered the device on and stared out of the grimy window at the smoky haze of an early morning in London. He'd never loved the city, not like some people did. They romanticized it, waxing poetic about its history, about the secrets hidden by the muddy banks of the Thames and the quivering heartbeat of the city, the glow of the streetlights and the great melting pot of diversity. To John, it was nothing but a means to an end. It was the only place he'd ever known; he'd grown up in Haringey, lived in a cramped flat with his mother and sister until he escaped to university and then Sandhurst. He served for a few years as a specialist trainee in various military hospitals in England before getting shipped out to Afghanistan to serve as a trainee in traumatology and orthopaedics at a large tertiary hospital — his dream job. He was nearly done with his second tour, his heart already set on applying for more, when a rogue Afghan soldier opened fire on their base during a routine patrol round, peppering the six men inside with bullets. Five of them had survived; the sixth was not so lucky.

John's fingers clenched around the mug, and he looked down at them, half-expecting to see them stained with the blood of his fallen comrades. His blood loss had pulled him from consciousness before he could make the crawl to them, their anguished cries mingling with the sharp noises of the attack continuing in some distant part of the base. The first word on his lips after stirring in the hospital had been the name of the man he'd been attempting to reach. John had been desperate to hear that David had made it — that losing consciousness because of his own injury hadn't been the final nail in the young man's coffin.

A familiar face had greeted him when he had been able to stay conscious long enough for a conversation. Bill Murray, his friend and fellow doctor, explained solemnly that the bullet had hit David’s femoral artery and he’d bled out before help had reached any of the stricken group. According to Bill, they were all lucky to be alive.

In secret, John had disagreed. He wasn’t entirely sure how he felt about that now. It seemed to vary day by day.

With difficulty, he forced himself to stand and move to the window, reciting aloud everything he saw in an attempt to stay grounded. When that didn't wholly dissipate the echoing sound of gunshots and screams in his mind, he opened the small window, sticking his head out and pulling in a deep breath.

*Petrol. Wet Pavement. Trash bins and greasy chips and the sharp grey tang of snow-laden clouds.*


He stayed at the open window for a long time, seeing with his senses instead of his memories just as he’d been taught to do. Finally, his mind stopped roiling like a barge on the stormy sea of his memories, observing and staying in the present instead of dragging him back to the hot sands of Helmand.

He closed the window, pulling his head and thoughts out of the foggy, cold air of London and back into his dull, everyday existence. He washed his mug and pulled out an apple, noting that it was the last edible-looking thing in the fridge; he’d have to make a trip to the shops today. The idea filled him with dread. He had never been what some would describe as a very active member of society. He was never interested in volunteering or community activities just for the sake of them but once upon a time, he’d had a social life. He’d met friends at the pub, played rugby and watched matches on telly with his mates. He had dated, enjoyed a laugh at lunch and during call with his fellow medical students and later on, fellow trainees. He had used public transportation and walked through Tesco without checking over his shoulder, without coiling for a fight, without leaving a full basket in the middle of an aisle because of an impending *episode*. It was all a bit not good, the
way he had allowed himself to grow averse of public spaces and people, as Ella never failed to remind him in many subtle ways each session. The fear, the avoidance: textbook PTSD. She assured him that he was making excellent progress and that each time he chose to face his fears, he was one step closer to a normal civilian life again. Most days, he wasn't sure which idea terrified him more.


No.

At half-past eleven, after a morning spent restlessly pacing, peering out of the window every five minutes, and half-heartedly trying to type an entry into his blog, John pulled out the job advert Mike had given him. He stared at the black type on the page, trying to conjure up any positive feelings toward the prospective job. It was probably either this or working a fish and chips shop like he'd done during medical school to earn a bit of cash.

Besides, admittedly he needed something to fill his days. Something that would help him ease into dealing with others. Something other than this endless monotony. A dejected sigh escaped John’s lips as he pictured himself wiping drool off of an old man’s chin while they watched endless reruns of Emmerdale. It was a far cry from battlefield medicine, or even from being a GP at a local surgery, but perhaps it could be a nice change of pace. It would be quiet at least, of that he was sure. Maybe he could even let his guard down a bit, catch up on reading, take up crossword puzzles, write something for his awful blog.

A nice, gradual return to work. Ella would be proud, wouldn't she? Adjustment, exploring options.

His mobile, a gift, felt heavy in his hands, his fingers brushing over the inscription on the back, the usual cocktail of emotions whenever he thought of the giver dulled with time but ever-present.

His mind made up, he picked up the slip of paper, his hand steady as he punched in the passcode to unlock it.

But before he could dial the number listed on the page, his mobile rang.

Chapter End Notes

This story borrows its premise (and lots of small bits and pieces) from Jojo Moyes’ novel "Me Before You". It was a major bestseller and is loved by many, but it's also very controversial — it angered plenty of people since the film version in particular had no time to address certain ethical issues as extensively or well as it should have. What can be said is that it is certainly a very thought-provoking story, and we have not steered clear of the difficult questions it raises. But, instead of following the MBY canon religiously, we have made our own decisions regarding plot and ethics and often it took us in different directions than J. Moyes. So, while many things in "Proving A Point" are the same as in MBY, this is not a direct retelling regarding the decisions the characters make or their worldviews — John is not Louisa, and Sherlock is in many respects very different from Will. And, Mycroft is way more (inadvertently) funny
than Mrs Traynor. If a reader familiar with the book and/or the film worries about the ending, we want to encourage them to look at our tags and content warnings (or lack thereof!).

Personal notes from elldotsee:

A random evening of "I think I'll rewatch a favorite movie" over a year ago set my fic wheels spinning (as it always does) and the idea of a Me Before You AU lodged itself in my brain. I ignored it. It persisted. I sketched an outline, wrote a handful of scenes, and ignored it again for many months. Until it came back, louder and more persistent than before.

I tossed the idea to my doctor friend for some advice and she immediately latched onto it. Her expertise and cheerleading morphed into specific encouragement morphed into headcanoning... and the rest is history, as they say. What had originally been "I can turn that into a quick Johnlock AU of the movie and book" turned into a fascinating exploration of medicine, of rehabilitation, of ethics, and relationships and love.

Without her as my darling co-authoress and co-captain of this ship, this story would still be languishing, half-finished, in my Google Docs (I've seen the error of my ways now), or *WORSE* would have been short and sweet and lacking alllllll the delicious details and medical realism that one can expect from a J. Baillier work of fiction (work of art !)

Thank goodness for her manic ways. <3

We now have a beautiful story that I am proud as hell of. And I've gained a very, very dear friend <3

Personal notes from J. Baillier:

I want to thank the delightful human being who let me into her playpen after I sat outside it for weeks talking to myself with frightening levels of enthusiasm. A big thanks also belongs to our encouraging and dedicated beta 88thparallel, our tireless and clever cheerleader tinysartorius, and 7PercentSolution who answered my weird queries about such things as English potatoes without batting an eyelid.

As a doctor, I am like John in the way that I don't have a lot of exposure to trauma patients after their first few days apart from when they need a reoperation. Rehabilitation, assistive devices, physical therapy… John's bafflement over much of this mirrors my own, which is why this story gave me a very useful professional crash education regarding tetraplegia. This means that any medical discrepancies or mistakes can be the result of either us employing artistic license or the fact that I am not a specialist in neurological rehab. In particular, I do now know a lot more about autonomic dysreflexia than I used to, which has already proven useful when I encounter anaesthesia patients with spinal injuries below a certain level. Fic serves reality and reality benefits fic!
Care And Companionship

At noon, John locked the door to his flat and limped down the ramp in front of his block of flats. His gaze was darting around, already subconsciously scanning his surroundings for danger.

The phone call had been from a blocked number. As soon as he'd held the phone to his ear, he'd been immediately greeted by a deep male voice that promulgated: "Your interview will be at one in the afternoon on the twenty-ninth of January at Musgrave Court. Your transport will arrive at noon; we'll be expecting you, Doctor Watson." The call had ended before John had even managed to reply.

On the Google Maps satellite view, Musgrave Court looked to be a large house in the middle of what looked like a large park, and way out of London in High Wycombe. John was grateful that he’d been promised a ride; it would have taken him at least half an hour by Tube to get to Marylebone train Station and then forty-five minutes by train to High Wycombe Station, from where he would have had to take a cab. The thought of such a complicated route would have easily discouraged him from even attending the interview. There was the question, of course, of how he would get to work if he managed to get the job.

_Maybe this is not a good idea_, he thought for the dozenth time. Already somewhat unsettled by how this interview had been set up, John knew he probably should have declined, yet he couldn’t help but be curious. That curiosity had edged out some of the anxiety and fear of leaving the flat, and his desire for a more purposeful existence had help nudge him out the door and onto the pavement where he now stood. Glancing at his watch, he was relieved to find that he still had a few minutes to spare. The street was empty save for a woman with a pushchair, so John closed his eyes and took a few deep breaths to calm down. Open spaces could still make him feel like a sitting duck.

He was so caught up in his thoughts that he didn’t even notice the sleek black car that pulled alongside the kerb until it crawled to a stop and a leggy brunette appeared from inside. John looked up quickly, silently chastising himself for the slip in vigilance.

“Doctor Watson.”

John stared at the woman standing before him. She held a slim smartphone in her manicured hands, her thumbs blurring as she typed. He let his gaze wander. Nice figure, great tits, but who the hell was she? He had expected something like a minicab, not… this, whatever this was.

“This is just… no.” He should turn on his heel and go back inside the flat. John shook his head and made to move around her, but she held up her hand to make him halt while she typed in a few final keystrokes, finally lifting her eyes from the small screen.

Her expression was neutral, a perfect mask of professional indifference as she inclined her head towards the rear door of the sedan. “Yes, John Watson. Mister Holmes is expecting you.” For lack of a better word, she sounded bored.

John looked up and down the street quickly, wondering if this was some sort of test. The minimal amount of information he’d been able to find about the residence had briefly mentioned the name _Holmes_ so that at least seemed to match. His heart was racing in his chest, but the sudden burst of adrenaline made him feel alive rather than terrified, and he found himself oddly fascinated with this whole cloak-and-dagger routine. _Who are these people?_
Morbid curiosity won out in the end, and John glanced around once more before shrugging and sliding onto the leather seat, pulling the door shut behind him.

The woman slid in next to him without so much as a glance. Her eyes were focussed straight ahead at the partition. The car pulled off without her prompting the driver, who must have already been briefed about their route.

John cleared his throat.

“Yes?” She glanced across the seat with one eyebrow elegantly raised.

“It’s just… this is taking me to… I mean. I’m supposed to have an interview?”

She smiled, and there was a hint of kindness in her eyes this time. "Yes. Can I get you something to drink to make you more comfortable?” She motioned to a discreet panel beneath the partition.

John shook his head. "No, thank you..." He trailed off, raising his eyebrows in what he hoped was an encouraging manner. It had been a while since he'd chatted up a woman. "I don't believe I caught your name."

“Anthea,” she supplied with another small, carefully curated smile.

“Pretty.” John eagerly returned the smile, but her gaze shifted back to the window.

He continued, undeterred. “So you’re… Mister Holmes’ assistant, or something like that?”

“Something like that,” she confirmed gracefully. Her phone reappeared in her hand, and this time John took the hint.

He settled back against his seat, apprehensive but comfortable.

Forty-five minutes later, the car turned off a country road after they had passed a sign indicating Musgrave Court. A large, old iron gate was invitingly open, but a sign which told visitors to keep out of the private grounds confirmed that this really was just someone's home. Unlike country houses turned into museums or otherwise open to the public, Musgrave Court didn't even have a website, but John still half-expected to spot a ticket booth, so impressive did even just the drive into the grounds look with the massive old oak trees lining the dirt road meandering through lush green parkland. Ivy hadn't been allowed to form a suffocating undergrowth, and some trees by the paths bore signs of recent pruning.

As the car took them closer to the heart of the estate, the place began to feel isolated rather than inviting. None of the buildings were visible from the road, and eventually, the open landscape turned into secluded, meticulously tended gardens with cone-shaped trees, rose trellises and red brick walls separating the different sections. A thick hedge trimmed into pyramid shapes in front of what John reasoned must be the house itself emphasized the sense of seclusion.

John let out a low whistle as they drove through an opening in the hedge and rolled to a stop front of the impressive Tudor-era red brick manor house with chimneys similar to the ones John remembered seeing at Hampton Court on a school trip. The windows facing the front were high but narrow casement ones consisting of tiny argyle glass pieces, and there were dark wooden supports
underneath in the shape of ornately carved horses. There was even a small, square grey tower at the back of the house, at which Anthea caught him looking.

"The tower belongs to the small family chapel. Rarely used." She sounded as though she'd stated something obvious.

She slid out of the car and waited for him by the front entrance as he struggled with retrieving his cane from where it had slipped under the front seat.

“Right this way, Doctor Watson. You are expected in the parlour.”

Having expected a vague disinfectant smell and wipe-clean surfaces based on the job description, upon entering the house John was instead met with whiffs of opulence and evidence of gentility. He was led down a central passage lined with old painted portraits, past a grand staircase and windows showing a small inner courtyard, and finally into what he would have called a sitting room, but a parlour was apparently the correct term.

The dimly lit space was as impressive as everything else John had already seen of the house. The high panelling, large-plank oak wood floor and massive oriental carpets reminded him of gentlemen's clubs he had only seen in films. There was a roaring fire in the hearth, doing its best to beat out the late-winter chill. Instead of the formal feeling of a museum, the room was warm and welcoming.

Silhouetted against a large picture window, looking out, stood a man with a regal posture. “Welcome to Musgrave Court, Doctor Watson,” he spoke and briefly clasped his hands behind his back before turning to face the room.

Though he'd only heard it once, days ago, John recognised this as the voice on the phone.

“Please take a seat,” the man prompted, indicating a pair of leather-upholstered high-back chairs on either side of a polished oak desk with a tilt of his head. He continued to stand instead of making his way to the seating area.

John faltered, trying to decide which one he should sit in. Surely there's some bit of etiquette about this sort of thing...

Stepping closer now, John could see the man better. He wore an impeccably tailored moss green, tweed three-piece suit which, despite its innate formality, the man managed to carry with natural comfort. A red tie and a fob watch completed the ensemble. John would have estimated his age to be in the late forties, though he was already greatly balding. His posture was not stiff, yet it was still formal, contained and distant. Clearly, this was the lord of the house, and it didn't seem surprising that he refrained from approaching his visitor to extend a hand for shaking as was commonly expected.

John fumbled with his cane, positioning himself before the chair for sitting, his irritation growing by the second.

“This is a matter of life and death, Doctor Watson,” the man watching him announced momentously.

John froze, wondering what sort of a Gothic saga he had stumbled into. I just need a bloody job.

“I— I’m not quite…” John coughed and drew himself up, standing erect, his hand clenching against the handle of the cane. “I’m here about the job advert. I was under the impression it was a caregiver position for a paralysed person.” And not an audition for the next Bond film, he thought,
lips tightening against his teeth as he suppressed a huff.

“Veteran of Helmand with the Northumberland Fusiliers, graduate of the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst, Consultant in Orthopaedics specialising in acute traumatology, member of the Royal College of Surgeons.”

As the man recited these facts, his calculating, patient gaze scanning John, the latter had the feeling he was already not measuring up to some set of standards. He reminded John of some of his medical school classmates — the niminy-piminy posh blokes whose upper-class lives were so different from John's humble background that they couldn't relate to one another at all. John didn't count any of them among his friends, and some of them hadn't quite known how to deal with the reality of the NHS and how the other half lived during their practical rotations and Foundation training.

John still hesitated, his eyes sweeping the room.

“An impressive list of qualifications,” the man concluded.

John nodded, his jaw tight. He found it difficult to connect the superior scepticism in the older man's voice with such praise and said nothing.

“Seen a lot of injuries then, I assume. Violent deaths.”

“Yes.” John’s voice was harsh, clipped. He cleared his throat, tipping up his chin to look the other man in the eyes.

“Yes, of course,” the man replied, smiling tightly. “My name is Mycroft Holmes. Pleased to meet you.” He came closer, perching primly on the edge of the leather armchair closest to the window.

“Please, do have a seat. Your leg must be troubling you after your journey here. This shouldn’t take long. I must say, you were a surprise. The rest of the applicants have been so much less qualified. Tell me, Doctor, do you have much experience as a caregiver? Specifically, with tetraplegia patients, I might add?”

John worked his jaw and stared straight ahead as he sat down. He wondered if Holmes had conducted every interview in the same unsettling, intrusive manner.

No wonder he's desperate to hire. Besides, John hadn't even really applied for this job — Mycroft Holmes was the one who had made the phone call.

John pressed the palm of his left hand into his knee, flexing his fingers. “No. Not much experience as a caregiver.” He cleared his throat. “Or tetraplegia, apart from the immediate aftermath of spinal injuries. That's the stage where a trauma surgeon is needed in a warzone. Patients are usually sent elsewhere to recover after immediate, life-saving care,” he admitted.

“Doctor Watson, why do you think you’d be a good fit for this position?” Mycroft Holmes asked after a long pause.

John blinked. Bloody good question.

“As you previously stated, I’m… hm.” Not a surgeon anymore. “I have a lot of medical experience. I’m good under pressure—” as long as I’m not being shot at. “I am competent and reliable.” I’m a goddamned mess, and I should probably leave before I embarrass myself.

Mycroft regarded him for a moment, then turned his head and steepled his fingers under his chin, gazing out of the window. Without taking his eyes from the view, he began speaking again.
“Sherlock was involved in a car accident thirteen months ago which resulted in a complex spinal cord injury extending downwards from the level of his seventh cervical vertebra. He lost all use of his lower extremities and has minimal use of his arms and hands. He requires round-the-clock supervision and specialised care several times a day, the latter which is provided by a trained nurse. I see to the rest of his needs. However, the circumstances of my work dictate that I need to be away on business frequently and I can no longer delay returning to my full duties. I would like to have someone I can trust to keep him company and ensure that he comes to no harm. There was an incident…” Mycroft cleared his throat discreetly. “My brother is constantly a danger, Doctor Watson.”

"Your brother?" John blinked, momentarily jarred by the idea that this wouldn't be a senior person he’d be assisting. Why had he even assumed so? 'Disabled' could have meant so many different things from a child with Down's syndrome to a visually impaired grandmother.

“I— er, I think I can handle him. After all, I’m—I was combat trained. Subduing a man in a wheelchair shouldn't be a problem.”

Mycroft turned his head and stared at him, unblinking. “Combat? Doctor Watson, the danger posed will not be to you. My brother is a danger to himself.”

With that, Holmes stood and strode out of the room.

John let his shoulders slump. Interview over, then. He wondered how he could summon a cab to get back to London.

“Do you need more rest, Doctor, or shall we proceed?” Mycroft Holmes’ voice soon called out from the hallway, jolting John into action.

He scrambled to his feet and made his way to Mycroft Holmes, who was waiting for him, standing beside a suit of armour.

John, nonplussed and feeling out of place and awkward, scrambled for something to say. "Relative of yours?" he asked, nodding towards the ghostly sight of the suspended metal battle outfit.

"Yes, though it was assembled from the sets of two ancestors. The helmet and gorget belonged to Sir Oswyn Holmes who expired in the battle of Pavia in 1527. The rest came from Sir Reginald Musgrave who never wore his suit in battle, hence the pristine condition of the parts."

John had to work hard to keep up with the brisk walking pace Mycroft Holmes then adopted, taking them even further away from the main entrance hall.

"He'll want to meet you immediately, I'm sure. We'll go see him, but his nurse is set to arrive to take care of his afternoon routine soon, so your first visit shall be relatively brief. Once Nurse Mullan arrives you will be shown to your living quarters to settle in."

John stopped in the middle of the hall they had arrived in after a turn in the corridor. “Living quarters? I— I didn’t…”

Mycroft tilted his head fractionally to speak over his shoulder but did not slow his pace. "I assure you, your accommodations will be quite an improvement, Doctor Watson. But if you find anything lacking, please let…” He huffed out a bored-sounding breath, “… someone know. I’m sure they’ll take care of it. Your comfort is of utmost importance."

"I…”
"You have a driver's licence." A factual remark, not a question. "You will be put on the insurance for the car refurbished for transporting Sherlock's chair. Nurse Mullan will show you how the ramp works. Not that Sherlock is very keen to go anywhere at the moment."

"Yeah, it's... windy today," John offered.

His host replied with his signature look at being convinced that his guest was an idiot.

Mycroft stopped in front of a large sliding door at the end of the corridor. For a moment, he hesitated, his hand hovering above the brushed metal handle.

“This is the annexe. It used to be the stables, but I had it renovated for Sherlock. There is a spare bedroom so that someone from the nursing agency could stay over if necessary when I travel. We needed someone quite often in the early days when Sherlock wouldn't accept my assistance. You are welcome to use any part of the manor grounds just as Sherlock naturally is but he rarely, if ever, takes advantage of the space available to him. Do you have any questions?”

Yes, approximately a million. "No."

"Very well. Let us go meet Sherlock, then."

Loud classical music heavy with violins and ominous-sounding brass accosted them as Mycroft slid open the door. The room revealed was spacious and modern, beautifully decorated in white and grey, with elegant, exposed wooden beams and gleaming chrome appliances. Much open space was left between all furniture and walls, and every door was supplied with a button to open them at waist height. The atmosphere was tasteful, practical and peaceful, and very different from the Tudor splendour of the main house.

_Looks like a posh Swedish bachelor pad,_ John thought.

A frosted glass door to the right was shut, but there was a dark shape silhouetted against the light. It was a person, unmoving as though they were listening carefully what was being discussed behind the door.

Without preamble, Mycroft flung it open, strode in and reached for a tiny remote perched on the windowsill. He clicked a button, and the music was abruptly silenced.

“Brother mine, someone I'd like you to meet. This is John Watson.”

The black wheelchair turned slowly to face them and John, standing in the doorway, got a glimpse of a man around his age, though the wild, unkempt halo of curly hair and too-large T-shirt made him look much younger. His eyes were screwed shut, and he emitted a series of grunts and squawks, his entire face contorting gruesomely. A dribble of drool oozed out of the corner of his mouth, and his hands flapped, his fingers curled and rigid. Next, a bloodcurdling groan twisted his features before he let out another unearthly sound—a prehistoric bellow which seemed to arise from somewhere deep in his chest. His head was tilted, sunk into his shoulders. He looked grotesque, and also vaguely angry.

Trying his damnedest not to show his alarm, John swallowed and straightened his back, forcing himself to look the man in the face.

“Uh, hello,” he said, nearly flinching as his suddenly slightly tremulous voice broke into the ensuing mortifying silence. "My name is John, and I'll be your uh..."

He glanced pleadingly to the older Holmes for support and was shocked to see the man roll his
“Sherlock.” Mycroft’s nostrils flared as he glared at his brother who was still thrashing, the stream of guttural noises picking up in volume.

John’s eyes flitted between the two, wondering once again how fast a cab could get to the house. *I am so over my head here.*

“William Sherlock Scott Holmes. Stop that this instant!” Mycroft hissed. He straightened his back with a tight smile at John, smoothing his hands nervously down his already impeccable jacket. “I do apologise, Doctor Watson. When in one of his signature contumelious moods, my brother fancies himself *quite the thespian,*” he said pointedly.

*Thank god you’re above being dramatic, then,* John thought sarcastically.

He cleared his throat, leaning heavily on his cane with one hand and slipping the other into his pocket. The noises from the man in the chair stopped suddenly, and John glanced up, startled. His hand clenched reflexively around the phone in his pocket.

“ Afghanistan or Iraq?” asked a butterscotch baritone.

John felt his eyebrows shoot to his hairline as he gaped. Seated in the wheelchair before him was a completely transformed man, speaking in a deep, calm voice, slender hands perched delicately in his lap, and his eyes! His eyes were incandescent, pinning John to the spot with their intensity.

“How—” John’s voice wavered, and he cleared his throat. “How could you possibly have known that?”

“I didn’t *know.* I *observed.* Just like I observed that your limp is most likely psychosomatic, but your shoulder injury is real and that you were recently invalided home from the war. You're living in military-assisted housing, and you have living family — likely a brother whose habits you don’t approve of, judging by the edge of the phone I see peeking out of your pocket — but you won't go to them for help. You only took this job in order to afford a different place to live, but you're already reconsidering and mentally planning the *carefully worded email* that will let you back out of this arrangement without offending my brother because you think you’re out of your depth here, even with your medical and military background.” The man inhaled, regarding John coolly. “Quite right.”

Using a small joystick, he turned the wheelchair back around to face the window, and with a tap of his finger on the screen of the tablet mounted on a support on his chair, the music resumed.

John clenched his jaw, staring in disbelief at the back of the head of messy, dark curls. *Who the hell are these people and what the bloody buggering fuck am I doing here?*

Mycroft cleared his throat pointedly. “I have a few matters to attend to in the house. Doctor Watson, I’ll let you two get on.” He flicked his hand at a speaker affixed to the wall. “There’s an intercom system in each room if you need to speak to the main house for any reason.”

“You do not need to talk around me as though I’m not here, Mycroft. Despite my very best efforts, my *ears* are not paralysed.”

Something in Mycroft’s gaze momentarily shifted as he turned away from his brother and strode out of the room.

John flinched at the heavy sound of the locking mechanism on the sliding door engaging, the
weight of the older Holmes’ absence descending upon the room.

Right. Best get on with it then.

Straightening his spine, John walked around the wheelchair, attempting to make eye contact with the man seated in it but his gaze was fixed somewhere beyond the window, and he didn't make any move to acknowledge John. He noticed that sheepskin had been used as extra cushioning on the seat and back.

“So. That was… you could be a detective, you know.” John smiled; a weak, patronising thing he hated as soon as it lifted his lips. “If you can tell so much about someone just from one look.”

Sherlock moved not a muscle, but his disdain was clear as day.

Determined, John pushed on. Surely they could attempt some small talk. “I mean, that was quite brill—” he started.

“I was a Consulting Detective,” Sherlock snapped at him. His tone signalled that this was to be the end of the conversation.

“So that’s like… a thing, then? Like a private eye? Are you still doing that? There are so many new laws, arrangements that can be made so that people can work—” Shut up, Watson!” Clearly, you’ve got that deductive thing still going strong so…”

John closed his eyes briefly, resigning himself to the fact that he had no idea how to phrase any of the vague things circling through his head — Sherlock had caught him so entirely by surprise.

“That deductive thing.” Sherlock’s voice was scathing.

John leaned back against the wall, nodding. “Well… yeah. You just deduced me within an inch of my life, seconds after meeting me. How did you really know all that stuff?”

"As I said before, I didn't know; I saw." Those piercing eyes bore into John as Sherlock pulled a breath in through his teeth. "Your haircut, the way you hold yourself says military. But my brother thought fit to hire you, and you didn't baulk at the sight of me — much. Clearly, you're used to being around injuries and accustomed to stifling your reactions to appear professional. So, army doctor — obvious. You have a very faded tan line on your wrists, even though it's January. Your limp's quite severe when you walk, but you don't ask for a chair when you stand as though you tend to forget about it, so it's at least partly psychosomatic. That tells me the original circumstances of the injury must have been—” Sherlock paused and his gaze flickered back to the window for a blink-and-you’d-miss-it moment. John did not. “—traumatic.”

Sherlock turned his head slightly, his eyes dragging up John from head to toe in a calculating manner that made his skin prickle. Sherlock's voice flattened as he continued, eyes lifted to the ceiling as though bored. "Wounded in action, then. Wounded in action, suntan… Afghanistan or Iraq. Not a difficult chain of reasoning. And with a psychosomatic limp like that, of course, you have a therapist. Most likely you find the sessions useless, though. A war veteran, and a proud one at that, from the way you still hold yourself with military precision, wouldn’t buy into any of the psychological mumbo-jumbo about acceptance and recovery.”

"How—" John's jaw snapped shut. "That's amazing." The words spilt out of his mouth before he’d had time to think about them. He swallowed, tipping up his chin in preparation for an onslaught of condescension.

Instead, silence settled heavy over the room. Sherlock's voice was low when he finally spoke,
nearly covered by the quiet hum of the wheelchair as he turned once more to face the window instead of John.

“Meretricious, now.”
The next hour and a half dragged on, each minute lasting years. John moved restlessly around the annexe, diligently checking in on Sherlock every fifteen minutes. All further attempts at conversation were met with stony silence.

At half four, a cheerful hello floated in from the main door, bringing with it a gust of crystalline January air. John returned to the kitchen from his latest inquiry about Sherlock’s needs — met with a glare and the hostile silence he had already learned to expect — just as a woman in her late thirties came bustling in, carrying a vase of flowers in one hand. Her worn pea coat was unbuttoned, revealing a set of scrubs underneath, and her cheeks were pinch-pink from having been outside. Upon coming face to face with John, she raised her brows and peered conspiratorially towards the closed door which separated them from Sherlock.

As if on cue, the music returned, erupting to life from a speaker in the kitchen as well. John hurried to turn down the volume from a console by the fridge.

"Bad day continuing, then?" She asked John, nodding towards the sitting room with a smile that was fond, warm and indulgent.

To John, it seemed a waste since it was utterly lost on the man about whom it was.

The woman set the vase on the gleaming kitchen worktop. "Can always use an extra bit of sunshine in here."

She then leaned against the cabinets, one foot crossed over the other, and extended her hand. "I’m Tallie, Sherlock's primary nurse. A pleasure to meet you." She nodded toward the closed door. "Did you get the Stephen Hawking or the Christy Brown?"

John blinked. “What?”

“He’s ‘against new people.’" Tallie lifted her hands to draw quotes in the air, and John noticed the lack of a wedding ring. "Against any people might be even more accurate, though. Likes to scare new employees off with his impressions. Don’t mind any of it; it’s all a front, really. I promise there’s a right little teddy bear under all… that.” She waved her hand vaguely in Sherlock’s direction and smiled again, though John noticed it didn’t quite reach her eyes. "Didn't catch your name?"

“John Watson.” His voice sounded a bit rough, and he cleared his throat, eyes drifting to the closed door. “Pleasure’s mine, although I’m not really sure…” He trailed off. Despite the alarm bells still steadily ringing in his head about this whole thing, he couldn’t deny the enticing spark of curiosity.
he felt flickering.

Tallie opened a cabinet and took out a glass, into which she dropped a drinking straw.

John cleared his throat again, dragging his gaze from the door and his mind away from the man inside. "I guess I don't know what I'm supposed to be doing here," he finished lamely.

Tallie watched him for a moment before nodding as if she’d just come to the conclusion that had eluded John. She turned toward the door, where the music had decreased in volume. “Me and Sherlock have a few things to take care of around this time. I’ll go over everything with you soon. Happy to have you here, John.”

He felt as though he had been dismissed. “Right. Er… I guess I’ll need to head back home to collect my stuff if I’m going to stay.”

Tallie nodded and disappeared inside the sitting room with the glass, now filled with water from the tap, and John could soon hear her cheerful voice rising above the violins and cellos.

He was startled when another voice, already familiar, spoke behind him. “That will not be necessary, Doctor Watson.”

He turned around; Mycroft was standing there, regarding him coolly.

“Your belongings have already been collected and are waiting for you in your room. Dinner is served at six, so you have approximately two hours to settle in; you may dine here or at the main house. Anthea will show you to your new lodgings.”

Entirely on cue, the door opened, and the same woman from the car strolled in. She glanced up from her phone and gave John a brief nod, before heading to a side door opening to the front yard. Maybe that was the shortest way to wherever John was to stay?

“You’re a woman of few words, huh?” He hurried to catch up with her, his cane clacking loudly on the flagstone.

She slowed her gait, the air twisting with her annoyance. “No.”

Sighing, John followed her to the main house without another word. She led him to a side door and down a long hallway to a spacious bedroom. It was dominated by an elegant four-poster bed of dark wood, covered by a fleur-de-lis bedspread. An empty fireplace had been closed off with a Plexiglass covering; perhaps it was obsolete now that modern radiators lined the walls. Everything was dustless, and a peek in a side door revealed a modernised en suite which seemed to clash slightly in style with the tapestry hanging on a wall depicting a hunting scene. As promised, John’s meagre belongings were already neatly arranged in the drawers — Christ, I’ll probably need a tutorial to work out such a complicated sock arrangement system — and in the closet.

Unsurprisingly, Anthea didn’t stick around to chat; the sound of her heels soon disappeared deeper into the house.

John listened for a minute to see if he could discern any other sounds, but the silence was loud, looming in the great halls beyond the bedroom. John kicked off his shoes and sunk into the large bed, noticing his laptop had been placed on the desk and plugged into the wall. After a few moments, he rose from the bed and went to open it, staring at the blank blog entry he had started a few days prior.

Because writing was supposed to be therapeutic, his therapist had suggested keeping a blog to
“keep track of everything that happened to him,” and to document the progress of his recovery. Until now, he hadn’t had a thing to write. Today, at least, had been… different as well as exhausting and bewildering.

John took a deep breath and started typing.

29 January

A strange meeting

I’ve said several times that nothing ever happens to me. Ella thought keeping a blog of my life might help, but it doesn’t because nothing ever happens. But today, something did. Something interesting.

Two weeks ago, I bumped into Mike Stamford, and I mentioned that I hadn’t started working again yet in London. The right job just hasn’t come along. He promised to keep an eye out for me.

It seemed inevitable that I’d have to be calling up the Job Centre, but Mike called the next day to tell me he’d found me a thing that seemed like it could be a good temporary placement while I decide what to do with my career. Can’t tell too many details but it’s sort of to do with healthcare.

I was all set to call the number listed on the advert, except somehow they’d got hold of my number and called me first. I didn’t even say hello before I was given a time and place and told that a car would be by to pick me up. I’d no idea how they could possibly know where I lived and I thought maybe it was a prank. But sure enough, I walked out of my flat today and there was a car waiting.

After a whirlwind of a meeting with my new employer, he introduced me to his brother Sherlock.

Except he didn’t introduce us. Somehow Sherlock knew everything about me, including that I’d served in Afghanistan and had been injured even though it didn’t seem like Mycroft had told him I was coming to visit. Sherlock is a bit of a madman and he’s arrogant and rude with a terrible sense of humour. It’s all been rather strange, but I find myself oddly looking forward to getting to know him a bit better. It has to be better than sitting in that dingy flat at least. So, here’s to a temporary distraction.

4 comments

Wow! You got the job! How ’bout that drink then, to celebrate?

Mike Stamford 29 January 17:01

are u some sort of a manservant now johnny?! or if it's healthcare, some kind of a home nurse? o how the mighty hav fallen LOLOL

Harry Watson 29 January 17:23

is that THE sherlock HOLMES?? The one who's gone off the grid?
Sherlock refused to come out of his room for dinner that night, so Tallie and John sat together in the annexe kitchen. Tallie told him that Sophie, the housekeeper, had delivered the food; she had a dual role as the household's private chef. After sampling the offerings, John was not surprised that Mycroft Holmes — clearly a man appreciative of the finer things in life, judging by his wardrobe alone — would have hired her. The herb-crusted chicken breasts were succulent, the oven-roasted vegetables had just the right amount of bite, and the salad laced with a vinaigrette dressing was as colourful as it was fresh. Served on the side was a basket of freshly baked bread with lots of seeds, and a pitcher of lemon-infused water completed the set. It was all delicious if a bit bland.

Tallie seemed to think the same — she went for the salt shaker in the spice rack before shoving the first forkful into her mouth. She offered the shaker to John, who followed her example.

“It’s because of his blood pressure issues,” Tallie explained, waving a fork in the direction of the glass door, behind which the shape of Sherlock’s wheelchair loomed. “Mister Holmes decided that all the food served needs to be healthy, low-sodium, with lots of fibre and veg.”

“It’s lovely,” John commented, skewering a bit of roasted carrot. “Is he really not hungry?” he asked, glancing towards the proverbial elephant in the next room.

Tallie shrugged. “He doesn’t like company when eating.”

“But he does… eat, I mean, he can, can’t he?” John shook his head. “He doesn’t have like a PEG tube in or anything?”

Tallie broke off a piece of her bread roll. “No. He can eat normally if someone helps him. It’s just that…” Tallie hesitated a bit, then squared her shoulders as though having decided John needed to know what she’d been thinking. “He rarely even eats with Mister Holmes. Sherlock hates someone seeing him needing help of any kind.”

“But he’s a tetraplegic,” John pointed out. “Of course, he’d need help with stuff. Why does he think I’d be put off by it — or Mister Holmes, for that matter?”

Tallie gave him a resigned look. “It’s not about sparing other people’s blushes.”

John nodded, unsure what else could be said. He mirrored Tallie, tearing off a chunk of bread and chewing thoughtfully. For the duration of their meal, she kept up a steady stream of small talk, inquiring politely about John’s previous work experience, where he’d grown up, gone to school, whether he had any family close by. John answered politely but volunteered only the bare minimum of information. He’d never liked to talk about himself — a feeling only exacerbated by the shame and guilt brought on by his injury and other recent… issues. He managed to ask a few questions of his own, but her answers didn’t stick, slithering in one ear and out the other. His eyes kept drifting to the door though it remained shut, the shadow of its occupant unmoving.
After loading their dishes into the dishwasher and offering John a biscuit from a packet she produced from a cupboard as dessert, Tallie walked John through the hefty folder that had a permanent residence on the kitchen counter. It covered everything from Sherlock’s daily medications to his physical therapy and what to do in the event of various emergencies. John took it all in without a word until Tallie gave him a knowing smile.

“It’s a lot, I know, but when I'm not here, it's good for the agency nurses to have a reference. I’ll be here to handle most of the practical stuff; this is all just for your background knowledge.”

John swallowed and hid his trembling left hand under the table, pressing it hard against his quadriceps. He refrained from explaining that he was a doctor because it didn't seem to be much help. He recognised the medications, knew about their effects and risks, understood perfectly Tallie's explanations about Sherlock's limitations and the symptoms his injury continued to cause, but the marrow of daily practical management of a patient like him was wholly unfamiliar territory. John tried not to think about things such as the apparatus he had discovered in the bathroom earlier in the day: a complicated chair-like device which was probably used to aid in bathing. He didn't even know how to lift or move patients unless to and from an operating table or a trolley.

Tallie closed the folder and went to unlock a small cabinet with a numbered keypad. John peered inside; all the medications were stored there. Why the lock?

She lined up a set of medications on the kitchen island. "So, this one lowers his blood pressure for bedtime, and this one raises it for the day. Baclofen he needs three times a day to control muscle spasms. He doesn't have very severe constant spasticity in any muscle group, but the spasms can be intense and easily triggered. I do range-of-motion exercises with him twice a day, which helps some. Mind you, a certain amount of spasms is a good thing since they give muscles at least some exercise and help maintain bone density and prevent blood clots. Some patients can deliberately trigger them to help with transferring from bed to chair and such."

Somehow, John couldn't quite imagine Sherlock thinking that spasms were a good thing in any way. Spastic hypertonia, meaning excessive muscle tone and dysfunction after the muscles had lost their connection to the brain through the spinal cord, was a common problem after spinal cord injuries. It could include hyperactive reflexes since there was no inhibitory input from the brain down the spinal column, sudden involuntary movements and muscle tightening through spontaneous or triggered spasms, and involuntary muscle tightness. It could start mere hours after an acute spinal cord injury, or after weeks or even months. The most common presentation was after a few weeks, at which point trauma patients had usually already been transferred out of John's care. Some of those who experienced them early on mistook them for a sign that muscle control was returning, even though spastic hypertonia was a sign of the exact opposite. Some of them had flat-out refused to accept this explanation from John on ward rounds. He never knew how to respond to such shocked denial.

"Any spasm triggers I should know about?" John asked.

Tallie frowned. "He gets them at night sometimes, and there's no clear trigger then. Cold is definitely a trigger, so make sure he's got enough on when he goes outside. Don't touch him suddenly or too lightly, especially when doing a transfer. Too tight clothing or something like a chair cushion that's bent the wrong way pressing on a nerve can also trigger stuff for him, and so can catheter issues such as it being kinked or obstructed. That reminds me—" Tallie picked up yet another bottle of medications and presented it to John, "—these tiny ones are to prevent bladder spasms. Then there's ranitidine for acid reflux; he might need one after a bigger meal if he gets uncomfortable," she summarised for John. "Antibiotics are needed with catheter changes, and they should be written down, as well as everything that's administered on a when-needed basis —
Mister Holmes' rules. Boxes of rubber gloves are basically everywhere if you need to clean him up, and there's cream in the bathroom cabinet if he gets sore, but it's less of a problem now with his new mattress and better pillows for the chair."

She gathered the meds and arranged them back into the cabinet, conscientiously pushing the door closed to make sure it locked. "The code's..." Tallie signalled it with her fingers so that she wouldn't have to say it out loud. "You got that?"

"Yeah," John confirmed.

"You're not to give the code to Sherlock, ever. Mister Holmes'—"

"—rules, yeah, I kind of guessed that."

John decided that he found some of these rules a bit baffling. In fact, he found almost everything quite baffling but kept nodding like a bobble-head because he didn't want Tallie to think he wasn't up for this. The battlefield is where he had excelled; he was used to injuries and pain but had avoided giving much thought to what happened to severely injured people once they were transferred out of his care. It was true that he had encountered plenty of amputees and spinal injuries during his time as an army doctor, but his stomach turned if he thought of all of those men having to endure the humiliation and frustration of a sponge bath, or daily pain and discomfort like Tallie had described Sherlock experienced every day. All those things — rehabilitation, long-term care, the adjustment process to such a life change — had been someone else's professional problem, not Johns; someone else's expertise. He fixed things as best as he could on the operating table and then moved on to the next patient. Best not to dwell on the carnage beyond that point. Is that how the surgeon who had operated on John to save his life and most of his limb had thought and felt, too?

It was disheartening to admit to himself how overwhelmed he now felt, how strangely out of his depth he was. His legs practically twitched with the urge to flee this place and its vague antiseptic smell, its cryptic secrets and bizarre occupants. Tallie's presence was a relief; she seemed accustomed to breaking in new employees and explaining everything thoroughly and patiently, making it all sound like normal, everyday stuff.

"Sherlock knows all this like the back of his hand, of course," Tallie told John, patting the folder. "So, you can just ask him if something's unclear."

John leaned against the fridge, shifting his weight. Sitting for so long had made his leg stiff. "What am I here for then, hm? Sherlock’s made it pretty obvious that I am not wanted, and your presence makes it clear that I’m not really needed for any of this practical stuff, either." John indicated the folder with his hand. "So why did Mycroft Holmes hire me?"

Tallie's mouth compressed, and John thought he saw a flash of... something in her wide brown eyes, but it was gone before he could name it.

Tallie chewed on her bottom lip thoughtfully. "I’d never claim to know what Mister Holmes is thinking. I guess you’re here to cheer Sherlock up? Keep him company? That sort of thing. I think Mister Holmes just wants him to be around other people so that he wouldn't feel so ostracised. And since he refuses to leave the house except for doctor's appointments..." Tallie shrugged. "I guess they have to make the people come to him." She passed him the HobNob packet left on the kitchen island.

John nodded absentmindedly, swallowing the rest of his biscuit as she collected the medication and knocked on the closed sitting room door. She glanced over her shoulder at John.
“See you tomorrow, John. Goodnight.”

John watched her slip into Sherlock’s company and close the door behind her, listened to the already-familiar baritone greet her in a joyless tone. Feeling foolishly redundant, he turned and headed back to the main house.

As usual, sleep was elusive that night, but instead of the usual nightmares plaguing him, John's thoughts were filled with medicine schedules, garden labyrinths, gloomy family portraits hanging on panelled walls and a pair of piercing, sea-glass eyes which seemed to read all of his deepest, darkest secrets.

After hours of tossing and turning, he heaved a sigh and sat up. Remembering the odd message that had been left on his blog, he collected his laptop, arranging the multitude of pillows on the bed until he could sit comfortably with the computer balanced on his knees. His fingers drummed a rhythm on the keys, and his eyes darted nervously around the room. It was apparent Mycroft had learned some information about John before he'd arrived, and as much as Sherlock claimed that he had deduced all of that about John's life, he was sure Sherlock had probably at least read his CV.

With a decisive nod, he typed Sherlock’s name into Google and settled back against the pillows. His search returned plenty of promising hits, but the most recent—from over a year ago — detailed the accident. A bystander had called the tabloids, and it seems that Sherlock had been famous enough for the fact of him having been the victim to be newsworthy.

Nothing in the press after that. It was as if the man had fallen off the side of the earth.

John read for over an hour before stumbling upon a website called "The Science of Deduction by Sherlock Holmes". He sat up straighter, a ghost of a smile on his face as he scrolled through bold claims that Sherlock could 'identify a software designer by his tie and an airline pilot by his left thumb'. His amusement soured, though, as he realised such detecting days seemed to be over according to what Sherlock had said. John couldn't help but wonder if Mycroft had omitted the fact that Sherlock had contracted a brain injury as well as a spinal one. Could explain some of his behaviours — people with damaged frontal lobes can retain their intelligence level but act downright sociopathic, can't they? Personality changes and impulse control issues?

He closed his laptop, feeling suddenly exhausted. Neurology wasn't his area beyond what he needed to know to treat acute trauma patients. He shook his head and pushed the laptop to the empty half of the bed. Flinging an arm over his eyes, he tried to will himself to sleep, but as much as he tried to clear his head, he couldn't help remembering the way Sherlock's mesmerising, impossible eyes had lit up — if only briefly — while he rattled off deductions about John’s life.

In the army, breakfast had been one of John's favourite things. After dragging himself out of bed for a quick brush of teeth and a piss, sitting down with mates for hot coffee and a nice fry-up always perked him up nicely for the day’s challenges.
The breakfast on his first morning at Musgrave Court was different. Nice, but different, and at least it beat having toast and tea alone at that dreadful bedsit. The manor house's drawing room was quieter than an officer's mess, for sure. Fancier, too: delicate white china, lovely tea served in small individual gilded pots, butter in covered porcelain receptacles instead of a crumb-filled tub. There was white linen, three kinds of toast and fresh bread rolls, four kinds of homemade marmalade and preserves, and a selection of newspapers which prevented the two men seated at the long table from having to fight over The Times.

Mycroft Holmes naturally looked right at home in these surroundings. This was his daily routine, after all. John, in contrast, felt both overwhelmed and underdressed in his old brown corduroy trousers and a plaid flannel shirt. It was stuff he'd bought in uni; clothes had never been much of a priority for him.

As if on cue, when John sat down, a middle-aged woman appeared by his side. Her crisply pressed trousers and blouse, and the quick and efficient way she moved around the table delivering their breakfasts, spoke of many years of practised professionalism. But when John looked up to thank her, he could see something rather motherly lurking in the crinkle around her brown eyes and warm smile.

Mycroft lifted his gaze from his newspaper and needlessly shifted his spoon from one side of his teacup to the other. "Ah, good morning, John. This is Sophie, our housekeeper and chef. If at any time you require food or a beverage, feel free to contact her in the kitchens. She works until five in the afternoon; after that, you are welcome to help yourself from the pantry and the fridges. We encourage guests to be quite informal in that regard."

John wondered if Mycroft Holmes even understood what 'informal' meant.

A cup of tea was poured for him by Sophie, after which she grabbed a pair of tongs and delivered two pieces of bread from a pewter stand onto his gold-rimmed plate.

"Mister Holmes requested tea, toast and condiments for today. For tomorrow and onwards, if there is anything you wish to have, just let me know," she offered.

"Sophie makes a splendid omelette," Mycroft offered, then focussed on his newspaper again.

"Toast is fine," John said feebly. He sipped the tea, feeling obliged to express appreciation right away. "This is good," he said and meant it. He realised there had been a slosh of milk at the bottom of the cup as Sophie poured the rest in — how had she known his preference?

"You should be forewarned that there are cameras in the annexe for safety reasons, as well as an advanced sprinkler system and a system integrated into Sherlock's chair which alerts me and emergency services in the case of certain arrhythmias or a fall."

_Cameras. Right. Guess that explains the milk. _"And Sherlock is fine with being watched like that all the time?"

The older Holmes raised a patrician brow before reaching for a croissant from a basket similar to the one placed before John. "I hope everything in your lodgings is to your liking. If not, do let Sophie know. I'm sure we can accommodate your needs."

"It's all very generous," John says.

Mycroft looked as though he couldn't quite understand what John was saying.

John cleared his throat. "You said Sherlock had — _has_ — a spinal injury. What about… other
injuries?"

Mycroft folded away the newspaper. "I shall have a copy of his medical records delivered to your room. It's an oversight on my behalf that this wasn't done before. Apologies."

"No, no, it's... You've got Sherlock's permission for that, then? Giving me his records?"

"Unnecessary," Mycroft said plainly. "Is there anything urgent you consider necessary to know?"

"Does he have a brain injury?" John stumbled the words out.

"No."

"So he is— he was always... like this?"

The faintest bit of amusement played on the curves of Mycroft's mouth. "Yes, Sherlock has always been highly intelligent, verbally gifted, neuroatypical, volatile in mood, quicksilver in temper and occult in his interests. Certain traits have undoubtedly been underlined by the aftermath of his accident."

While eloquent, this description gave John more questions than answers. He knew Sherlock worked as a detective, but what did that really entail? Did he live alone before the accident, or was he in a relationship? Was he depressed, genuinely mean, just not very good with people or all of these things?

"Any other questions?" Mycroft politely prompted.

"What is my job description?"

This was how John had decided to phrase it after careful consideration. What had happened yesterday did not feel like a job interview but a formality. Everything was arranged for him, induction into his surroundings began instantly, yet not even Tallie could provide the answer to the most burning of questions: what the hell was John doing here?

"And what about my hours?" John asked when no answer was forthcoming from the older Holmes.

"Tuesday through Sunday, from the nurse's morning departure to dinnertime, after which she returns for Sherlock's bedtime routines. I assume your schedules to be flexible, which allows you and whoever else is looking after Sherlock to make arrangements on a day-to-day basis. An electronic record has been installed on your laptop for keeping track of your hours. If you need days off, that can be arranged. As long as Sherlock has constant supervision, schedules can be kept very flexible. Breakfast is served every morning at either seven if I am to head to London, or nine if I am staying in the house. If you wish to have it at another hour, all you need to do is inform Sophie. Sherlock tends to take his meals at the annexe, but you are most welcome to dine and have lunch here at the house."

John bit off a corner from a piece of toast, eyes fixed on Mycroft, waiting. There was no way the older Holmes who saw and noticed everything could have forgot about his first question.

Eventually, he addressed John again. "Sherlock is finding it outstandingly stressful to deal with a cavalcade of changing faces from the nursing agency, and for much of the time, their specific training is not needed. What he requires is intellectual stimulation, the likes of which not just anyone can provide. Your medical expertise is useful not only to address related needs but to ensure you will have the capacity to understand his interests. He has never been good at engaging with and relating to others."
"So you hired him a friend."

"I would not be so presumptuous as to assume such frivolity as friendship could be enforced on someone, no matter how great an incentive was offered. The most I can hope for is that he finds you tolerable company and a stable fixture in his life — someone I can rely on to make a note of his needs and his mood and act as a mediator. He often finds me irritating, perhaps for many complicated reasons, including that I, of course, knew him well before the accident. He seems to fear others are guilty of constant comparison between then and now, and finds his current self lacking in many regards."

You hired him a friend, John mused again and didn't quite know what to make of that. It felt equal parts sad and thoughtful.

Later that day, after mostly ducking out of the way of Sherlock's volatile mood, John was relieved to leave the annexe when Mycroft came in at six to watch the news with his brother. The TV programme didn't seem to be the point — Mycroft insisting on attempting to inflict brotherly compassion appeared to be the leading motive.

However, when Mycroft called out his name just as John was about to close the door behind him, it seemed that his workday was not quite over yet.

"Could you return at nine? Tallie has promised to give you an introductory lesson on Sherlock's chair then since I doubt Sherlock can be talked round to participating in such proceedings."

"Yeah, of course."

That left John three hours to relax, and to have dinner served by Sophie. He still felt restless in these new surroundings and having slept so badly was taking its toll. John doubted that he could kick back and try to forget about his duties while waiting for the clock to strike nine.

Not that he wanted to forget. That was the strange thing: the more time he spent with Sherlock, the more stubbornly curious and insistent he seemed to become to get along with the man, to get to know him. What should have been a taxing, ungrateful job felt more engaging than anything he'd done after rehab.

John wasn't sure he liked what that said about him.

Tallie seemed to like Sherlock, too. She seemed to consider Sherlock's bark worse than his bite — John was still undecided. She seemed dedicated to her job, and her cheery demeanour seemed genuine instead of the artificial, grating perkiness John had hated in some of the nurses who had looked after him after his injury.

After finishing Sherlock's evening routines, Tallie poured two mugs full of tea and pulled up a chair next to John. He half expected to be given a manual to read regarding the obviously complicated and very high-tech wheelchair which Tallie had steered to the corner of the kitchen after closing the bedroom door. It was only a bit past nine in the evening — quite early for a grown man to retire to bed — so John tried to listen if there were any auditory indications of what Sherlock was doing.
"He likes to read," Tallie said as though having read John's mind.

*Is everyone in this bloody house telepathic?* John wondered and sipped his tea carefully since it was still scalding hot.

"Reading is one of the things he can do by himself. He can finish a book in one night; doesn't really like novels but factual stuff. Says crime novels are written by idiots and that his enjoyment of them is effectively destroyed by the fact that he can usually tell who did it the moment that character is introduced." Tallie smiled. She abandoned her half-drunk tea and slid off her chair. "Ready for your lesson, then?"

"Ready as I'll ever be."

"I don't know how familiar you are with…"

"I'm not going to lie; we don't get taught a lot about any assistive devices in medical school, and as an ortho, I rarely worked with patients during their stable rehab phase. So, please go through the basics."

"Right. Mister Holmes did mention you're a doctor. So, it's a power wheelchair, which means it can't be pushed by hand like a manual one. There are so-called power assist ones which can automatically adjust to the surface tilt a user is travelling on, and their automatic brakes can assist with, well, braking. That's a great option for most lower cervical tetraplegics, but while Sherlock would have enough mobility in his hands to use one, he doesn't have the strength needed."

"Could he gain that, with enough PT?"

"I think so, yes." Tallie looked thoughtful. "I'm not sure, but I think Mister Holmes said that his first chair was planned to be a power assist one, but then there were some setbacks."

She went to the chair and patted the seat cushion. "These are important, and custom-made, as is the chair frame since his bodily proportions are not that average. You've probably sat in class for a whole day — non-disabled people can shift their weight and readjust their position during such days to prevent pressure sores and muscle aches, but Sherlock can't. That's why he needs a good mattress and good chair seat cushions and paddings that prevent stuff from accidentally chafing. He can get injured in his lower limbs without realising it. Always check that the safety belts are attached," Tallie said, leaning closer to lift one so John could see it, "because he doesn't have quite the core muscle strength to lift his torso back up if it tips forward. In the car, you need to check that both these and the regular car seat belts are fastened. These aren't designed for collision forces."

John nodded. He shifted in his chair so he could see Tallie better.

"There are straps that go across his shins; like lots of SCI patients, he gets extensor spasms where his knee snaps straight. He hates the straps, but it's best to use them outside the house. At least, it's less embarrassing than accidentally kicking someone."

*Is there anything Sherlock doesn't hate?* John wondered.

"You probably know this, but if he starts getting more spasms than usual, or lots in a certain spot, it can be a warning sign. Could be a UTI or a pressure sore, ingrown toenail or something else that needs sorting out."

John nodded.
Tallie ploughed on. "The headrest detaches," Tallie said and demonstrated how. "His neck muscles and most shoulder muscles work but being without the rest can worsen the pain he gets in his tricep area; lots of C7 quads have to put up with that. We don't remove the headrest all that often."

"Where do you hang the bag?" John already knew that there was stuff Tallie always packed to take with them when she accompanied Sherlock somewhere. Straws, meds, sheepskin for extra cushioning of the chair, a catheter kit…

"There's a hook behind the backrest with a clip so that stuff won't fall off." She stopped for breath before continuing, "Unlike most models, this is an all-wheel drive. That gives Sherlock the ability to get over kerbs and rocks and other objects, plus a really nimble turning radius and stability. Top speed's about eight miles per hour."

To John, the chair looked like the love child of a black barber's chair and a riding lawn mower. It was mostly black, but the power unit under the seat red. He wondered if colour choices were available and if Sherlock had picked this one himself.

Next, Tallie leaned down on her haunches and pointed to the back of the power unit. "The battery pack attaches here. It's easy to change: just release the latch, take the old one out and slide the new one in; it should click into place and the latch springs back on. One lasts about ten hours; less, if the terrain's rough. Don't forget to check that there's always at least one plugged into the charger in that corner. You don't want to find out how pissed off he gets when he runs out, and one isn't available."

"Probably not, no."

"There is a simple manual wheelchair available just in case; it's in the spare bedroom." Tallie bit her lip. "You need to know how to move him from chair to chair and bed to chair and back. I'll teach you when he's not in a bite-your-head-off mood."

John had already seen Tallie do such transfers using two different techniques. He knew he'd have to learn at least one.

Tallie stood up. "If you need to move the chair, do not try to push it — it's bloody heavy. Just use the joystick as he does. There's no on-off button, really; it's always on and functional. I give it a good cleaning once a week, check the cushioning and all, so you don't have to worry about that. This model's got great manoeuvrability, never seen a fancier one. Gets him through narrow spaces and tight corners easily. There's plenty of attachments in the handrests for his tablet and phone stands and a book stand, too, though he prefers to read on the tablet since he needs another person's help turning pages."

"There's a third chair, isn't there?" John had seen one in a side room leading to the garden entrance. It looked more like Sherlock's primary one than a manually operable one.

"Yes," Tallie replied enthusiastically. "Lightweight, a bit simpler, for use outside the house. It's the same manufacturer so battery pack stuff and all that is the same. We keep it close to the door; the car's usually parked right by the annexe."

John rose from his chair and came closer to have a proper look at the battery system.

"Looks fancy," he concluded after giving the whole chair a thorough look. Tallie had made the right call; inspecting it while Sherlock was in it would have felt awfully awkward.

Tallie pursed her lips. "It is. Clearly, Mister Holmes spared no expense — insurance wouldn't have
paid for such a customised model. Or maybe Sherlock paid for it; I doubt that, though, since he hates the thing."

"Seems logical to me he doesn't like it."

"Well, yeah, at first it would be," Tallie admitted, "but the quads I've assisted before were usually aware of what's on the market, and many of them would have been damned proud to have a great chair like this one. Mind you, most of my prior clients needed a wheelchair from an early age because of issues they were born with or because they were injured as a kid. Regardless, when someone has been in his situation for over a year, these things should start to become everyday stuff they don't think about that much."

"But?" John could read the missing word in the look Tallie gave him.

"Not for Sherlock. Sometimes I feel like he's living as though the accident only happened last week."

Chapter End Notes

From now on, new chapters will appear on Sundays.
Two days passed, and John did not begin to feel any more comfortable in Sherlock's presence. Mostly they sat in adjoining annexe rooms and every fifteen to twenty minutes — half an hour if Sherlock had been particularly vile to him the last time — John stuck his head into the sitting room and asked if Sherlock needed anything. Sometimes he plucked up the courage to suggest something, and Sherlock never ever failed to mock whatever idea John dared to present. It seemed that he had adopted insulting comebacks as some sort of a sport. John's question "Do you want your laptop?" was met with "Why? Have you found an online support group I could join? Quads R Us? The Four-Wheel Club for Former Detectives?" A suggestion of popping into the garden was met with an inquiry whether John truly believed it had changed significantly from seventeen hours ago. When John asked if the book Sherlock was reading was any fun, Sherlock had glared at him and told him that "Yes, since obviously anyone would be in stitches over planar chromatography."

Every night, John returned from the annexe relieved that the day was over and frustrated at the brick wall of dismissal and avoidance against which he was banging his head. He had to hand it to Sherlock: the man was at least consistent. Not many could maintain such stubborn persistence in trying to put someone off. The man's bristling would have been comedic if John wasn't feeling the pressure of the expectation to break through the facade somehow. He envied the lightness and sense of duty with which Tallie saw to her daily tasks; Sherlock didn't seem to be even half as vile towards her as he was towards John, and she was clearly better than John at not letting Sherlock's moods get to her. As much as John tried to follow her example, it kept grating at him how clearly his presence wasn't wanted even when he didn't think he'd done anything that wrong.

On a Wednesday morning, on his way to the annexe from breakfast, voices from behind the door stopped John in his tracks. His hand halted on the door handle without pressing it down; he felt guilty for eavesdropping but even more hesitant to step in.

"Perhaps if we—" Mycroft's tone was exasperated.

"Just stop, Mycroft! No matter what Mummy thinks, nothing is going to be improved, fixed, or rehabilitated with a change of scenery, a fancier bed, a more intense sports regime, a better physical therapist, a more constructive attitude, a more effective antidepressant or the sixty-seventh second opinion by yet another neurosurgeon. You've always relished telling me to be mature and realistic about things yet now it very much seems to be you who refuses to accept the facts. Nothing's going to change, so feel free to get back to whatever it is you were doing before gaoling yourself here with me. I promise to inform you without delay if I find myself suddenly able to leap out of bed and dash back to London. And, you are to stop hiring new people. It's tedious."

"You know perfectly well that since Nurse Mullan isn't available round the clock, you need someone here to assist you in between her visits, to help you do what catches your fancy while I am also out of the house or otherwise occupied."

"Nothing catches my fancy, Mycroft, because all I do is sit and barely exist! The torture of it would be at least marginally lessened if there weren't one of your hired help following me around and staring at me all the time. You know as well as I do what your minders are really here for."

Mycroft sighed. "I do wish you weren't so beastly to them. They might last longer."

"I do apologise for failing to fulfil whatever deluded ideal you have of all cripples being obligated to be humble and amicable. And it's hardly my fault if the people you parade through to be a
nuisance get so disturbed by the way I am. No, people really can’t manage the discomfort of having to deal with someone in this state, can they? That's why they plaster on a sunny smile, suggest inane things that fix nothing, give advice such as *stiffen up the lip*, encourage me to keep positive, to see the silver lining, *to explore all the possibilities,*" Sherlock spat out the words as though they physically tasted foul. "Never thought even *you* would fall into such deluded, plebeian wishful thinking because you can’t face reality. I suppose that's what you're really trying to outsource to your *watchmen.*"

"Sherlock."

"Prison wardens."

"Sherlock."

"Nannies."

"Sherlock."

"Go away, Mycroft."

John sighed, pressed the handle and stepped in just as the older Holmes — looking tired and disgruntled — left the stage.

It was going to be a long day.

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That Wednesday afternoon brought with it a heavy cloud cover, and soon the landscape surrounding Musgrave Court became grey and wet. John had longed for a short walk after lunch, but rain splattering against his cheeks and soaking through his trousers soon made him turn and head back to the warmth of the house. Shivering from the cold, he wiped his cane clean in the foyer with an already-muddy towel hanging from an umbrella stand. Then he took a turn for the annexe, having decided on a cup of tea. Maybe it would help with the headache that still lingered after yet another night rife with nightmares. He couldn't decide if the silence of the countryside was a nice thing, or if it made the whole house feel too desolate for comfort.

Just as John turned on the kettle Tallie emerged from the sitting room, shaking her head as she left the door ajar.

“*He’s in rare form today, John. Good luck.*” She rolled her eyes and slipped on her own raincoat and bright red wellies before leaving, shoulders hunched against the rain as she jogged to her Vauxhall.

John heaved a sigh. As much as he tried to muster the energy, he felt too achy and tired to babysit a crabby, grown-ass man-child today. With much more force than necessary, he stirred sugar and milk into Sherlock’s tea, adding just a squeeze of lemon to his own. He carried both cups to the sitting room door and used his elbow to press the button to open it.

Sherlock’s chair was by the window, his back turned to the door. John set his cup down on the side table with a grunt, and Sherlock didn’t even glance in his direction. His eyes were closed, and his hands were pressed together in front of his mouth, the tips of his index fingers resting lightly on his lips. John already recognised this as his thinking stance, and Tallie's words signalled that Sherlock was unlikely to feel like doing any conversation today. That was fine by John, but the Hippocratic oath and the promises he'd made to Mycroft Holmes pinged around his brain when he turned to
leave the room, bringing him to pause by the door.

“A’right?”

Sherlock didn’t answer. John waited a moment before sighing heavily. He didn’t want to go back to sit in the kitchen; his back got stiff on the stools by the kitchen island and the hard-backed chairs by the table.

"’Kay. Fine. I feel like rubbish today, so I'll be on the sofa. Yell if you need something,” he declared.

*Or just get it yourself.* John thought viciously. He shuffled to the TV area, cradling his own cup of tea in his hands. He settled onto the sofa, pulling an artfully arranged plaid afghan which probably saw little use onto his legs. He flicked through the Netflix choices before deciding on a classic Bond film.

After the first scenes and the opening credits had come and gone, John guiltily glanced over his shoulder. He could see the very edge of Sherlock's wheel, in the same spot he'd left him, and wondered briefly if he should invite him to watch the film with him. He shrugged. *It's a free country, and it's his bloody house. He can do whatever he wants.*

Without further thought, John sunk back against the cushions to enjoy the mindless explosions and the parade of Bond's women. Truth be told, he’d always been equally interested in Bond as he was the women. When he was younger, he thought that was because he’d wanted to be James Bond, but as he got older, he realised it was really just that he liked to watch the man move. In fact, as soon as he allowed himself to notice, he discovered that a nice jawline, a captivating set of eyes, and lean muscles — particularly in arms and shoulders — always caught his eye, regardless of the gender of the owner.

The syncopation of rain and the sound of Hollywood-exaggerated gunfire mixed with the warmth of the tea, lulling John into a relaxed doze against the pillows until a sound behind him startled him awake. Hastily wiping his cheek with the back of his hand to check for drool, he briefly paused the movie to see how long he’d slept; it couldn't have been more than twenty minutes — Bond had just arrived at the Whyte House.

Soon, there was another sound, a bit louder, and this time, John recognised the squeak of Sherlock's wheels. He waited to hear the already familiar quiet thunk as the chair went over the threshold into the kitchen, but it never came. Instead, he heard Sherlock drawing a deep breath as he drew nearer. John could tell the man was trying to be stealthy, so with a private smile, he turned back to the telly, surreptitiously clicking up the volume. He kept his eyes fixed on the screen for the remainder of the film, caught up in the action and nearly forgetting about the man lurking behind him. As the ending credits rolled, he wondered if Sherlock had fallen asleep. John sat up, twisting his torso towards where he thought Sherlock had been parked, only to be met with an empty room and the sound of Sherlock’s bedroom door closing.

John rolled his eyes. *So much for the company.* He turned off the TV and the audio system and was rising to his feet to straighten the back cushions of the sofa when the bedroom door opened again.

“John?” Sherlock called out.

“Yes, Sherlock?” John feigned nonchalance, draping the afghan over the back of the sofa — nowhere near as neatly as it had been — and started to move towards the kitchen.

“More tea, please. Two sugars.”
John reached into the cupboard to get down the deep purple mug that he noticed Sherlock seemed to like better than the other ones. He heard the whir of Sherlock’s wheelchair as he joined John in the kitchen. That gave John pause — maybe they could at least sit together as they drank their tea? He tried not to get his hopes up, because whether he was present hardly mattered since Sherlock usually just sat in sullen silence.

Today, however, the rumbly pitch of his voice suddenly sounded directly behind John: “Shaken. Not stirred.”

John snorted and when he turned, noticed a twitch of Sherlock’s lips as he tried to hide his own smile.

Once the tea had brewed John carried both mugs to the kitchen table, making sure Sherlock's was within reach, and the straw turned forward before dropping into the chair opposite. He wrapped his hands around his mug, relishing the warmth that seemed to seep out of it and chase away the chill of the room. Or maybe that was just the slight thaw of the man seated across from him, the way he seemed to fill up every room he was in, the way his oddly-coloured eyes, sharp and keen, were currently fixed on John as though he were the most interesting thing in the world. John let him look, feeling himself relax as the warmth released some of the tightness in his chest.

After a few moments, he spoke, more to his cup of tea than to Sherlock. "You're wrong, you know."

“Rarely.” Sherlock’s voice sounded scratchy from disuse all day, but John noticed a note of superior amusement.

“I don’t have a brother. Shot in the dark.”

Sherlock blinked, the crease appearing between his eyes that John had learned to equate with discomfort. This time John knew it wasn’t physical pain, but a mental cramp that was twisting Sherlock's expression. He bit back a smile, enjoying having the upper hand for once.

“Show me your phone,” Sherlock compelled him.

“My phone? Why?”

Sherlock didn’t answer, but slowly turned his hand over, palm up. For one wild moment, John thought Sherlock wanted his hand, but he caught his mistake before embarrassing himself. He lifted halfway off his seat, fumbling in his trouser pocket for the device. Pressing it into Sherlock’s hand, he watched the man's face for clues, but his expression gave away nothing.

Sherlock clasped John’s phone between his palms, turning it over clumsily by dragging them up to rest on his chest. He inspected the back, then closed his eyes and inhaled deeply before releasing a torrent of words on the exhale.

“Harry Watson: clearly a family member who’s given you his old phone. Not your father; this is a young man’s gadget. Could be a cousin, but you’re a war hero who couldn’t find decent a place to live. Unlikely you’ve got an extended family, certainly not one you’re close to, so brother it is. Now, Clara. Who’s Clara? Three kisses tell of romantic attachment. The expense of the phone says wife, not girlfriend. She must have given it to him recently — this model’s only six months old. Marriage in trouble then; six months on he’s just given it away. If she’d left him, he’d have kept it. People do; sentiment. But no, he wanted to get rid of it. He gave the phone to you: that says he wants you to stay in touch, and an expensive gift could be telling of a relationship fraught with conflict...”
With a shake of his head, John interrupted, his voice coming out tense and clipped. “Harry is short for Harriet, and Harriet Watson is my sister."

“Sister!” Sherlock’s eyes snapped open. He studied John in the same intense way he had that first day, in that way that made John feel exposed, flayed open. He stiffened, but Sherlock’s expression softened, his mouth opening into a perfect O.

At John’s raised eyebrows, he continued, his voice lacking its usual edge. “She’s a recently-divorced recovering alcoholic, and neither of you has a lot of money at your disposal.” Sherlock then shrugged. "None of that was a huge leap, even if I did get one tiny insignificant detail wrong."

John shook his head, taking a noisy sip of his tea as he didn't want to meet Sherlock’s gaze. The prying git wasn’t wrong, but John was still uncomfortable discussing his familial issues even if somehow having it all laid bare like that felt like a bit of a relief.

John swallowed, glancing up. What he saw surprised him. Instead of looking smug, Sherlock looked embarrassed. His eyes were trained on his own cup of tea, his mouth was pulled down at the corners and that tiny wrinkle of his brow had reappeared. John fought an urge to smooth it and wondered at the sudden change in the man’s demeanour.

Perhaps Sherlock regretted giving voice to some of his reasoning.

“She gave me the phone,” John confirmed. "And no, neither of us has some big trust fund or fortune to lean on, and she's always gone from one job to another pretty quickly. We’ve never got on, but… we’re trying. I haven't actually talked to her for some time."

Sherlock nodded.

"Was it always like this with Mycroft? You two seem to get along… and not get along." John couldn't come up with a better way of describing the brothers' precarious interactions. Dedication and worry were emanating from the older Holmes when he was in Sherlock's company or spoke of him, and sometimes Sherlock's dismissals of the man seemed a bit… habitual. Half-hearted. Neither of the Holmes brothers had a spouse, and there hadn't been any mention of Mycroft having friends or hobbies outside the house. John couldn't help wondering if Sherlock's accident had led to both of them becoming recluses, or if that was a trait they had shared before.

"Mycroft is an insufferable busybody who thrives on micromanaging others. Power-hungry to the extreme, but subtle about it. Practical. Overprotective.” Sherlock drew a breath, looking thoughtful. "Any other siblings?"

"Nope. It's just Harry and me. Your parents still alive?"

"Yes." Sherlock sighed. "And thankfully approximately 4,230 miles away."

_________________

After a few more days, John felt sufficiently settled in to start thinking about himself and not just the daily practicalities of Musgrave Court. Things with Sherlock vacillated between neutral and difficult; John largely still got ignored, and he mostly preferred that option. He tried not to feel clumsy or self-conscious when Sherlock was forced to accept his help for something — he kept glaring at John with the force of an ocular gale wind. Worse, though by far, was when he wouldn’t even meet John's eye.
John found it strange that, despite how hard everything still was, neither Mycroft nor Tallie seemed the least bit of disappointed or surprised. That helped John keep trying, as did the solidarity from Tallie. Every morning, she dropped some helpful hints regarding Sherlock's mood, for which John was grateful. She also turned a blind eye to when John decided not to hit his head against the wall by trying to get Sherlock to do things his big brother insisted were wholesome and important, such as the high-calorie smoothies he was supposed to have to compensate for his low appetite. John agreed that they looked like wallpaper paste, even with fresh strawberries added in.

At least John's resilience was getting plenty of practice — which is why it was time to do something he knew he'd been putting off for too long.

He messaged his sister, then spent the next day — his first day off — trying to avoid mulling over the last time he’d seen Harry. As his only living relative, she had been notified immediately after his injury, but John wasn’t made aware of that fact until he was flown back to the UK and brought to the rehabilitation centre. On his third day there, Harry had marched in with some half-baked plan to try her hand at playing the responsible sister. He had been so angry; angry at the arsehole who’d shot him, angry at the unfairness of a world that would let a young man like David die with his whole life still ahead of him, angry that his own future was now a giant question mark.

And he’d taken all of that anger out on her.

He and Harry had never been close as children, and the physical distance gained as they grew older had only pushed them further apart. Her appearance that day had been a shock and her pity unwelcome. The suggestion that he come live with her when she was barely in a state to take care of herself was laughable: she had been wearing stained sweatpants and reeked of body odour tinted with stale alcohol and cigarettes. There were plenty of tell-tale signs that her most recent relationship had ended in her usual dramatic fashion, and that she’d sought consolation from her longest love affair: the bottle.

Harriet Watson never did anything halfway, least of all her romantic endeavours. Though John had accepted his own sexual orientation, he had guarded it closely, choosing only to engage in same-sex encounters quietly and privately. He had never thought that he’d end up in a long-term relationship with a man; the only people he had dated for any significant amount of time had been women. Most of his hook-ups with blokes had happened on furlough while enlisted, and he’d even had some similar encounters in Afghanistan where discretion certainly felt like a necessity, despite what some of the leaflets doled out during basic training had claimed about diversity and tolerance.

Conversely, Harry had always worn her attraction to women like a badge of honour, using it to isolate herself in a blaze of rainbow-coloured glory. To John, it had always felt like a rather blatant attempt at offending others before they could pick on her. As a teenager, she had cut her hair into a spiky, short style, changing the colour as often as one might change their underwear. She’d worn t-shirts emblazoned with aggressive slogans and had a punch card to both the local tattoo and piercing shops. *Fresh paint to disguise another smell.*

John felt more dread than anticipation as he arrived at the appointed cheap-and-cheerful Italian restaurant in Soho. He scanned the cramped but cosy room furnished with the usual garlic plaits, photos of Etna and chequered tablecloths. He was early, so he accepted the host’s offer of a table tucked into a quiet corner and settled in, propping his cane against the leg of his chair and watching the other patrons. Thankfully, the beer he wasted no time in ordering arrived promptly.

He hoped he and Harry would be able to remain civil, but just in case, he wanted to make sure he knew the nearest exit. Harry had always had a temper and a flair for the dramatic, often running away from home as a young girl and picking fights at school. Her fuse only seemed to become
shorter as the years progressed, and she collected more fuel to add to her personally-offended-fire. As an adult, alcohol had fanned those flames until everyone around her had, at some point, been forced to retreat and watch her self-combust.

Meeting Clara had seemed like the best thing that had happened to Harry in a long time, and the thought of her messing up that good thing still raised John's hackles. The two women had met at the first job that Harry had had in over a year. Their relationship, in typical Harriet Watson fashion, had been a whirlwind; they’d only been together for six months before they’d decided to get married. During a furlough home, John had had the honour of being the witness to their civil ceremony, and when he’d gone back to Afghanistan, it had been with rosy promises to keep in touch, and the first hope of a decent relationship with both his sister and new sister-in-law.

Things took a turn when, four months later, their mum died. John hadn't been able to come home for the funeral, and a part of him was relieved that he wasn't there to face the things her death would have stirred up. He had hoped that Harry, with the support from Clara, could manage the practicalities, but Harry's letters became scarcer and angrier and more withdrawn until they stopped altogether. When she’d arrived in his room at the rehab centre that day, reeking of failure, it had been more than John could take. He’d liked Clara, but most of all he had liked the tenuous relationship that he and Harry were forming for the first time in their life thanks to the stabilising presence of her. Seeing Harry in such a dreadful state made John feel as though he had absolutely nothing good left in his life. They’d argued — loudly — and a security guard had escorted her out.

He’d regretted his harsh words only minutes after Harry had left, but the damage was done. It felt like the theme of his life, now: irreparably damaging so many things that were important to him.

Two weeks later, just before he was to be discharged, a package arrived for John at the rehabilitation centre. It contained a mobile phone with an apologetic, if barely legible, note pleading with John to keep in touch. He’d immediately binned the note but kept the phone — if only because it saved him the hassle of finding himself one once he left the facility. Her number remained the only one saved to his contacts, but guilt and shame over the way he’d treated her kept him from reaching out.

Until now.

John rubbed idly at the condensation collecting on the outside of his water glass, wondering what state Harry would be in tonight. Her replies to his texts had been short but blessedly free of typos or obnoxious emoticons.

He didn’t have to wonder long, as a few minutes later, he spotted her by the doorway, her dark blue eyes — so like his own — scanning the restaurant. He held up his hand in greeting and used the few moments it took her to navigate the tables and chairs between them to gather his first impression. She had on jeans and trainers underneath her parka, which was zipped nearly to her chin. An oversized beanie with a bobble was mashed on her head, but John could see wisps of her blonde hair framing her face. It was neatly trimmed to a length that reached barely below her ears, but John couldn't remember when she’d had hair this long. She’d gained a bit of weight since he’d last seen her and her cheeks looked less hollow now, flushed from the cold air outside. She looked… if not the picture of health then at least very different from their last encounter.

She took her jacket off and hung it on the back of her chair and then took off her hat, jamming it into a sleeve with one hand and shaking out her hair with the other. It was cropped much shorter at the back, but John decided the geometric cut suited her. It didn't look like she'd done it herself.

Finally, after fretting beside the table, Harry settled into her seat, taking a sip of her water before glancing up at him.
“What?”

“Hi to you too.”

She shrugged, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear, her eyes darting around the restaurant. “Hi.”

John cleared his throat. Of course, she wasn’t going to make this easy for him.

“How’ve you been? You look… better.” It was true, although nearly anything would have been an improvement over the state in which she’d been at the rehab centre.

Harry picked up a menu with a hum of acknowledgement. "You do too." Her eyes drifted purposely down to the cane propped against the chair. "I thought you hurt your shoulder."

“Ah, yes. Well.” Best not discuss anything connected to rehab.

Thankfully, the waitress appeared then, saving them from the awkward silence. They ordered; John declined the wine list without asking his sister. She didn't seem to care.

Eventually, Harry cleared her throat. “So, you got that new job. Wiping bottoms and that sort of thing?”

John shook his head, squeezing his left hand into a fist underneath the table; it sometimes helped with the smarting in his shoulder or at least diverted his attention from it.

“Er… no, not exactly. Like I said, I’m a carer for a paralysed guy. He’s… he’s interesting, actually.”

Harry picked up her fork and twirled it between her finger and thumb. She had ordered a plate of spaghetti carbonara, while John had picked the lasagne.

“And you’re living in some country house now too, I see. Very posh.”

"It's alright, for now." He reached up to rub at the back of his neck. "Are you… are you getting on alright? Have you found some work, or…?” He let the sentence trail off, watching as she shrugged. She set the fork back down, re-crossing her legs as she stared across the table at him. Her eyes were hostile. He couldn't say that he blamed her.

“Why do you care, John? What happened that you suddenly are interested in my life? You haven’t given a single shit about me, or my life, for a long time. You weren't interested when Mum died, or when Clara left. You weren't interested in anything but your own pity party when I came to see you. I’m surprised you even still had my phone number. What changed?”

John opened his mouth, a thousand denials crowding his tongue, the desire to lash out and insult her ripe and enticing. He pressed his knuckles into his aching leg, relishing the dig of pain.

“Ohhh.” Harry shifted to lean back in her chair, the corners of her eyes pinching with whatever epiphany she thought she had just had.

“Why do you care, John? What happened that you suddenly are interested in my life? You haven’t given a single shit about me, or my life, for a long time. You weren't interested when Mum died, or when Clara left. You weren't interested in anything but your own pity party when I came to see you. I’m surprised you even still had my phone number. What changed?”

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“Ohhh.” Harry shifted to lean back in her chair, the corners of her eyes pinching with whatever epiphany she thought she had just had.

John regarded at her warily.

“Oh what?”

"This is a therapy thing, isn't it? 'Repair bridges burned' or some shit. You need to check me off a list? Well, listen, John. I don’t need your… charity, or your pity or any of that. I’m doing okay. I don’t have a lot going for me, but I’m trying. So, you can tell your therapist you tried, but your
fuck-up of a sister might actually have a future, and you're off the hook."

It grated on John particularly hard to be told that he was off the hook. Why did everyone seem to think that he was desperate to disengage from them, from his life?

Maybe he didn’t want to examine how close to the truth they might actually be.

"So, this crippled guy?" Harry quipped. "Does he talk through one of those robot things? Your life must really be dull lately if wiping some guy's drool is what you consider interesting."

"Don't." John’s voice was hard, and he felt a few people glance their way, their glances skittering away quickly. He was free game for a bit of payback for the way he'd spoken to her the last time, but she had no right to insult Sherlock.

With difficulty, John lowered his voice. “He's not like that, Harry. He can talk perfectly well, and he's maddening at times because he's rude, but he can also be fascinating and funny. He's a detective— well. He was.”

Harry watched him, her eyebrows knitting together for a minute before her shoulders relaxed. “Okay.”

They watched each other suspiciously, and though John felt relieved to have found a topic away from the ghosts of their past, he was decidedly uncomfortable with Harry’s attitude toward Sherlock. Harry's unfair description reminded him of how uncomfortable laypeople felt around disability. How uncomfortable he had felt upon meeting Sherlock — even with all his medical training. That's what people assumed when they saw an electric wheelchair, wasn't it? That it belonged to someone whose brain was probably as infirm as their body? Someone alien and off-putting? Sherlock was undoubtedly working hard to appear to be just that. Maybe it was just easier, fulfilling people's stereotypes. Changing them would be hard work he probably doesn't have the motivation for.

"So, was he… always like that? You said he was a detective? What happened?" Harry asked, and her anger seemed to have evaporated.

That was the thing with Harry — she liked people. She got along with people. People liked her; her keen interest and spontaneity made them curious and entertained. Except that it was a front, of course — a desperate attempt to patch up a missing self-confidence with the love of others. Maybe, in a different life, she could have been a good match for a career in healthcare. Something where her curiosity and easy directness with people would work in her favour. John could almost imagine her as an A&É nurse — or a combat one. She wouldn't take sass from anyone and was good at delivering it herself.

"He was in an accident a little over a year ago. No brain injury," John informed his sister firmly, "But he's paralysed from his upper chest down. A bit of movement in his hands and shoulders, that's all."

"Fucking hell. That's gotta be terrible. They can't do surgery for it or anything?"

"They did operate to stabilise things, but if someone gets too much damage on their spinal column, there's not much a surgeon can do to repair the spinal tracts which have been severed." He had almost said 'what we can do'. Almost. "Can't just suture two ends of a nerve back together; it won't grow into a functioning one like blood vessels or muscle tissue can."

"So now he does… what?"
"Not much," John admitted. "Lives with his brother. And yeah, the house is huge. Like one of those National Trust places Mum used to take us to."

Harry whistles. "You've certainly traded up, then."

John almost told her that she should come to visit, but he'd need Mycroft's permission for that, wouldn't he? John couldn't quite imagine Mycroft Holmes having tea with his sister. Even if it would be amusing as hell to watch the two of them in a battle of wits, John would prefer to keep his job.

That thought gave him pause. He wasn't really skipping with joy every morning when he finished breakfast and had to make his way to the annexe, and it was a rotten thought that seeing someone whose life is even more difficult than his own would cheer him up. But, that wasn't it, was it? The house was lovely, a nice change of scenery, and he had meant it when he'd told Harry that Sherlock was interesting, even if he was trying so hard to repel everyone. It wasn't about John, the way Sherlock behaved, was it? He'd done it to others, hadn't he? It wasn't John specifically who he disliked, or so he wanted to believe.

"If you're not a male nurse or his surgeon, then what do you do with him?" Harry asked, unrolling her paper napkin.

"Keep him company. Help him out with everyday stuff."

"Our Johnny, a lady-in-waiting to some posh country lord," Harry laughed, and John couldn't help but join in.

Their food arrived, and they both dug in with relish, happy for the distraction. John noticed that Harry occasionally sipped at her water glass and declined the waiter's offer for something else to drink with her meal.

As he was scraping up the last of his pasta, his curiosity got the better of him. "So, you're sober then? I mean, you look… healthier, and you're drinking water, and you smelled like—" John trailed out, realising it had sounded a bit odd.

I can deduce a bit too, he still thought smugly.

Harry cut him off with a lift of her palm. "Yes. I'm twenty-two days sober. I know it isn't much, but I really want it this time — and not because I'm with someone. I'm going to AA and working for a really small advertising company that was willing to overlook my CV gaps. I just want not to be the family fuck-up anymore. There can't be two of us!" She gave him a wry smile, an offering. This is what they'd always done; where other siblings might show their affection through kind words and supportive actions, the Watsons were demonstrative in a different way, jabbing and taunting one another.

Well. Perhaps not all other siblings, John corrected himself when Sherlock's particular sneer that he reserved for when Mycroft was particularly insufferable came to mind. Between the Holmes brothers, insults seemed to replace endearments. John knew what it was like to watch helplessly as a sibling drowned themselves in misery. Could it be that he felt a strange pull to help Sherlock because of that? And helping Sherlock helped Mycroft, too, didn’t it? Was that why John had been hired: not just to fill out gaps in an established Sherlock-sitting rota, but to take some of the obviously immense pressure off the older Holmes?

"Harry… That’s great." John was surprised by the sincerity in his voice and judging by the way Harry’s head snapped up from where she was tracing patterns in her sauce, she was too.

John’s lip tugged sideways not into a smile but a sheepish half-grimace. "As for there being two
fuck-ups, well, I think I'm… I think this job is good for me. It's only a temporary thing, but for now…"

For now, it's good. Really good.

They finished their meal in amicable silence, and John insisted on paying, though Harry made a vague comment about paying next time. His first week's pay had already landed in his account. Perhaps Mycroft knew that his funds were depleted. He knew everything else there was to know about John, so this would hardly have been surprising. And, John was oddly not too worried about such a breach of privacy. It was reassuring to think that someone cared about him now, too, even if just in the capacity of an employer. Since the money was for services rendered, it didn't feel like charity. It didn't make him feel as pathetic.

“Until next time?” Harry asked.

John collected his coat from the back of his chair, and grasped the handle of his cane, though the pain in his leg was little more than a dull background throb for now.

Harry nodded, making the knit ball on top of her hat bob ridiculously.

“All right. See you soon, Harry.” There was no hug. That wasn't the Watson way.

John followed her to the door and gave a wave as he stepped off the restaurant’s front steps, not surprised in the least when he spotted the sleek black car idling at the kerb.

Sometimes, he supposed, overprotective siblings weren’t all bad.
The day after seeing Harry, John woke up once again with a pounding headache. It was different from his usual in that it brought with it the beginning of a head cold: his nose was stuffy, his muscles ached in earnest, and his throat felt scratchy. He worried about spreading his germs to Sherlock, so it seemed best to stay away from the annexe. He cursed as he dragged himself to the bathroom to get a glass of water to appease his raspy throat; the dinner with Harry had reinvigorated his dedication to attending to his work duties, and now he'd have to call in sick.

He used the intercom to inform Mycroft that he would have to refrain from work for at least a day.

To his relief, the older Holmes took his announcement in stride: "I shall have Anthea call the nursing agency. Perhaps Nurse Mullan is available for additional hours until you're on the mend. There is a pharmacy cabinet in the large bathroom close to the kitchens where you should be able to find anything you need. Sophie keeps it well stocked."

John thanked the man and pushed the intercom button to hang up. He wanted nothing more than to crawl back under the covers and sleep for a week, but he had one more call to make. It felt important to be polite, to be the one to tell Sherlock he wasn't coming in. John was still walking on eggshells with the man and wanted him to know he wasn't happy about having to stay away.

He rang the annexe and tried not to be disappointed when it was Tallie’s cheery voice that answered. She told John that Sherlock was outside in the garden.

After coughing into a bit of tissue he'd torn off a toilet roll, John explained the situation. "Tell him I'll be back as soon as I can. He'll probably be relieved to be rid of me for a few days."

After ending the call, John succumbed to the lure of sleep, not stirring again until the afternoon. The head cold had, by then, evolved into a fully-fledged entity of copious snot and a productive, convulsive cough. He popped an ibuprofen from his own stash which helped with the muscle ache, but the distracting stuffiness in his sinuses remained. Let's hope Sophie's cabinet has a stash of Sudafed.

The medicine cabinet did turn out to be fully stocked, even with several prescription medications, which didn't surprise John. Mycroft, once again. After collecting what he needed, John dragged himself back to his bedroom and under the covers, content to stay there until he felt human again.

For the next twenty-four hours, Sophie was a godsend, regularly delivering trays of hot soup and tea with lemon and honey. Mycroft rang John once a day to politely inquire about his health, though he was probably receiving regular reports from Sophie. When sleeping stopped being the only thing he was interested in doing, John's laptop and the house's extensive library kept him entertained. After his first encounter with Sherlock, John had spent a bit of time every day on the internet to learn what medical school never taught him about everyday life with tetraplegia and being off sick gave him time to continue his research.

Depending on the level of injury, the long-term situations of cervical spinal injuries varied between living independently to completely immobile and respirator-dependent. Sherlock seemed to be somewhere in the middle — impaired enough that he would need a lot of help with very intimate things, but most patients with his level of injury could do more themselves than Sherlock was
currently managing. John couldn't help wondering why.

He had not attempted to intrude on the times when Sherlock and Tallie retreated into his bedroom and bathroom for what Tallie called their daily routines. John had some idea of the procedures and assisted hygiene habits that Sherlock's injury would require but chose not to dwell on them. If he were in Sherlock's position, he wouldn't want others to speculate how he used the loo or washed his hair, either. Yet, this led to a slight dilemma with his job description: Mycroft seemed to appreciate his medical skills yet had made it clear that the use of them would not be expected. Sherlock also seemed as uninterested in John's profession as he was in most things regarding other people. For John, the question why me lingered stubbornly. His research gave him facts, but very few tangible answers regarding what to do about Sherlock.

After two days of being confined to his bedroom, John felt well enough to explore the house a bit more. He discovered a stunning bathroom upstairs with a large, gilded, claw-footed tub. He spent two hours there on a rainy afternoon, letting the hot water scented with the lavender and ginger bath oils he selected from a shelf soak away the aches of being confined to bed. It was like being on holiday, if only with a raging head cold. His shoulder constantly ached in unison with his back, and the warm water did wonders to it. His leg hadn't troubled him for days, but then again, he never seemed to be able to predict its whims.

He tried to relax his mind as well to enjoy it but found his thoughts frequently drifting to the annexe and its one occupant. He was getting antsy to return to Sh— err, work.

Three days after the start of his viral ordeal, John felt confident that he was no longer the Typhoid Mary of upper respiratory infections. He got dressed and headed to breakfast early, hoping to catch Mycroft to let him know he'd be returning to work.

John couldn't say that he looked forward to sharing Mycroft's formal morning proceedings over tea and newspapers, but it was nice to get out of his bedroom again. He wondered if Mycroft ever just snuck a bowl of cereal in his pyjamas instead of all… this. Six different jams, preserves and marmalades adorned an oak tray, and there were pain au chocolat and no less than four kinds of savoury bread on offer. I bet none of these came from a plastic bag, John thought as he took his seat and spread a white linen napkin on his lap.

"Good morning, John — good to see you are on the mend. Sherlock will be delighted," Mycroft commented in his usual, courteous manner, looking visibly relieved.

"That seems like a bit of an exaggeration.” John took a bite of the half of a pumpkin seed & cheddar wheat roll he'd buttered. Realising then that his employer was serious, he added: “But thanks, I guess."

Mycroft gave him a curious look. "Perhaps you might have a word with Natalia on this."

The man's tone made John suspect that he had already done so. He gave Mycroft a rise of a brow, then focussed on his tea and the front page of The Times.
It was chilly in the annexe when John arrived; Tallie must have opened a window to air the kitchen despite the crisp early spring air. Remains of a breakfast of yoghurt and toast were piled up in the sink, and John realised that he'd missed the cheery, modern comfort of the annexe — no matter how forced — because of its stark contrast to the stuffy, stale atmosphere found in the main house. A yellow tablecloth with red flowers John hadn't seen before adorned the kitchen island — so different from the plain linens of the main house. It seemed very much Tallie's style; she seemed determined to spruce up the surroundings to banish the doom and gloom of the estate.

She walked in, carrying a basket of laundry and flashed John a smile. "Feeling better, then?"

"Must be Sophie's chicken soup." *And the copious amounts of Co-codamol.*

"Sherlock's outside if you want to join him."

A glance out the kitchen window told John that the morning was sunny but windy. The first snowdrops and other spring flowers were popping up, and while most of the garden was still withered and bleak, John enjoyed spotting the occasional blotches of colour amid the undergrowth. The ground had dried, allowing Sherlock to venture outside the paved paths with his chair. He still stuck mostly to the hedged area just outside the annexe back door, and John wondered why. There was a maze of gravel paths in the park outside the immediate vicinity of the house he could have easily navigated even during the winter months because they were kept open by the groundskeeper. *Sherlock probably just doesn't have the motivation,* John reasoned. *He seems to have very little of that for anything.*

"Go on, join him," Tallie prompted. "There are thermos mugs in the cupboard; you could take some tea outside. He'll be happy to see you!"

"Why does everyone keep insisting that?" John asked. "Even Mycroft said so. Sherlock barely even talks to me. Maybe he does hate having a changing rota of nurses he doesn't know when neither of us is on duty, but he likes you way more than he does me."

Tallie bit her lower lip, looking secretive as she continued to smile at John. "When I got here four days ago, the very first thing out of his mouth was 'when's John coming in'? Then when you called in sick, that was the end of his good mood. Yes, John, I said *good.*” She insisted when John raised a brow. “He'd never admit to it, but he was disappointed and has continued to be pretty damned disappointed for three days, even though he understood you were off sick. Yesterday, he got so stir-crazy he nearly came to find you, and he never goes into the main house if he can help it. Says that the spirit of Mycroft haunts it."

John chuckled, mostly at what must have been a direct quote, but also because of the astonishing and baffling idea that Sherlock appeared actually to want his company. In theory, John knew that's what he was hired for, but Sherlock had made it pretty clear what he thought of just about everyone.

"In fact," Tallie continued, "Why don't I join you two? Let's make a picnic out of it,” she suggested mischievously, turning to dig out a packet of ginger nuts and some savoury Fortnum & Mason rosemary and cheddar biscuits from the cupboard. She dropped them into a wicker basket used by Sophie to ferry food to and from the main house. Tallie then hopped into her Wellingtons and bustled out the door.
John grasped the handle of his cane harder, still feeling a bit whiplashed before shaking his head and hurrying to catch up with her.

They found Sherlock by an opening in the thick holly hedge, looking out towards the lawn that stretched out towards a pond at the outskirts of the northern side of the estate. Elsewhere around them, the hedge enclosed the annexe’s back garden into a concealed sanctuary.

Sherlock seemed to be watching a black and white bird pecking at the withered grass.

"Eurasian magpie — *Pica pica* in Latin. Member of the Corvidae family. Highly intelligent," he announced without even turning his head to look at who had joined him by the thicket.

"Why's it called a magpie?" Tallie asked.

John had noticed that she often asked Sherlock factual things to engage him in conversation, to keep him from drifting off into wherever it was that he went inside his head when he didn't want to acknowledge the rest of the world. Sherlock frequently took the bait, appearing to enjoy flaunting his astonishing knowledge base of the natural world, history of criminology, and classical literature, among other things.

"The word 'pie' is a mongrel version of the French word 'pica', meaning pied or black-and-white. The English name was established as early as the 1600s. It has been theorised that the first part comes from the female forenames Margery or Margaret. As to why one can only guess."

"I thought that the pie part was from something like maggoty-pie," John interjected, clasping his hands behind his back in a half-hearted parade rest where he stood just behind Sherlock's chair. "I think I read it somewhere."

"Oh," Sherlock said snootily without even turning to look at John. "You're here." It sounded like an accusation.

John rolled his eyes at Tallie. *See? Told you.*

Tallie laughed. "I'm sure John missed you, too."

Surprised, Sherlock turned his head to face her. Now, it was John's turn to laugh when the tiniest hint of a blush spread across the man's considerable cheekbones. Even though he then tried to divert attention from the fact by schooling his features to look even more exaggeratedly displeased than before, it was too late.

Tallie dug out one of the biscuit packets. "John comes bearing English breakfast, and I've got your favourites to dunk in."

"No, thank you."

John breathed out, gaze idling on the bird which seemed to be getting increasingly frustrated trying to find worms in the cold ground. *You and me both,* John thought.

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Boredom flirted with unease, peppered by occasional moments of minor triumph during John’s first few weeks at Musgrave Court as they all settled into a routine. Sherlock was clearly used to being left alone in spirit — if rarely physically — and did very little each day. Most of the time,
John could still have been a potted bloody plant for all the attention with which Sherlock saw fit to award him. It was hard to believe Tallie and Mycroft's words about Sherlock having looked forward to John's flu abating since tea and the occasional glass of water were still the only things about which Sherlock initiated communication.

Strangely enough, for John, the presence of another person, no matter how antisocial, was still such an improvement over the suffocating solitude of the dingy bedsit he had left behind that he found himself oddly glad for it, however monotonous their days felt. Tallie came by in the morning and afternoon, often staying until late in the evening so that she wouldn't have to come back in for a third visit to assist in Sherlock's bedtime routines. On the days she needed to leave earlier to attend to other patients or her university classes, John and Mycroft took turns keeping Sherlock company until she returned after dinner. Sherlock never seemed to welcome his brother's company actively, but the older Holmes seemed seasoned in ignoring the bristling disapproval his younger brother directed at him. John had to admire both men's resilience: Mycroft's serenity in the face of his brother's restless, seething dislike of anything and everything which, at times, bordered on comical, and Sherlock's in executing such theatrics with both consistency and creative flourish.

Every evening, Mycroft arrived shortly before the news was on and settled in to watch it in the recreation room of the annexe. That is what the elder Holmes insisted on calling it while John and Tallie referred to it as a sitting room. It had a TV, an admirable sound system and several bookcases as well as a case for DVDs and Blu-Rays. Sherlock hovered by while the news was on, more focused on bickering with his brother or homing a bristling silence at the man than watching the reports on screen.

Though John found some consolation in seeing everyone around Sherlock being treated with at least mild disdain, eventually John became quite desperate to come up with something that would make Sherlock voluntarily acknowledge his existence.

He smelled an opportunity at an early Monday breakfast when Mycroft and Sophie were discussing that week's schedules. Sophie had a night off, and she began to instruct John on what to take out of the freezer and fridge for dinner — things she would prepare in the afternoon or had cooked the week before.

Mycroft would not be home that evening — some meeting or other, the explanations of which were always kept very vague — so John wondered if he couldn't give the older woman a bit of a respite. He felt guilty over her fussing.

"We could just get takeaway," he suggested.

The looks he got were utterly confused. Surely someone in this house has at least once ordered a bloody pizza? He wondered, but another look at Mycroft's facial acrobatics signalled that his assumption might be false, indeed.

"Could be a nice surprise for Sherlock," John insisted, but his tone now lacked the enthusiasm he had felt only moments ago. "What does he like?"

"He did use to sustain himself on takeaway among... other things," Mycroft admitted cryptically. "But it is inadvisable to alter his diet very suddenly."

"And his diet is what?" John still rarely saw the man eat a single bite. Mostly he just spotted large glasses with remains of what looked like smoothies and plates with a few crumbs, but nothing else to give away their former contents. If Sherlock ever consumed normal meals — the kinds served by Sophie in the main house — the evidence of that was strangely absent. John knew that when Sherlock had meals in the annexe kitchen, it was with Tallie and Tallie only; John's presence
seemed always to prompt an announcement that Sherlock wasn't hungry. That's why John politely tended to retreat to the main house to have dinner there, served by Sophie. Mycroft always seemed mildly pleased at those occasions.

"Nutritiously balanced for the benefit of his recovery," the older Holmes declared.

*What recovery? John wondered. It's been over a year. He doesn't seem to do physio or... much of anything. How is he going to improve or recover, exactly?*

"Admittedly, his refusal to make use of the assistive devices available in his condition for dining has led to weight loss since he will only consume things he can painstakingly manage to eat with his fingers or with the help of a straw. Thankfully, he will at least allow Natalia's assistance."

"But what does he like?" John insisted. "Everyone's got favourite foods and foods they hate."

"For Sherlock, a list of the latter was very extensive, indeed."

"What do you mean, 'was'? His sense of taste is the same, isn't it?"

John detested the look Mycroft gave him. It made him feel belittled.

"Food is one of the things in which Sherlock has always found easy to lose interest. In a way, it serves as a weathervane of his moods. Appetite can be affected by a spinal injury, we were told, though I cannot fathom the precise physiological mechanism of it."

*Anyone would lose interest in food if they were spoon-fed oatmeal by a nurse,* John thought bitterly. He knew what that felt like because he'd been through it at the hospital in Afghanistan right after his injury; his arm and shoulder had been in a splint, and his right wrist sprained and terribly swollen. He hated being fed bland hospital food by someone else with every cell of his being, and the first thing he'd done once settled into his flat was to find a place that delivered a decent curry. It didn't fix anything, but it made him feel a little less like a patient to indulge in something so decadent. He kicked his foot irritably against his cane as he remembered those first few days.

The food in the manor mirrored its atmosphere — refined but more than a bit stuffy. Not modern by any standards. To John, it felt logical that being served whatever others thought he should have was probably a part of why Sherlock found the concept of meals at the Court so disinteresting and depressing.

Mycroft appeared to be thinking, which John took as a good sign. Either that, or he was about to be viciously insulted for daring to suggest something as uncouth as eating food that arrived in a Styrofoam container.

"Sophie?" Mycroft inquired suddenly. "Are you aware of any establishments in the area which deliver meals?"

"Papa John's is where my Alden tends to order his Friday night rugby pizza. Then there's Noodle Nation on Crown Lane, but I cannot say I have ever tried it."

Mycroft looked as though he'd rather be waterboarded by the Taliban than dine at anything called *Noodle Nation.*

"When my Ollie visits, we do sometimes order in from Sundarbans on London Road," Sophie added. "They are quite good."
"Could you supply the contact information for Doctor Watson, in case he wishes to order in dinner for himself?" Mycroft inquired politely, before snapping his newspaper into submission, clearly considering the conversation concluded.

"Certainly." Sophie flashed John a smile.

Armed with his newfound knowledge, John squared his shoulders and marched into the annexe to propose his modest plan of evening entertainment. Tallie had just left for the morning; the sound of gravel being ground under her shoes could still be heard from outside the window.

"We could order in enough for all three of us," John finished his enthusiastic dinner proposition to Sherlock. He couldn't think of a reason why Tallie wouldn't also enjoy a bit of a change in annexe cuisine.

Sherlock was giving him a withering glare, not unlike that which Mycroft had awarded the concept of Noodle Nation.

"Mycroft's not in tonight," John explained.

"Thank god for small mercies." Sherlock yanked petulantly on the joystick of his chair, backing up and attempting to move around John, who determinedly blocked the way into the kitchen.

"You choose. Indian, Italian, Chinese…?"

"You're infuriatingly persistent."

"And you're just infuriating!" It slipped out before John's brain connected with his tongue.

Maybe his patience hadn't recovered from his own injury. Or perhaps anyone would feel the pressure after days and days of being treated like dirt even if they were being paid for it.

Sea-green eyes narrowed, fixed on him. "Excuse me?"


"Who says I want ethnic food?"

"Mycroft says you used to live on takeaway."

"Mycroft says a lot of deluded things."

"Well, did you?"

Sherlock bristled.

"What is your favourite food, then?" John asked casually. He stepped aside just enough to allow Sherlock to roll past him into the kitchen. Once there, he didn’t do anything, signalling that he had just wanted to abandon the conversation.

"Favourite crisp flavour?" John pressed and walked behind Sherlock as the man abandoned the kitchen for the foyer leading to the garden. Once there, Sherlock attempted to close the kitchen door in John's face, but the electric mechanism was slow enough that John was able to slip in and crowd him again.
"Favourite ice cream flavour?"

Sherlock stared at him.

John stared back petulantly. "Earl Grey or English breakfast?"

"What do you want from me, John?" Sherlock finally asked, defeated.

John tried not to smile. "Company for a curry. I'm not having dinner alone in the main house, and I bet once you smell what's going to be in the delivery containers, you're going to want a taste."

"What does it matter to you what I want?"

"Of course, it bloody matters!"

"That's not how things usually work in this house."

"Big Brother decides everything for you, then? Seriously, what's with this food thing, Sherlock?" John asked, his tone now quieter. He moved to lean on the sun-warmed wood of the garden door and noticed that two pairs of wellingtons sat beside it, one with the tags still in place. On a hunch, he picked them up and checked the size — his own. Mycroft. Of the bloody course.

"I didn't care much for eating when I was at the hospital with my shoulder," he told Sherlock. "The meds made me nauseous and made everything taste weird. Took me a while to start feeling hungry again. Maybe, for some people, that lasts longer?" he suggested.

"I don't want to discuss this."

"So, you'd rather starve than talk, then?"

John knew nothing good would come out of that sentence, but he said it anyway. He wasn't sure if his infuriating persistence would be a match for Sherlock's stubbornness, but a part of him was still curious about what was going on. Some sort of an eating disorder?

Suddenly, the pieces fit as he remembered Tallie's explanations on the day he'd arrived and what Mycroft had said about sandwiches and assistive devices.

He worried his lip before speaking. "You just don't want any help, do you? You hate all of this so much that you'd rather just… not." It wasn't a question.

For the briefest moment, something shifted in Sherlock's gaze, softened and revealed itself, before it was pushed back and locked away again.

"You don't know anything about me," he protested to John, but his tone lacked the usual blind stab of a blade.

"No, but I'd like to change that," John said softly. "Chinese it is."

The delivery man, a twenty-something sporting skinny jeans which left little to the imagination and a nose ring, gazed up towards the towering facade of the front of the main house before passing the white plastic bag to John. "Nice digs."
"Not mine," John said. "But thanks."

"You're just housesittin' a castle, then?"

At John’s grunt, the delivery guy disappeared back into the driver’s seat, sending gravel flying as he pressed the gas pedal.

John stuck his nose into the bag to ensure that the number of containers matched the number of dishes he’d ordered — seven. A bit over the top, but if Sherlock had mostly just consumed protein shakes and toast for god-knows-how-many-months, he was due a bit of over-the-top. Their joint perusal of the restaurant’s menu had taught John that Sherlock had probably been a picky eater even before his accident. They’d eventually settled on a nice selection of Cantonese classics, and John’s mouth was now watering at the aromas floating up from the bag. He was hopeful that, since Sherlock had had equal input in the ordering, he would willingly eat some of it.

It wasn’t enough that John had got to the bottom of the issue and now understood Sherlock’s reasoning. Now, he desperately wished he knew the right words to make the man feel less apprehensive about eating in his presence. Brushing one’s teeth, bathing, wiping one’s behind, eating a meal — all were things that humans learned at a very young age. Losing such abilities as an adult and having to ask for help with them would be crushing. John had needed help with most of that stuff right after his injury, and he was thankful that the morphine he’d been on had heavily diluted most of his mortifying memories of that time. For him, it had been a passing thing. For Sherlock, reliance on others would colour the rest of his life.

John thought he now also understood why Tallie was allowed to assist in such things when he was not — not yet, at least. She was not a man roughly the same age who still retained the skills Sherlock had lost, but a hired professional with experience doing these things for others. Sherlock must have sensed John's apprehension and hesitation, which had added to his embarrassment. Tallie managed to treat these things as though they were normal and natural. Sherlock never seemed to let Mycroft help, either, which made sense, too. John would have hated for Harry to be his carer during his rehab.

Still, it was no use refusing to accept reality. If Sherlock wanted some of tonight's General Tso's Chicken, either he’d have to grab a fork or let John do it for him. With a determined stride, he took his loot to the annexe kitchen before turning on the TV in the sitting room. Maybe eating in front of the telly might give them both a suitable distraction.

He collected a roll of kitchen paper and two plates from the cupboard, planning to load them both with a bit of everything, but then hesitated. I should let him choose what he wants. That's the whole point, isn't it?

"Sherlock?" John called out. "Dinner's here." He quickly opened all the containers and arranged them in a line on the edge of the kitchen island. "Come tell me what you'd fancy."

Sherlock had insisted on Jasmine rice instead of plain, so John spooned some of that onto a plate, convinced that it was one culinary decision already made.

It took a few moments for Sherlock to appear. When he did, hesitating on the threshold of the kitchen, his gaze shifted from John to the food and back to John. He looked ready to bolt.

Feeling the atmosphere thicken, John scrambled to break the ice by peering into one of the containers. "This one's got mushrooms, which they didn't list on the menu."

Sherlock swallowed. "I'll pass on that, then."
John cleared his throat and nodded in the direction of the rec room. "There's a documentary on. Hummingbirds. Wouldn't mind watching it with you."

He fished out the chopsticks from the plastic bag, opened the cutlery drawer and swiftly shoved them into an empty slot in the white plastic divider. He took out two forks and two knives and took them to the coffee table in front of the TV. Usually, Sherlock watched it from his chair, but John had been purposefully paying attention lately to how Tallie managed Sherlock's transfers, and he'd had an idea while walking back to the annexe regarding how to make Sherlock feel less self-conscious about eating together. He had also decided that it would probably be less awkward if Sherlock didn't have to ask for such help, but simply accepted his offer of it.

"Dinner on the sofa?" John suggested. "I'll help you with everything."

To John's delight, after a brief moment of hesitation, Sherlock nodded. "Alright."

"Now, what can I get you?" John asked and began listing all the foods they had ordered.

Sherlock stopped him after two, looking indignant as though it was insulting that John assumed that he didn't remember it all. He named four dishes and watched as John ladled some of each onto his plate. Following John to the rec room, he watched quietly from the doorway as John set his plate on the coffee table and then pushed the table away from the sofa to make room for the wheelchair.

John knew that Tallie always left a sturdy, wide, belt-like cloth beneath Sherlock's thighs to make transfers easier. Another option was a flat, black plastic slide, but that had to be manoeuvred into place first. It had a permanent place in the bathroom where anything made from fabric would have got wet or soiled and thus be much more troublesome to clean than plastic.

After Sherlock had positioned himself beside the sofa, John leant his cane against the coffee table and came to stand before him. "You know this is fine, don't you? It's all fine," he assured Sherlock.

"I know it's fine." Careful. Dismissive.

"It is what it is," John acknowledged. "We just have to—"

"What it is, is hell." Sherlock's jaw tightened.

John was surprised by the outburst — the first time he had heard any Holmes resort to profanity. This raw honesty was different from the way Sherlock habitually lashed out at everyone; even when he made morbid jokes about paralysed vocal cords, he was merely sidestepping the issue.

"We're going to have a nice evening, and not think about tomorrow, or next week, or next month, or the next ten years, okay?" John suggested. "God knows I don't like thinking about all that, either. I like working here right now because it lets me not worry about such stuff. So, let's just watch these hummingbirds and have some Chinese, hm?"

At Sherlock's stiff, resigned nod, John leant down and grabbed the straps under Sherlock’s thighs. Sherlock crossed his wrists over his chest and tipped slightly forward against John's shoulder as John unbuckled the chair's safety belt.

John was surprised by how light the man was. He'd feared his shoulder would complain or that his leg would have difficulty supporting both their weights, but he easily managed to lift and slide Sherlock onto the sofa. With a bit of fumbling, he steered the wheelchair away so that he could return the coffee table to its usual spot.
Sherlock watched his attempt at working out the chair’s controls. "It’s not rocket science, you know," he commented, eyebrow raised in a mixture of alarm and amusement.

"You try doing it upside down from outside the chair," John quipped back. "It’s my first time operating this thing so stop looking so bloody smug."

John got the legged tray Sherlock used in bed and placed it over his lap, carefully arranging the plate and a fork on it.

He didn’t really know how well Sherlock could manage with regular cutlery. There were larger-than-normal forks and what looked like Velcro cuffs stuffed in the back of the kitchen cupboard; he assumed they were what Mycroft had been referring to when he said that Sherlock refused to use any assistive devices. John didn’t assume he understood Sherlock’s thinking enough yet to make sense of why those devices would be more embarrassing as needing help. Then again, Sherlock’s solution seemed to be to refuse to eat altogether.

Sherlock carefully grabbed hold of a fork, manoeuvring it so that his entire hand clasped around it in a fist. The arrangement didn’t look very dexterous. "I need you to skewer things and spin the noodles around the fork." His tone was detached, business-like.

"You got it," John said and turned up the volume on the documentary as the opening credits began.

His own food was likely to get cold while he helped Sherlock, but he didn’t give a damn. Considering how much weight he must have lost compared to the photos John had seen in newspaper articles, Sherlock clearly needed his deep-fried squid balls with sweet and sour sauce much more than John did.
John and Sherlock team up against the powers of Big Brother in a small, but effective way and Mycroft asks for help.

On a rainy Wednesday, a few weeks into his employment, John was standing next to the shelves of DVDs in the sitting room, reading aloud the titles in an effort to engage Sherlock in an activity that didn't involve attempting to stare holes through window panes.

Two days earlier, John had suggested going for a drive. He knew he should not delay learning how the car refitted for Sherlock's wheelchair worked so that he wouldn't have to stress over it if he was assigned to take Sherlock to one of his hospital appointments.

His suggestion was met with what he now considered Sherlock's baseline of disdain.

"A drive in the country? And what would we see? Some trees? A sliver of the sky? How riveting. Nothing I could possibly see from the window."

Of course, John knew that Sherlock's day wouldn't probably be much improved by a zip around the country lanes in the parish, but it had been his only remaining idea that afternoon.

"I need to learn how to manage with your ramp and all," he had pointed out tiredly, already realising he'd lost this round.

"I would be more than happy to lend my chair to you. You and Tallie can then play around with the car to your heart's desire. Just leave me out of it."

Maybe that conversation meant that leaving the house was too big a step. So, to break today's monotony of Sherlock staring out the window into the rain spattering the glass or listening to some angry-sounding symphony, John decided he would try to find something for them to do from the clues on the shelves in the rec room on what Sherlock might find tolerable.

The most obvious one was the extensive film collection, presumably supplied by Mycroft. None of the titles so far had roused any interest in John's brooding companion. Shifting his gaze to yet another shelf, John finally managed to trigger a half-hearted glare when he — somewhat intentionally — butchered pronouncing 'Des Hommes et des Dieux'. Sherlock repeated the title to him with elegant, perfectly enunciated, fluent French. It made John recall Mycroft having mentioned some of their maternal relatives hailed from the north of that country.

"Men… something?" John prompted, wanting to salvage Sherlock's opinion about him being at least somewhat cultured.

"French gay porn, obviously," came the sarcastic retort. Over the last few weeks, John had learned that sarcasm was something Sherlock cultivated only as a sender, not a recipient. Statements
requiring interpretation about the speaker's motives seemed to go over his head.

"I may not watch those sorts of films, but I'm not an idiot."

"Pray tell, what are 'those sorts of films'?"

"Foreign ones with subtitles. It feels like too much work to both watch and follow the text at the same time." John shrugged. "I'd just grab a book if I wanted to read."

"It may surprise you, but there are people on this planet who do not primarily speak English."

John refrained from sticking out his tongue, but barely. "What's it about, then?" he asked, just to make conversation. He had already put the DVD case back on the shelf.

"It's one of Mycroft's favourites but, admittedly, quite good. It is about a group of Trappist monks in Algeria who are kidnapped by extremists during the Algerian civil war in the 1990s. The duties of government and international politics as pertaining to terrorism are prominent themes."

"That doesn't sound too bad." John grabbed the DVD case and put it on the coffee table as one option, but returned to the shelves for a final, leisurely sweep of their contents.

"What is it that Mycroft actually does for a living?" he asked while skimming the rest of the titles. He had wondered this before, but something about the older Holmes' demeanour had strongly discouraged him from asking.

"My brother would say that he occupies a minor role in the British Government. What would be closer to the truth is that he is the British Government when he's not stretched thin being both the British Secrets Services and a one-man subsection of the CIA on a freelance basis. When he's bored, he dabbles with the Mossad just to stir things up. Nothing whets his appetite like a crisis in the Middle East."

"And he tells you all this?" John rather believed that Sherlock was just testing how gullible he was. It all sounded so outlandish.

Probably Mycroft Holmes was just some businessperson who had inherited land with a country pile plonked in the middle.

"He doesn't tell me anything. I deduce it. It's quid pro quo for the way he has always prided himself in being nosy about my life. Now, he gets to micromanage it. Must be a dream come true, imprisoning me here."

"He doesn't actually do that, does he?" John's question was only half serious. "I mean, you could live where you wanted if the flat was accessible and you had help, couldn't you? Where did you live before—"

John snapped his mouth shut, turning back to the vast selection of DVDs, unsure whether the topic was a wise choice.

Sherlock never spoke about the accident and true to form, the man didn’t reply. Not that he spoke all that much to John about anything, but clearly it was a touchy subject. The charged silence intensified until it became tangible, a suffocating weight repelling every ounce of lingering, stilted humour.

With another yet-unread jewel case in his hand, John glanced over his shoulder, visibly startling at the sight of Mycroft looming in the doorway. The brothers were locked in a staring contest of epic
proportions, entire conversations held in the twitch of an eyebrow.

*Christ.* John still wasn’t used to the elder Holmes appearing out of nowhere. He glanced behind Mycroft, wondering if the man had somehow learned how to teleport.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Doctor Watson. I simply take the precaution of high-quality shoes with sound-eliminating soles.” Mycroft did not move a muscle as he unnervingly seemed to be reading John’s mind and delivering this quip in a bored voice.

“Kettle’s boiled.” Sherlock’s voice matched Mycroft’s in tone, though his eyes twitched to John’s briefly seconds before the whistle from the kitchen sounded, shrill in the thick air.

“How…?” John trailed off, shaking his head. Though it wasn’t their usual tea break time, he had thought about putting it on mere minutes ago. “Right. Guess I’ll just…”

Sherlock flicked his fingers dismissively. “That does seem to be what you do best, John.”

John stomped to the kitchen, stopping himself just short of slamming the mugs onto the counter. The rumble of deep voices followed him from the bedroom, but his irritation muffled them, filling his ears instead with the sound of his harsh breathing and pounding heart. Bloody ungrateful bastard and his bloody interfering brother. Perfectly matched, those two.

When he returned to the sitting room, it was just in time to hear the elder Holmes huff out an irritated breath.

"I would have hoped, with more people in the house, that you might find it in yourself to regain some of your prior standards. Mummy is pressing for one of those Skype calls again so you could at least *try.* This isn’t easy for them either, you know."

“*Oh.* It’s not easy for *them*? Excuse my utter lack of empathy. Perhaps it’s paralysed.”

Neither brother smiled at Sherlock’s feeble joke, and John knew better than to interfere. He stood motionless in the doorway, the mugs hot against his palms. The air was crackling with decades of complex history between the brothers.

"Thank goodness Natalia’s presence at least guarantees some level of personal hygiene. Your level of initiative has not improved, so an intervention is needed. I am sure that, with the right incentive, your prior service provider could be persuaded to make a house call."

"You're not dragging anyone here from London to gawk at me."

"What I am proposing would *lessen* the desire of others to gawk at you. You look like a highwayman, brother mine."

John had to agree. Some men didn't grow a very even beard, and Sherlock was one of them. It bristled every which way, and when combined with naturally very curly hair that was allowed to mat and fluff into an English approximation of an afro, the overall effect could well frighten small children. Especially when accessorised with Sherlock’s default snarly expression.

However, John was starting to notice that Sherlock looked particularly off-putting when he was aware of being watched, ready to strike at the slightest provocation. There was something very heart-breaking in the almost knee-jerk like way he attempted to offend as a defence mechanism. The whole thing was tinted with almost a panic-like urgency at times — as though he feared that if he didn't snarl and snap and wound often enough, John might actually get a word in and surprise him in a way he wouldn't like. Outside of those moments when he was willing to engage with
others, he looked crestfallen, locked behind a veil of desolation.

John edged into the room, setting Sherlock's tea carefully in the cup holder of his wheelchair, angling it so he could reach it easily. Their eyes met for a brief moment, and John thought he saw a glimmer of something nearly-familiar pass through the impossible depths of Sherlock's sea-green gaze, but then his head snapped up to glare at Mycroft, and it was gone.

"John can help," Sherlock announced.

Mycroft’s face did something complicated that John suspected might be his attempt at a smile but looked more like the face one made when encountering something unpleasant such as a smelly rubbish bin or a large rodent.

"Surely you would prefer a professional — someone familiar with an educated level of personal grooming."

"Oi!" John commented and was ignored.

"You may stall and jest, but you know as well as I do how much it would worry her if Mummy saw you in your current state. We've talked about this," Mycroft continued with the tone of a schoolmistress. "You were advised repeatedly that returning to one's personal habits and routines is very important. I will make an appointment."

Mycroft spun on his heel and began making his way back to the main house.

"Yes, clearly it's of utmost importance to look good while rotting away IN HERE!" Sherlock yelled at the receding back of his brother, the volume of his voice rising towards the end as the latter slipped out of the annexe.

Still stung from the way he had been talked down, John was in the mood for a bit of payback: "So, what are we planning, then?"

He got a glare. "We are planning nothing."

John shrugged. "You should think about it. Showing that hair a comb and that beard the door isn’t the worst idea."

Sherlock's gaze swept him up and down. "You're one to talk, Mister 'Boots three-pound shaving cream and a decade-old Dove bar'."

"Highwayman," John teased in kind.

Sherlock's eyes widened, nostrils flaring. John had learned by now that any barbs coming from Mycroft were liable to prick Sherlock into a counter-strike rather than sticking to his sulky silence. He’d probably outlive God trying to have the last word, so maybe playing by his rules would be the only way to rouse Sherlock into action. In this case, it meant sticking to Sherlock's own, perhaps rash, suggestion.

"Do your worst, then," Sherlock said snootily, turning his chair and heading towards the bedroom.

"Do my worst what?" John asked mock-innocently as he returned to the kitchen to put the tea cosy on the pot.

"Oh, for Christ's sake, John, what it must be like in your funny little brain! Come along, the day is wasting!" came the shout from the bathroom.
John hid his grin and followed.

John had never shaved a man. A man that wasn't himself that is. He would have assumed the steps would be obvious and the way he needed to adapt his methods would come naturally but as he stood by the sink in the large en suite, razor in hand, what he felt was not the confidence of a man who had battled his own facial hair for over twenty-five years. Instead, he felt quite lost indeed.

Sherlock had told him where to find fresh towels. John then opened the above-sink cabinet, which turned out to be full of bottles and tubs and tubes of posh cosmetic products, most of them containing potions the uses of which were a mystery to him. It shouldn't have come as such a surprise that a country estate such as Musgrave would be fully stocked with such extravagance. There were several posh-looking aftershaves and a shaving cream the brand of which John had never heard, and he wondered if it was sold in salons only. That didn't surprise him, nor did the fact that there was no electric razor, but a stainless-steel safety blade by some brand called Merkur. He thought of the contrasting packets of six of plastic Gillettes he always bought and worried what sorts of expectations Sherlock might have of this shave and how he was likely going to be disappointed.

"Does Tallie usually do this?" He asked.

"Yes, though I mostly tell her not to bother."

John placed the bottle of shaving cream on the edge of the sink and then draped a large, white towel across Sherlock's chest and shoulders.

"Does she cut your hair, too?" He then asked.

Sherlock's dark brown curls looked like such a far cry from the perfectly styled, beautiful ringlets John had seen in the newspaper photos that he was confident in his guess. He was sure that Sherlock must have had his hair cut and done at one of London's nicer salons before his accident.

John filled the sink, poured a generous dollop of shaving cream on his left palm, then lathered it on Sherlock's features with his fingers.

"There is a brush for that in the cupboard, you know," Sherlock commented disinterestedly.

John's reply was a tight-lipped hum. He picked up the razor, spent a moment trying to decide where to start, then made the first swipe down from below a cheekbone towards the tip of Sherlock's chin. *Best start where the skin should be thickest.*

The man went quiet, watching John as he worked. The latter kept his eyes sternly fixed on the job and making an effort to focus on each swipe helped him feel less self-conscious under Sherlock's intense scrutiny. He was leaning slightly over the man's lap, using two fingers of his left hand to tilt his face where he wanted it for access and to see what he was doing. Wordlessly, Sherlock complied.

With each swipe of the razor, more of his face was revealed, his pale skin reddened slightly by the blade’s chafe, making the blue-green of his eyes stand out in sharp contrast. They continued to track John’s every movement with keen alertness when his face wasn't turned too far away.

Sherlock’s skin was smooth and warm beneath John’s fingertips as he wiped a smear of shaving cream from beneath his jaw, and that's when something caught his eye. There was a smallish,
slightly scaly scar underneath the angle of Sherlock's jaw — not easy to spot, as it was faded and clearly old. It didn't look like the result of an accident; it was as though something had rubbed against it and causing the skin to thicken. Was it a callus of some sort?

Sherlock soon noticed that his hand had halted. "The violin," he answered, tone detached, uninterested.

"What?"

"I play— played the violin. Regular practice, when done long-term, will produce what is known colloquially as Fiddler's Neck or a violin hickey." Sherlock grimaced, presumably at finding the latter terms distasteful. "If often heals when someone stops playing, but not always. If significant hyperkeratosis and acanthosis develop, it can be permanent. I looked into treatments."

And? John wanted to ask. The mark didn't look very dangerous, and it wasn't very noticeable, so why have it removed? And why had Sherlock used the past tense about having sought treatment options?

"So, you played a lot?" John asked. "Before—"

Sherlock's eyes first sought out something in the far wall of the bathroom but shifted as though they were fixed beyond it, as though he was trying to distance himself from the situation.

"A lot of things have changed," he eventually said in a dull tone. "Are you done?"

John had a suspicion he was not talking about just the shave. "Nope." He had now finished the jaw and cheek areas. It was now time for some of Sherlock's more delicate features. John concentrated, his lip pulled in between his teeth, careful not to nick Sherlock as he uncovered first one high cheekbone, then the other. He stepped back and drew in a breath, tipping his head to each shoulder to work out the kinks in his neck before leaning over to swish the razor in the sink. The air in the bathroom had become slightly humid, and the fragrant scent of the shaving cream had become intense but not irritating. John had shut the door after entering to try to keep the space warm enough for Sherlock. John realised that the room now felt cosy rather than suffocating, only the sounds of their quiet breathing and the rasp of the razor breaking the silence when neither was speaking.

As John surveyed the results of his efforts so far, Sherlock’s eyes narrowed. His lips parted just as John clasped his chin in his hands again, ready to finish the sparse patch of hair below his bottom lip.

Realising Sherlock was about to speak, he dropped his hand and stepped back.

“Sorry, what—“

Sherlock ended up nervously speaking over John. “Nothing," he dismissed, stumbling a little on his words.

He then swallowed noisily, lifting his eyes to the ceiling and exhaling through his nose.

John raised his eyebrows and waited, but Sherlock’s eyes slid closed, and soon, a carefully curated look of boredom seemed to radiate from every pore. Assuming Sherlock just wanted to finish up as quickly as possible, John shrugged and stepped forward once more to finish the job, pulling the soft skin taut, using gentle strokes on the delicate dips and curves.

After a few moments of silence which felt increasingly awkward, John spoke, if only to reclaim the
quiet calm of earlier.

“So. Tallie sure is nice. Happen to know if she’s single?”

Sherlock’s lips tightened, but he said nothing, nor did he open his eyes.

"Not that I'm looking, per se, probably wouldn't be on anyway, since I guess we're considered colleagues… But she’s pretty, right?” John realised he was rambling, the attempt at making casual conversation derailing so fast it would probably jump the track.

“I wouldn't know.” Sherlock’s voice was slow and deep, but it wasn’t the tone he usually reserved for telling John he was an idiot. No, this was new: careful, slightly suggestive. *Progress*, John decided, and his eyes flickered down in surprise as he swished the razor in the sink once more.

They spoke simultaneously again, John’s brain catching on faster than his mouth. “Am I hurting — oh.”

“Not really my area,” Sherlock said, articulating every syllable carefully to give them weight.

John realised too late that the signs of Sherlock’s avoidant hesitation, which had slipped through his facade weren't caused by discomfort of the physical sort. In Sherlock's tone, a warning flirted with what John suspected was unintended innuendo since his expression signalled that he wasn't enjoying the topic. Sherlock's eyes were still closed, pinched at the corners.

*Not his area.* John couldn’t explain why that simple phrase seemed to make something flutter inside of him.

Sherlock composed his features into cold nonchalance again.

“So, boyfriend, then?” John asked, trying to keep his tone light. His mouth felt dry as he spoke, louder than he intended, the sound echoing in the small space. He darted his tongue out to lick his lips, a nervous tic of which he instantly felt self-conscious.

Sherlock sighed, a quick huff of air that signalled that this conversation was now severely trying his patience. Were he able, John had no doubt he would have fled the room.

“No. No *friends* of any kind, any gender.” Sherlock pronounced the word 'friends' to sound like a suffix, a generalisation of his romantic partnerships, but John wondered about the truth of it on a surface level. It was clear Sherlock certainly tried his best to be as unlikeable as possible.

Sherlock continued, his voice acquiring a razor's edge that sliced through the warm comfort of the previous moments. “Never needed any, don’t want any, especially now. I don’t have friends, John. You’re off the hook.” His lids shut again tightly as his jaw clenched. He was breathing heavily through his nose, seemingly trying to regain his composure.

*Off the hook.* John stiffened, feeling a surge of anger. He set the razor down with a clatter and clenched his fist once, twice, three times, trying to regain his composure before he lost his temper. He knew that particular expression was a ridiculously intense red flag for him, but he couldn't help it — he was bloody tired of people dismissing the thought that he could care about them and be able to help. *I'm a doctor for Chrissakes! It comes with the job description!*

He stepped back and looked at the man before him: arrogant, angry, hurt, withdrawn. When Sherlock opened his eyes and lifted his gaze, it was as if a reflection of how John felt was staring back at him in human form: Sherlock's eyes and mouth tight slits of barely controlled rage, his shoulders hunched up around his ears in defence, his chin tipped up haughtily.
How dare this man act so ungrateful for all John had done? He made it sound as though John was here for personal gain, trailing along behind him like some half-wit, desperate for attention.

_I'll bloody set him straight._ When John spoke, his voice was low, dangerous, and startled even him.

“I don’t need to be your friend, Sherlock. I can’t even say that I particularly even want to be here a lot of the time when you’re being a right dick. I’m here to do a job because I need the money. So while I _am_ here, it would be nice if you didn’t try and make my life as miserable as you see fit to make everyone else’s.”

“What if I _don’t_ want you here?!” The words exploded out of Sherlock, his eyes flashing, face gone splotchy, and jaw jutted out in a way that made him look like a bratty, insolent teenager.

John stared back, tipping his chin down to meet that icy stare, refusing to be intimidated, but couldn’t help cursing inwardly.

_One step forward, a hundred back._ The positive developments of the past few days had made him more confident about not putting up with too much shit from Sherlock. This qualified as a situation in which feet should be put down.

“Well, I’m not employed by you, I’m employed by your brother. I will continue to come to work until _he_ tells me to leave,” he informed Sherlock.

When no reply came, John rolled his eyes, reaching over Sherlock’s head to dig in the medicine cabinet above the sink for the aftershave. He could feel the anger radiating off the man like a physical thing, the air thick now with their combined irritation. John's hand trembled, causing bottles to clink against each other. After a moment of rifling, he pulled down two small bottles of aftershave, each wrapped in their expensive-looking labels. He leaned back, holding them within Sherlock’s line of sight.

“Preference?”

Something shifted in Sherlock’s steely gaze for just a moment, but then his features hardened again.

“No. It doesn’t matter.”

John uncapped each bottle in turn, giving them a sniff before holding them out to Sherlock. One had a light, citrusy scent while the other was headier, a combination of sandalwood and vanilla. He wigged the bottles and Sherlock’s head tipped back with another irritated sigh.

"I loathe repeating myself, John. Make a choice."

John rarely used aftershave; his collection of toiletries had never been very extensive, and his time in the army had made it even more compact. Defeated, he poured a bit of the citrus one on his palm, rubbed his hands together and gently tapped them along Sherlock's cheeks. He reached to replace the bottles in the cabinet and was nearly run over as Sherlock left the bathroom without a word or even a glance towards the mirror to survey the results of the shave.

"Thank you for all the help, John, that was very nice of you,'” John muttered bitterly.

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A good night’s sleep remained a pipe dream for Musgrave Court's newest inhabitant even though the quiet house and the comfortable bed should have provided a conducive environment. During
the two hours John spent battling sweaty sheets that night, his short bursts of slumber were permeated with images from Afghanistan. Just after midnight, he tore himself out of bed, grunting in frustration.

His bedroom felt claustrophobic, prompting him to grab the fluffy, slightly oversized bathrobe supplied by the housekeeper and make for the corridor. Though the draught there made his bare toes curl at first, the thick robe on top of his old RAMC T-shirt and old, thin-worn cotton pyjama bottoms provided enough warmth for some nightly exploration. He knew the staff went home for the night and that Mycroft’s bedroom was located at the opposite end of the wing, so his midnight walk shouldn’t bother anyone. Besides, he lived there now, so he was doing nothing wrong even if he did feel like he’d broken into some National Trust estate.

He grimaced at the sound of his cane clicking on the bare wooden floor between his bedroom and the long carpet adorning the middle of the hallway. Once on it, he could move quietly, save for the odd creak of a floorboard. But He only got as far as to the entrance to the drawing room before footsteps at the end of the corridor made him freeze on the spot. Did Mycroft Holmes have security staff doing nightly rounds, after all? Shouldn’t John have been warned about that?

It turned out to be the lord of the house himself. John raised his hand in greeting, and Mycroft hastened his steps to meet up with his houseguest. The older Holmes looked as composed as always but in the dim light and deep shadows of the old house he appeared older than his years, tired and a bit haggard. His attire was an obviously prohibitively expensive silk dressing gown, its tasselled belt ends hanging over likely tailor-altered, dark blue striped pyjama trousers underneath. A pair of new-looking slippers completed the gentlemanly ensemble.

"Evening, Doctor Watson," he greeted cordially.

"Evening." John stuck his hands into the pockets of his robe. He half expected Mycroft to inquire about his nocturnal traipsing-around, but the man looked distracted and hurried — as though on an errand — and was eyeing John as though expecting the verbal exchange to be over soon.

"I’ve received a rather distressed call from Sherlock; he appeared to be shouting into the phone from a distance and did not listen to a word I said. So, if you’ll excuse me." Mycroft tried to set off towards the annexe.

"Do you want me to go? To see him, I mean?" John called out. Having something to do seemed better than trying to make his brain stop chasing its own tail.

"There's no need; your contract does not include any nocturnal duties," Mycroft dismissed courteously. "This is not an uncommon occurrence; nights are often… difficult for him," he assured John, but his tone had gained a hint of hopefulness.

"It’s no trouble at all. You have to leave for work early tomorrow morning, don’t you? That means you need your sleep more than me." John usually ventured to the annexe no earlier than ten in the morning, making sure to leave enough time for Tallie to finish her morning duties with Sherlock. John still did not know exactly what they entailed, nor was he familiar with the details of Tallie’s afternoon visits or how she and Sherlock prepared for his bedtime. John had decided to let Sherlock have as much privacy as possible; he would learn if it ever became a necessity.

Mycroft glanced towards the end of the corridor, antsy and indecisive.

"I really don’t mind," John insisted. "At all," he added in for good measure.

"It would be very kind of you. Perhaps he would be... more civil towards a near-stranger than he is
towards me at these occasions."

John wasn't sure how he felt about 'near-stranger'. It was accurate enough, wasn't it? He couldn't understand why Mycroft would think Sherlock might prefer someone like that instead of a brother. After all, for Mycroft, these sorts of nights were clearly a familiar phenomenon.

It was clear that the past year had taken a toll on both Holmeses. If John could help, even a little bit, then why wouldn't he?

Mycroft's expression was sober. "Sherlock suffered panic attacks at the hospital after his accident." He took a pause, now looking more resigned. "I was told they are not uncommon with high-level spinal injuries, that they can happen when patients wake up and are still disoriented from sleep and unaccustomed to their state. They have become fewer and further between, but they do still happen. He detests needing my assistance, especially on nights like this."

Mycroft sounded as though he was trying to discourage John, but the mention of panic attacks had the opposite effect, making John’s gut clench in sympathy. He adjusted his grip on his cane and straightened his back.

"I'll go," John promised firmly and saw the older man’s shoulders sag in relief. It was the most emotion John had ever seen him display.

"Thank you. I shall see to it that you are justly compensated for going above and beyond the call of your agreed-upon duties."

John knew better than to argue with this. It was probably important — *a matter of honour, even?* — for his employer to not owe people favours. Perhaps, in that respect, the two brothers were rather similar?

John could feel Mycroft’s eyes on him as he made off towards the annexe. Only after he turned the corner did the sound of the older Holmes' footsteps appear and then began to recede.

"Finally!" Sherlock yelled from his bedroom when John opened the door connecting the annexe to the main house. "What the hell took you so long?"

His voice was high-pitched and urgent. In what John now knew was a typical Sherlockian response, anger was being employed to mask near-hysteria.

"You *imbicilic fat moron*—" Sherlock continued, but when John stepped into the bedroom, he turned his head and instantly fell silent, having expected his brother.

Even in the low light, John saw that he was pale, forehead glistening with sweat, his chest heaving unevenly.

"John?" he asked breathlessly.

Smiling at him, John circled the bed since Sherlock was lying closer to the right side of it. "Everything alright?" he asked, aware that it was not, but the sudden apprehension that had just taken over Sherlock meant that he wasn’t entirely pleasantly surprised at who had answered his summons and John didn't want to embarrass him further.
"My phone’s under the bed; the— the attachment to the stand broke which woke me up and I managed to push the bed remote too far away when I—" Sherlock had to pause to gasp for air. "I need to get up, to sit up, I didn't have the remote to call on the intercom, and I couldn't tell if I'd managed to activate Siri—"

"Hey," John called out gently, frowning as he sat down on the bed. With his palm, he enclosed Sherlock’s fingers which were digging into the duvet. "Listen. It’s alright. Mycroft heard you."

He removed his hand to grab the spring-cord bed remote which lay next to Sherlock’s knee and brought the head of the bed up to an almost sitting position. “Want some water?”

"No. I just need—" Sherlock paused to suck in a breath, “—to sit, but I had a spasm, that’s why the remote—" Sherlock finished miserably, breathless from the frantic deluge of words.

John knew a losing battle against a panic attack when he saw one since they were his frequent nocturnal companions, too. What he’d discovered to be helpful were concrete, grounding facts.

He glanced at the offending phone stand — a flexible arm extending outwards from the bedside cabinet. The magnetic clip that held the top of the phone against the back was, indeed, broken; likely a stress fracture after several years' heavy use. John slid off the bed and knelt awkwardly on the floor to recover the iPhone, checking that it was still functioning. Thanks to the soft carpet covering the whole floor, even the glass was intact. He gripped his cane tightly as he climbed back to his feet, picking up Sherlock’s hand to press the phone back into it.

Sherlock’s fingers were trembling as they slowly coiled around the phone.

John retook the seat next to Sherlock’s hips, reaching out to place a reassuring hand on a knee but catching himself. He leant slightly forward, instead, to grip a shoulder. "Everything's fine. You called Mycroft, and he sent me."

"Had a nightmare. Can’t possibly sleep now."

"Should I give you something?" John remembered Mycroft’s words about trying to avoid benzodiazepines since they tended to make Sherlock even crankier than usual. But wouldn’t sleep deprivation and the aftermath of being this upset do the same?

"Please."

It was the first please John had heard from the man.

Sherlock’s fingers slowly uncoiled from gripping the phone like a vice, and after dropping the phone on his lap, he managed to press the home button for a moment to activate voice control. After hearing Siri’s tinny voice, he gave the programme no orders, just closed his eyes with a rattled exhalation.

"Meds or a nightcap?" John asked and made sure the bed remote was still within Sherlock’s reach.

Sherlock’s eyes fluttered open in surprise. "The former for me, the latter for you if you want. I believe Mycroft keeps a Balvenie bottle on the top shelf of the kitchen cabinet that houses glassware."

All anyone needs to do to keep stuff away from him is to put them on the top shelf, John realised. Like childproofing a home. Christ.

"Mycroft seems to think it’s a bad idea to give you sleeping pills," John remarked. He felt suddenly
very uneasy about having so readily agreed to all the older Holmes' rules. *I can't believe how little say Sherlock gets in his own life.*

"He’s a tosser who would think differently if he was the one who..." Sherlock swallowed the rest of the sentence. It wasn’t the first time that he stopped himself from granting words to what had happened to him. Only when Sherlock got outstandingly riled up by his brother did he use such words such as 'wheelchair', and even then, only to voice what sounded like self-loathing channelled into sarcasm and gallows humour.

*It’s been over a year, John thought. Shouldn’t at least some of this have become normal for him by now?*

Sherlock seemed to have regained his composure. "Mycroft shouldn’t have woken you up. Typical of him to outsource these things," he complained in a patrician tone much resembling his big brother’s.

"Would you like me to ask him to come here instead?" John asked carefully. He couldn’t quite parse who or what it was that Sherlock wanted, or whether he wished to be left alone now that the phone crisis was resolved.

"Absolutely not." Sherlock’s usual, snidely superior tone held steady. He seemed back in control, and the invisible wall John had sensed between them before was back in place.

Or so John assumed. Perhaps he’d have that nightcap but have it alone, poured from Mycroft’s great selection in the library.

"I’ll get you your pill," John said and rose from the bed.

But just as he planted his feet on the carpet long, pale fingers gripped the edge of his bathrobe that hadn’t yet slid off the duvet.

"John." Sherlock’s tone was tentative, almost shy.

"Yeah?"

"I wouldn’t be opposed to a bit of… company."

John remembered what he’d said about a nightmare. He couldn’t know what Sherlock’s dreams were about, but when John himself woke up drenched in cold sweat and panicky, he would very much have wanted a grounding human presence in the room until he could calm down and fall back asleep. *But I'd have a hard time admitting to that, too.*

"Yeah. 'Course I can stay a bit," he promised.

Sherlock let go of his bathrobe, and John made a brief visit to the locked cabinet in the kitchen for a fast-acting sleeping pill. He returned to the bedroom where Sherlock’s worried eyes fixed on him the moment he came back into view. John gave him a small smile he hoped would be reassuring, but Sherlock's eyes skittered away, accepting the zopiclone tablet John held out to him and a sip of fresh water without meeting his gaze.

Sherlock then reached for the remote, lowering the head of the bed by mere centimetres.

"You don’t want the bed levelled down to sleep?" John asked.

There was no answer. Sherlock’s eyes remained fixed on the foot of the bed, and he was
distractedly smoothing down a crease on his top sheet with his fingertips.

John dragged a chair over from the side of the room, placing it a respectable distance away from the bed. He was acutely aware that this was new territory he was navigating — being in Sherlock's room at night — but he reasoned inwardly that it was just one more aspect of his job to offer reassurance regardless of the hour.

"What did you dream about?" He asked casually after a few moments of silence.

"Why were you already awake?" Sherlock countered. "It should have taken much longer for you to get here. Mycroft must have sent you, but clearly, you were already out of your room by the time he contacted you."

"Got peckish. Ran into him in the hall," John replied. Now didn’t seem like the time to discuss his own nightmares. More importantly, he didn’t want to talk about them.

"The kitchens are at the opposite end of the house from the route Mycroft would have taken to get here," Sherlock insisted.

John shrugged, occupying himself with studying the handle of his cane. He twisted it idly around in his hand, the weight of Sherlock’s gaze settling on him like a physical entity. Since conversation didn’t seem to be invited, he kept quiet and let his thoughts wander back to his hallway encounter with Mycroft.

This must have been the latest in a long line of nights when the older Holmes had been forced to leave behind his warm bed to attend to Sherlock. Can't be easy, having all that abuse hurled at him just because he's the available one — a situational whipping boy for Sherlock's anger that seems to be directed at everything and everyone.

Sherlock yawned suddenly, his jaw cracking. John glanced up.

“Dim lights," Sherlock murmured, his eyes drifting closed as the voice-activated lightning control system obeyed. John shifted forward to adjust the phone and remote so that they were right next to Sherlock’s right hand and fought the urge to tuck the blanket in around him. John then sat back and listened with a clinical ear as Sherlock’s breathing slowed. What little colour his pale complexion allowed had finally returned to his features. His curls were fanned out against the white pillowcase and the black silk pyjamas he wore made his skin glow in an unearthly way.

John cleared his throat and stood. With one last glance over his shoulder at the now peacefully sleeping man, he crept out of the room, leaving the door ajar.

Yawning, he made his way back to the main house and his bedroom, making a mental note to find out where they could get a new phone stand contraption first thing tomorrow. Perhaps they could make it into an outing and Sherlock could pick a new model himself. The idea of venturing out with Sherlock thrilled him in a way he didn't want to examine too carefully.

Sleep treated him well for the rest of the night.
"You left something behind last night," Sherlock announced while they were drinking tea at the annexe the next morning.

John was surprised. He would have assumed that Sherlock's embarrassment would've firmly prevented him from mentioning John's visit to his bedroom. "Yeah?"

Sherlock cocked his head towards the kitchen corner where John's cane was leaning against the wall next to the fridge.

"Oh," John exhaled.

He rubbed his leg habitually, realising that it hadn't bothered him on his way back to his bedroom, and he hadn't thought about it in the morning, either. He'd been in too much of a hurry to get to the annexe to check on Sherlock.

"When you're focused on something else, your pelvic tilt and the fluency of your walk are not indicative of any discomfort. However, during the days immediately before seeing your sister, your walking deteriorated acutely, only to be much improved overnight. Judging by your mood, it was obvious your dinner with her went well, and your limp was all but gone for several days. The weather and your daily activities logically affect how much your shoulder troubles you, but no such correlation seems to exist between your leg and your activities. There's also——"

John reached over and unceremoniously pulled the hood of Sherlock's sweatshirt over his face to shut him up.

"Alright, alright! Just because you have eyes and a laptop, it doesn't make you a bloody orthopaedist," John grumbled.

Sherlock was wearing his usual: tedious, grey track bottoms and a sweatshirt over a long-sleeved T-shirt. The outfit didn't seem to fit with the photos John had seen of him, but it seemed logical that someone whose desensitised limbs were at risk for pressure sores would opt for comfort over style. John felt practically overdressed: he'd worn a new, plaid dress shirt today he'd bought after
deciding most of his wardrobe wasn't really fit for a place like Musgrave court. At least he'd worn his least aged dark brown corduroy trousers instead of something fancier.

"Why aren’t you attending regular physical therapy?" Sherlock asked bluntly after a fumbling attempt at uncovering his head from the hood. He tossed his head irritably, his riotous curls falling back into a soft halo around his face. "Your shoulder injury is recent and plenty troubling enough to warrant it, and since you were injured in service, it would be free of charge, arranged through veteran healthcare. So, why?"

"That's a bit pot and kettle, don't you think?" John countered. "You should have regular physio appointments, too, even just for maintaining your current abilities."

Sherlock's expression instantly turned from curiously triumphant to sour. "Tallie attends to all that." He flicked his fingers dismissively.

"What she does is limited to maintenance of your range of joint movement and prevention of cramps and spasticity," John pointed out. He was quoting her almost verbatim; Tallie had told him that the only PT appointments Sherlock had were during his regular check-ups, and their purpose was mainly to upgrade Tallie's instructions.

"You could be doing and achieving a lot more, and you know it," John argued further.

"So could you." Petulant. Dismissive.

John pressed his lips together and raised his brows in reluctant agreement. "Alright. I will if you will."

"What?"

"You heard me. Let's make a deal. I get a PT; you get a PT. Mycroft might have some names, or Tallie might know someone good locally who does house calls. Maybe they could even see both of us on the same go."

"Pointless," Sherlock scoffed.

"No, it's not. Even if twirling chopsticks aren't in your future, there's a lot that could be done about your eating if you had more strength and dexterity. Maybe you could even manage with a simpler chair, wouldn't have to rely on limited battery life so much."

Sherlock turned his head to stare at the wall and John could see him gritting his teeth. 

At least he hasn't left the room, John thought and decided to push further. "What about an occupational therapist? They're usually even better than PTs for coming up with ways to make daily activities easier." From his research, John had learned that occupational therapists were particularly good at finding assistive devices. Not that Sherlock seemed willing to use anything like that.

"In rehab after intensive care I saw enough therapists to last a lifetime," Sherlock announced.

"And where did you go for that?"

"Hobbs at Bramshott Grange. Astoundingly boring."

John whistled. "I've heard of them; they're supposed to be great." A private residential inpatient rehab unit offering intensive specialist rehab, it was above the financial means of most patients,
and the military wouldn't send patients there because of the cost.

John grabbed the tablet left by Tallie on the kitchen island — provided by Mycroft for both her and John to use — and brought up the Hobbs website.

'Experts in the field of physiotherapy, occupational therapy, speech and language therapy, rehabilitation medicine, neuropsychology, CBT and orthotics to help ensure that every individual can reach their full potential,' it declared, featuring an image of the inner courtyard of a modern brownstone building with large windows and terraces.

"That's in Liphook, isn't it?" John asked.

"Yes. East Hampshire."

"I went to Hedley Court in Surrey. Military place. Nice farmhouse, Elizabethan I think. I liked the swimming pools. Nice garden, too, but nothing compared to this."

Sherlock didn't reply. Instead, as if prompted by John's mention of the grounds, he retreated from the kitchen island and headed for the foyer leading to the garden door. "I'm going out."

"Do we have a deal, then?" John asked the receding back of the wheelchair.

"Whatever."

John gulped down the last of his tea with the ghost of a smile. _It wasn't a 'no'. Progress._

It hadn't been difficult to spot the way Sherlock had shut down and deliberately pretended to lose interest in the conversation when John had referred to the time just after his accident. He had learned that words like _dull_ and _boring_ and _pointless_ translated in Sherlock-speak to _"I don't want to discuss this because I'm uncomfortable"_.

At least Sherlock hadn't left the room instantly when John had pushed him to talk about the PT. It was hard to find encouragement in such small things, but John tried to keep in mind that Sherlock had existed in this limbo for much longer than John had been trying to cope with recovery.

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Mycroft Holmes was a man of his word. That night, when John went back to his bedroom, a thick stack of documents had been placed on a side table next to his laptop. They contained Sherlock's hospital and rehab records, and John's first instinct was to ignore them, fearing Sherlock would hate such a breach of his privacy. But, wasn't all that Tallie had shown him in that folder at the annexe pretty much the same?

And if he was to help Sherlock, shouldn't he have all the necessary information? Sherlock would hardly share all that with him, at least not for some time, and Mycroft had assured him it would be fine. John hoped to understand whether Sherlock had always been like this, or why — even after more than a full year had passed — he acted as though he was in the very early stages of adjustment, vacillating between utter misery, a thirst for revenge, and denial.

Resting his palm on the cover of the folder, he still hesitated. In the end, he picked up the phone and got Tallie on the line when the intercom connected to the annexe.
"Is he still up?" John asked after they'd exchanged a hasty greeting.

"Reading. At least his light's still on," Tallie said.

"Can you do me a favour? Pop your head in and ask him if he minds me seeing his medical records."

There was a clatter as Tallie put the receiver down on the kitchen table; she returned to the call very soon. "He says he doesn't give a toss and had assumed Mister Holmes had already shown it all to you, anyway."

John was certain that he'd never get more explicit consent, so he bid Tallie a good night, and took the papers to bed to read after brushing his teeth, taking his painkillers and stripping down to his pants to get under the covers.

What the psychological rehab staff at Hobbs had had to say about their patient confirmed John's impressions and suspicions. He skimmed the pages, feeling his heart sink with each word.

After a very short initial bout of motivation and progress, Sherlock had been hospitalised again with pneumonia. After he returned to rehab, everything had changed. It seemed that he had just quit, shut down, withdrawn from the world. He'd refused to discuss the accident even before that setback, focusing instead on PT with a single-mindedness which some staff had considered bordering on pathological. After the pneumonia, he wouldn't do anything. The process of getting him even to consider selecting a wheelchair for home use took weeks. He just… wouldn't. There were mentions of several staff members raising the suspicion that he was attempting to manipulate and mislead them in order to be prescribed more painkillers and benzodiazepines, and also a consensus that he suffered from severe anxiety and depression and 'an inability to shift forward from the early stages of resolving the psychological crisis regarding his emergent disability'.

After those words, John stopped reading. He shoved the records into the back of the drawer of his bedside cabinet, feeling guilty for having them. He thought it unlikely that Sherlock had read those pages. At least John hoped so.

It seemed that the staff had done their best — as had Mycroft — to encourage Sherlock to try to claw his way out of that black hole. But he never made the effort, did he? Mycroft brought him here, made him comfortable.

Preserved what was left of him.

A week later, a clatter of silverware on the polished floor made John look up from the pan he was scrubbing. For the briefest second, he caught a startlingly unguarded expression on Sherlock's features: embarrassed alarm coiled together with a stark, deep vulnerability, but Sherlock quickly shuttered it behind his usual mask of indifference, pulling his chair away abruptly and yanking on the joystick to turn towards the rec room.

Since their brief, jilted discussion about physical therapy, John had taken the matter in hand for both of them. He'd enlisted the help of Tallie and Mycroft, and the older Holmes hadn't wasted any time hiring a local PT with a double degree in occupational therapy and experience in neurological rehabilitation to visit Sherlock three times a week. During his Wednesday visits to Musgrave Court, he would also see John for an hour during Tallie's afternoon routines in the annexe.
Sherlock had immediately tried to rebel against this regime, but John had reminded him of their reluctant deal. John admitted that he wasn't looking forward to it, either, but as they had established, it was something they both needed.

"You can always fire the guy," he'd told Sherlock. "Even if he was brought in by Mycroft, if you refuse to lift a finger because you don't like him, there's nothing anyone can do. Just... give it a chance, yeah? I will if you will?"

John didn’t know how well Sherlock was complying during the sessions, but now, after a good bunch of them, John saw with his own eyes some positive change: Sherlock was beginning to do more with his hands when it came to everyday stuff. Maybe the night when he'd lost his remote had also had an impact on the decision. John found knowing that they were both doing this, that they were in the same boat and suffering some of the same frustrations, surprisingly consoling. He hoped the same applied for Sherlock.

*Who wouldn't want to be more independent?* John reasoned.

John had had just one session so far with Leo Brinley, the PT, and found him patient but tough enough to deal with even Sherlock.

So, it appeared that Leo had motivated Sherlock to practice his fork work, but he was easily and understandably frustrated by any setback. Such as what had happened just now, making Sherlock want to flee the scene in the kitchen.

"Wait," John called out, a command issued in his most formidable captain’s voice. The single word seemed to echo in the kitchen as he hurried around the worktop, drying his hands on a tea towel. He took a deep breath, confident of his assessment but less sure how to get his point across the right way, without slipping into the condescending tones he witnessed others used around Sherlock. The emotions he'd just witnessed from the man gave him the confidence he needed to push ahead.

Sherlock was frozen in place; his chair turned halfway towards his room. The dropped fork was a few mere centimetres away from his back tyre, but John knew Sherlock couldn't see it, especially not in his hurry to escape.

John took another deep breath, moving closer and bending down, ignoring Sherlock’s irritated scowl when he thought he was being talked down to. John grasped the utensil quickly and stood, holding it out to show Sherlock. *Don't make a big deal out of it.*

"Didn’t want you to pop a tyre. Not sure how to fix one if you did. I was never one for mechanics," John said in a light tone.

A small crinkle appeared above Sherlock’s nose again as he contemplated this. John’s fingers itched to smooth it out, to erase all the hurt and confusion caused by the accident, by Sherlock’s body’s betrayal and by the betrayal of others who treated him differently because of his physical limitations.

Turning away, John shook his head slightly, pushing down the rising anger at the injustice of it all. *Getting riled up isn't going to help anyone.*

"I’ll grab you a clean one," he told Sherlock before tossing the dirty fork in the sink. He then pulled a fork and a spoon out of the drawer.

"Not hungry." Sherlock’s voice was clipped as he shook his head, but he didn’t turn away. Instead,
he watched John warily as he approached the chair.

*Not falling for that again.* "What if I help? Just a bit so you can get some more food in? You've been at it for some time now, must be getting tired." John kept his tone casual as he set the spoon on the table. It should be within reach of Sherlock's pale hands, now curled in his lap, if he came back to the table.

John speared a piece of pasta with the fork and held it up. "Take it."

After manoeuvring himself back beside the table, with slightly trembling fingers, Sherlock clasped the handle and slid the food into his mouth, letting his arm fall heavily against his chest as soon as John retrieved it to reload with another forkful.

Doing it like this should allow Sherlock to retain some of his dignity, without overtaxing his weak arm muscles with the repetitive motion of lifting the fork to his mouth. John knew it would be mortifying for both of them if he spoon-fed the man like an invalid.

Working together, they got Sherlock to polish off the entire bowl. John could see the exertion had taken a toll; Sherlock's arm was shaking badly, and he was breathing harder than usual. On the last bite, his limb lost its battle against gravity and fell heavily to his lap, smearing sauce against his trousers.

Sherlock let his head tip back against the headrest as John grabbed a kitchen towel to dab at the sauce. Unfortunately, all that succeeded in doing was smearing it around, so he wet it, wringing it out as much as possible before attacking the stain.

John glanced at the clock; Tallie would be here soon to take Sherlock to his doctor's appointment. There wasn't time to get him changed into clean trousers, John didn't even know how to manage that, and he didn't think Sherlock had the energy anyway.

"Shall I go to my appointment as an incontinent, then?"

John glanced up at him, expecting to see the usual cocktail of emotions on his face; resignation, defeat, anger, all carefully hidden beneath a smooth mask of indifference. Instead, to his surprise, he found calm, pale eyes watching him and a soft smile on those full lips.

John stood quickly. "Stay here. I have an idea."

"Unusual." Sherlock's voice lacked its usual acerbic bite.

"With hair like that, you've got to have a hairdryer."

Sherlock exhaled noisily, waving his hand in the direction of the bathroom, his eyes sliding closed. "Not used very often since it's not a very good idea on curls, but there is one in there… somewhere," Sherlock instructed.

"Back in a tick."

Unlike the spotless organisation of the rest of the house and the bathroom's above-sink cupboard, the cabinet underneath it was a jumbled mess. John sifted through the detritus until he spotted a black cord. Tugging at it, he managed to unearth a small hairdryer partly, but a plastic package erupted from the pile and slid onto the floor. Keeping one hand on his prize, he reached down to grab the escaped item with the other.

He froze as he turned it around so he could see the label, all thoughts of his search forgotten as he
rocked back on his heels and read the words, his breath constricting in his chest.

Clutched in his hand was an auto-injector for opioid overdose; the preloaded syringes came in packs of two.

Cold dread filled John as he realised only one syringe remained and that the other half of the packed looked to have been hastily ripped open.

The older Holmes’ cryptic statement echoed loud in his head: *There was an incident.*

"Oh, Sherlock," he whispered in the solitude of the bathroom, his voice catching.

"John? Did you find it?"

Sherlock’s voice startled him, and he quickly stuffed the package in his pocket, pulling the hairdryer free. He shut the cabinet door firmly. Though he hoped to god he wouldn't ever have to use it, he would find a new home for the remaining syringe; *somewhere I could grab it quickly in an emergency?*

"Yes. This should work," John called back.

He breathed out as he stood in the middle of the room, then clicked off the light, carrying the dryer back to where Sherlock was waiting, an eyebrow raised expectantly.

When Tallie walked in moments later, she had to stifle her laughter at the sight of a disgruntled Sherlock sitting in his wheelchair with a sheepish-looking John aiming a blow dryer at his groin.

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Things went smoothly for several days, a comfortable rhythm settling into their everyday interactions that hadn’t been present before. This tentative progress helped John push away the thought of what he’d found in the bathroom.

*Things are better now for him, aren't they?* He wondered but wasn't sure at all about the answer. *Who the hell knows about Sherlock Holmes…*

After one particularly relaxing day that had melted effortlessly into a relaxed evening of watching telly together, John returned to his bedroom, spurred on to do something he’d been putting off for weeks.

Doing PT again made him feel like he should complete the effort by picking things up with what was going on in his head as well. He should contact Ella, no matter how off-putting the idea felt. He recognised that it was probably a good idea talk to someone outside the house — Musgrave Court could easily feel claustrophobic and isolated, and the intensity of the time he spent with Sherlock would have exhausted anyone even if John had grown to enjoy it greatly. In that dingy bedsit, he had spent hours each morning trying to muster the energy and motivation to get out of bed. Now, he couldn't rise fast enough because he wanted to see his new friend.

He regretted his words to Sherlock during the shave about just working here, about not wanting to be there, but he had no idea how to go about fixing things. He wasn't even sure if he needed to do that. Sherlock hadn't mentioned it again, and they hadn't had a single argument since. Maybe that was something he could take up with Ella: how to best balance being an employee *and* a friend. The latter role felt much more natural to him, anyway. That was the role he really wanted. Not out
of pity, but because... he just did. Why should he need to pick his motives apart?

Dialling the number he had memorised long ago, John settled onto his desk chair, rehearsing a casual way to leave a voicemail that avoided explaining too much. He was startled when it was Ella who answered instead of a machine, her own surprise smoothly and professionally concealed.

"John, it’s good to hear from you. What can I do for you?"

When they hung up, an appointment had been scheduled for John’s next day off, and he felt productive. It felt like a huge weight had been lifted but he couldn't help wondering if that was just because therapy had always felt like a hoop he needed to jump through. He'd never quite reached any level of trust with her, never felt comfortable under her professional, reservedly empathetic, rehearsed scrutiny. He had never been sure that the sessions were beneficial, and he wanted to get them over with. Not that he even knew how long he was supposed to attend counselling.

*When will I be... better? Cured? What does that even mean, and who defines it?*

Monday morning brought with it a weather warning: heavy snowfall was expected to start mid-morning and continue all day, a severe setback to the fledgeling spring. The air was heavy with the promise of precipitation as John's transport left the house and its grounds early and made his way into the city. Despite the weather, he felt, if not exactly happy, definitely lighter than he had in a long time.

Some of that lightness was replaced by a familiar, quiet dread and discomfort he had felt before, attending therapy. He didn't quite feel like ditching the session, but he certainly wasn't looking forward to it, either, as he sat in the empty waiting room of the private practice, curling his fingers into the fabric of his trousers covering his knees.

After inviting him in and pouring them each a cup of tea, Ella settled in with her pad of paper balancing on her knees, and her ever-observant eyes fixed on him, gentle but serious. She didn't chastise John for his long absence, and he wasn't sure if he'd even expected her to do so.

She didn’t, however, waste any time jumping right into the heart of the matter: "You look better, John. Are things improving for you?"

"Yeah... yeah." He was surprised to find that he suddenly wanted to share the events of the last few weeks with someone if only to confirm that they had been real. Words stuttered out of him before he could stop them, tripping over each other in a nearly nonsensical way.

"Things are... they’re good. Pretty good actually, yeah. I... uh... Got a new job. And I’ve met someone."

Sherlock's rare but genuine smile flitted into his mind's eye, and his mouth twitched in response. Ella raised an eyebrow and smiled, encouraging him to continue. "You’ve met someone? That’s wonderful, John! Where did you and this someone meet?"

He realised how he must have just looked and sound and hastened to correct her: "Oh no... No. Ha. No. Not like that. It's my uh... Hm." *Friend?* "Patient? Client? He's more than that, though. It's for my new job. I'm his sort of... companion? Caretaker?" He let out a breath through his nose, frustrated with his lack of competent words and cringing at his last. *He's not just some... disabled*
"It’s actually a bit complicated," John said more sternly than he'd intended. He fidgeted in his seat, suddenly oddly uncomfortable with the idea of bringing Sherlock into this space without the man being present. John didn’t want words like tetraplegia or disabled to be the defining things about him. That's all people see at first, isn't it, and that's what he hates so much.

Ella watched him with pursed lips for a moment before crossing her ankles and leaning forward. She set her pen down on top of her pad and folded her hands. "Do you wish to elaborate? Tell me how it’s complicated?"

John shook his head slowly, staring out of the window colourless landscape. It reminded him of the view from the only window of that depressing hellhole he’d lived in before. It had been so very different from the beautiful landscape cradling Musgrave Court but felt just as isolated.

"No. No, I don’t think I can..." He shifted, clearing his throat and glancing at Ella out of the corner of his eye.

She was sitting still, watching him calmly. She nodded slightly to encourage him to speak.

What could he say? 'I’m keeping company for a really depressed paralysed bloke, and it's the best and most interesting thing that's happened to me?' No. That wouldn't sound right.

"Sorry. It’s just sort of a… grey area? Patient confidentiality and all that." He met Ella’s gaze, letting his eyes drift back to the clouds outside, sinking low and growing heavy with the weight of all they held in. "I’m sure you understand."

Ella studied him for a moment but apparently decided to accept John's explanation. She could have reminded him that she was bound by strict confidentiality, too. After all, any doctor attending therapy would probably need to talk about patients at some point, but she must have sensed his discomfort and gracefully let him backtrack.

She switched topics, for which John was so grateful that he found himself unusually willing to discuss Harry and his tentatively mended relationship with her.

By the time he left Ella’s office for the bus ride home, the sky had darkened to gunmetal grey and the first fat, wet flakes had started to fall, swirling around the late-morning commuters as they hustled past John. He hastened his steps to where he knew he could catch a bus to the train station. It was a Monday, so he knew Mycroft and Sherlock were most likely out of the house attending to appointments and errands, but he still felt an undeniable pull to return home as soon as possible.

The snow caused delays in the train services, so it took twice as long as it should have before he was standing at the small train station at High Wycombe. The streets were filling with deep, slushy snow, creating slick ice patches and anxious drivers, each crawling along in a mix of hesitation and impatience. It seemed like a miracle that he managed to hail a cab, and from the station, it didn't take long even in the foul weather before the car stopped in front of the main house. The driver raised his eyebrows at the sight of John clambering out of the car, probably wondering what business he had in such a posh place, with a decidedly not posh parka, in the middle of a blizzard.

It was his day off, but he was reluctant to stay away from Sherlock all day; he didn't want to reinforce the idea that he didn't enjoy the man's company; things still felt so fragile and careful. So, John began to trudge up the short walk to the annexe door, already daydreaming about a warm cup of tea and dry socks. The blizzard was now in such a fury that he could hardly see the gamekeeper's cottage in the distance. His cheeks stung from the biting wind whipping the snow
around. He felt suddenly exhausted, all the light-heartedness of earlier merely a memory.

There were no lights on in any window facing the front courtyard of the main house, but one of the lights in the annexe was on, illuminating the window with soft yellow light. It looked cosy, and inviting, encouraging John to hasten his steps, his legs propelling him toward the doorway. Smiling to himself, he pulled open the door. A day filled with tea and films sounded perfect; maybe he’d even agree to one of those subtitled ones.

He shut the door firmly after himself, shaking out the hood of his parka. The familiar warmth made him feel as though the tension of the crowded train ride and battling the weather was melting away from his shoulders. Mycroft had offered him the use of Sherlock’s car on his days off, assuming that it was available, but John had felt reluctant to do so — he was already being provided so many perks by the man that it bordered on charity.

John pulled off his slush-soaked shoes and wet socks and left them by the door, shivering a little as he padded barefoot toward the kitchen. Thankfully, there was underfloor heating in the annexe. He’d head up to his room in a bit to get dry socks but first things first: tea and entertainment.

He smiled to himself, imagining the look of surprise on Sherlock’s face at his plan to suggest one of ‘those films’. He hummed a little as he moved around the kitchen, pulling out the makings of a nice hot cuppa and a packet of biscuits. Funny how this place already felt more like home than the sad little bedsit ever had, and how such a change could have happened in only a few short weeks. That’s what he had called it in his head, earlier, without even realising: home.

‘Embrace it, John’, had been Ella's parting words at the end of their appointment. ‘Whatever good things you have found in your life, embrace them.’ Never question whether they are deserved or not.’

The whistle of the hot water shook him out of his thoughts. His hand paused before gripping the handle of the kettle, suddenly realising that the annexe was quiet — too quiet. Even on the days when Sherlock wasn't feeling very chatty, there were still ambient noises present: the quiet whirring hum of his wheelchair, the blare of his music, or the chatter of the telly.

John’s heart thudded in his ears as he stood in the centre of the kitchen, listening. He could see that the lights were off in the rec room and that Sherlock’s bedroom door was shut. Think rationally. Don’t panic.

“Sherlock?” His voice was shakier than he expected as he walked towards Sherlock’s bedroom door.

The silence that answered him was excruciating.
John stood by the kitchen island, straining his ears even as his mind whirled. Did I get the day wrong? The car was in the garage; maybe Sherlock had some appointment, and they travelled there in a different one? Wasn't I supposed to have the whole day off? Where is Tallie? Or Mycroft? What if there was a mix-up with schedules and Sherlock has been stuck in bed all morning, calling for help? What if he tried to get up on his own and had an accident…?

John tried not to think about the syringe he’d found, swallowing hard to diffuse the flare of panic that erupted deep in his gut as he crossed the remaining distance to the bedroom door in two strides. Just as he was reaching for the button on the wall to open it, the door was opened inwards by the automated latch and Mycroft — slipping quietly out of Sherlock’s bedroom — nearly crashed into him.

John’s face must have shown his surprise.

Mycroft’s voice was low when he spoke. "John. Wasn’t expecting to see you before dinnertime, especially with the snowstorm." He inhaled, glancing over his shoulder but not moving away from the door. “Sherlock is a bit under the weather, I’m afraid. I was just going to step out and call Nurse Mullan again to ascertain her whereabouts. I was hoping she’d have been here by now, but the snow is causing her some transport trouble."

John raised an eyebrow at Tallie’s formal name, although he was only half-listening. There were more pressing concerns than Tallie's car.

"Under the weather, how?" He spoke through gritted teeth as he pushed past Mycroft and into the bedroom, concern for the man lying in bed winning out over civility.

Sherlock was completely still and pale, except for two splotches of colour high on his cheeks. John hurried to the side of the bed he was lying on, and now he could have a better look which confirmed his suspicions: feverish. Shit. Shitshishitishit.

Mycroft hovered in the doorway, lips pressed into a straight line.

"Has he been like this all morning?” John demanded angrily.

The elder Holmes sniffed before answering, assuming his usual arrogant air, but John didn’t miss the very slight quiver of his voice when he spoke. John's reaction seemed to have alarmed him.

"This morning, I came to keep him company since you were out and Nurse Mullan called to say she
would be late due to the snow—"

John was no longer listening. Instead, he was stripping the covers off of Sherlock, patting his cheek and saying his name loudly. His face was flushed, the skin hot and dry under John’s palm.

Mycroft was still rambling on. "He's been rather lethargic, but communicative—"

John cut the older Holmes off. "He's not 'a bit under the weather', Mycroft. He has a fever! Sherlock can’t regulate his body temperature below his injury.” John exhaled loudly, the implied you should know that hanging heavily in the air between them. "We need to cool him down and quickly. Get some wet towels. Cool water, not cold. Turn the air con fan on and lower the temperature. And get me a thermometer."

Without waiting for an answer, John got to work, reaching for familiar protocols to calm himself down. He tamped down all of the doubt that was threatening to creep in and distract him; the voice that was practically shouting about lines being crossed, about knowing his place, about having lost his abilities. To hell with all that! He was still a doctor and right now, he was needed. I can do this. I have to.

In the battlefield, major bleeds were addressed first, but clearly, that bit was not relevant right now.

John straightened his back, suddenly sensing that he wasn’t alone yet with Sherlock. He glanced over his shoulder, antsy to get on with the proper diagnostic ABCDEs.

Mycroft was frozen in the doorway, his eyes wider than before and locked on Sherlock.

“Mycroft! Now!” John barked a command, and finally, the older Holmes sprung to action, practically fleeing the room.

John turned back to the bed, focussing once more.

Airway? Sherlock's chest was rising and falling rapidly. John stuck his hand in front of his mouth and felt strong, steady breaths. That also covered the B of an acute assessment of a patient suspected to be in critical condition: breathing. John wished he had a pulse ox at his disposal, but for now, he would have to make do with what he could see and hear. Sherlock's colour was normal, apart from being a little flushed from the fever — not cyanotic.

Next on John's mental list was C: circulation. He gave Sherlock a quick, cursory exam and found distended neck veins, warm extremities, strong pulses on his wrists and his feet. Mean arterial pressure sufficient to sustain brain and coronary supply.

This allowed John to move onto D for disability. Unceremoniously, he shoved his hand underneath Sherlock's neck, attempting to bounce his head a bit. No neck stiffness. This didn't entirely rule out a central nervous system infection, but it was good enough for now. His ministrations were met with no resistance from his patient, who wasn't quite listless but alarmingly pliant nevertheless. There was little spasticity in his limbs, which seemed logical; John's research had taught him that cold was a trigger for spasms and increased spasticity for many tetraplegics; maybe warmth had the opposite effect.

Sliding a hip onto the mattress next to Sherlock’s, John patted his cheek again, calling out his name. There was a pinch of eyes and a groan this time, which John found reassuring. He pressed a fingernail on the bony bit just below Sherlock's right brow, which was met with an unintelligible protest of minced words and a gasp. Sherlock's hand shifted upwards on the duvet, presumably in an attempt to push John's hand away from his face. It didn’t get very far before it stilled, and
Sherlock exhaled softly as John smoothed his brow with his thumb tip over where he'd pressed. He'd had a sudden urge to stroke down across the delicate, wan cheekbone as well and had to stifle a deranged giggle at the thought.

He drew in a deep breath and focussed once more on his mental checklist. Level of consciousness not necessitating securing the airway.

The last letter in the protocol — E for exposure— was mostly done already, but there was still one important question to find an answer for: what was the cause of the fever?

"He hasn't been coughing or sneezing, has he?" John asked Mycroft as the older brother re-entered the room, looking rather uncomfortable. Whether that was due to the situation or his armload of wet towels, John couldn't be sure.

He grabbed a small flannel from the top of the pile and wrapped it gently around the back of Sherlock’s neck, eliciting a small noise which could have been either appreciation or annoyance.

"Not to my knowledge, no," Mycroft replied, eyes fixed on what John was doing.

"Likely not a respiratory infection, then, although his symptoms could be atypical." John mused aloud. “Any pain, other complaints from him this morning?"

"He is never very forthcoming about such things to me—"

"Is there a but?" John pressed, standing and placing his hands on his hips to stare at the older Holmes. If not, then stop wasting my time with your dithering!

"No, no complaints regarding his physical state."

John gave a sharp nod and turned back to the bed, chewing on the inside of his cheek. Habitually, he shifted his weight onto his good leg, eyes scanning the length of Sherlock as he mentally repeated everything Mycroft had told him so far.

"Sorry, mate," John muttered before lifting Sherlock's pyjama shirt and pressing his palm on his stomach. This elicited another protest with an indignant grimace, and John slid the fingers of his other hand around Sherlock’s wrist to prevent the man from swatting at him. Once John's hands were warmed by the feverish skin, Sherlock stopped his lacklustre squirming. Abdomen not distended, no localised or general soreness, no peritoneal irritation. There was no rash, nor other kinds of unusual findings on his skin, but John’s eyes lingered on a long, well-healed vertical laparotomy scar on his abdomen, probably from an emergency operation. A small scar on his side likely marked the site of a large-bore chest tube. Faint but noticeable, there was also a small, round scar just above Sherlock's sternal notch which John hadn't noticed during the shave since it was so much lower — did he have a tracheostomy after the accident? John knew Sherlock had had an operation on his cervical spine to stabilise it — that scar must be on his neck. Is that why he's let his hair grow so long?

There was one discovery which made John pause — crater-like scarring in the crooks of Sherlock's elbows, between his toes and on the inside of his wrists. But, the connotations of all that would have to wait; clearly, they were old and not relevant to what was ailing Sherlock right now.

"Help me turn him."

"Excuse me?" Mycroft looked apprehensive.

"I need to see all of him. Don't want to miss a skin infection."
Mycroft nodded, expression sombre, and circled the bed to stand beside it. John pulled Sherlock's other knee up and crawled fully onto the mattress behind him. Together, he and Mycroft log-rolled Sherlock momentarily on his side so that John could make sure there wasn't an explanation visible anywhere for the fever. That required hiking up the legs of his pyjama trousers and then pulling them down from the waist. *No time to be awkward.*

As far as John could tell, Sherlock looked outwardly fine. He took a fist to Sherlock's back to knock on his kidneys, which produced a slight complaint but he couldn't tell if the organs were actually sore or if Sherlock was just protesting being manhandled.

Only one possibility remained, and a quick survey of the catheter bag confirmed John's suspicions: the urine was slightly pink-tinted and cloudy.

"UTI, can't tell if it's reached the kidney yet," John concluded, settling Sherlock gently back against his pillows and arranging his limbs carefully to avoid pressure sores. He slid off of the bed but kept one hand resting on the mattress, centimetres from Sherlock's. "He needs antibiotics."

Thankfully, the impressive collection in the locked cabinet in the kitchen included several anti-microbial drugs and other prescription medications. "We also need to try to get his fever down.; the towels might not be enough."

While Mycroft disappeared on that errand, John sat down on the bed once more, pushing away his duvet and draping a wet towel on his thighs. Sherlock's lashes were fluttering, but he hadn't opened his eyes yet fully.

John brought the head of the bed up with the remote. "Sherlock?"

There was a non-committal hum before Sherlock dragged his lids open. "Jhn?"

"Ten points. I need to get some pills into you. Think you could do that?" He pinched the skin on Sherlock's arm and ignored Sherlock’s grunt of protest; it took a bit too long until it sunk back down. *Dehydration.* There would have to be a lot of fluids, too, to flush out the bacteria. John remembered that Tallie's introductory round of the closets in the kitchen had revealed an IV kit with a selection of fluids, both with glucose and without it.

Sherlock gave him no reply besides a sigh and a groan, his eyes sliding closed once more, so John decided against relying on his co-operation. IV fluids were warranted, which meant that he could use the same route for antibiotics.

Once Mycroft returned, John began flipping through the pages of the binder he'd brought. Bingo — an IV version of ceftriaxone. Administered only once a day, it was far more wide-range than what would usually be prescribed for a simple urinary tract infection, but the complicating factors of Sherlock's injury and the fact that he was feverish told John that it wouldn't be long before the bacteria would have crawled all the way up to the kidneys if it wasn't already up there, and then IV antibiotics would definitely be warranted, as would probably be a hospital stay. Sherlock's lethargy seemed to be just from fever, not from a septic shock; John could still monitor him at home.

"I know Tallie's got a BP cuff and meter here somewhere. What about other monitoring equipment?" John glanced over his shoulder at the older Holmes.

Mycroft didn't reply; his face pinched as he gave a sharp shrug. With a roll of his eyes, John returned his attention to the folder and flipped through it once more. This time, his attention was
caught by a mention of blood pressure. A quick rummage in a bedroom drawer produced not just the BP stuff but also a pulse ox.

"Brilliant!" John announced and wasted no time in making use of the equipment. Sherlock wasn't enthusiastic about the tight squeeze of the cuff but accepted the finger clip of the pulse ox without protest. Everything was within what Tallie had jotted down as his normal range except for a slightly elevated heart rate, easily explained by the fever and dehydration.

Satisfied with his assessment and management plan, John made his way to the kitchen to find the IV kit.

"Is there anything I can do?" Mycroft offered, having followed him.

"Unless you know how to air IV tubing or dilute powdered antibiotic, not in here. But you *could* adjust the temperature in the bedroom lower and take a pitcher of ice water with a glass and straw to the bedside cabinet."

Mycroft hurried away like a man on a mission.

Once back in the bedroom with his loot, John grabbed a chair from by the window, opened the IV tape on the bedside cabinet, and tore off the cover from the sterile IV cannula packet. There were three hooks on the wall behind the bed at just the perfect height to hang the bag of saline with which John had filled the IV tubing, and the small glass bottle of now perfectly diluted antibiotic he'd prepared with a separate set of tubing connected to a three-way stopcock. He'd swap to Hartmann's after the antibiotic had been infused; it had a better electrolyte balance than saline.

Satisfied with his preparations, John glanced up and was pleasantly surprised to find Sherlock's eyes tracking him tiredly.

"Hi," John breathed with a relieved, nearly ear-splitting smile. "How do you feel?"


He stretched his arm, trying to pull off the towels but John stopped him with a hand on his elbow. "Sorry, no. We've got to get that fever down. I've got some paracetamol here," he dug out two tablets from his pocket and put them on the bedside cabinet. "There's an IV version available, too, but our stock is only two bottles so if you can swallow these, that'd be great. Best steer clear of proper anti-inflammatories until we can be sure your kidneys aren't in trouble."

Sherlock didn't respond, but his eyes slid to the IV gear John had brought, his expression changing from bleary to mildly disapproving.

"Antibiotics and fluids," John said. "Best play it safe, so we don't have to get you carted off into the overworked arms of the NHS. Would probably have to hire sledge dogs to make it to the nearest hospital."

Sherlock snorted his displeasure at that idea and closed his eyes, head lolling tiredly away from John against his pillow as John tied an elastic tourniquet around his arm and effortlessly found a good spot for the IV on the back of his hand — the fever had distended his veins, making them very visible. Sherlock did not resist when John grabbed a firm hold of his hand to fix the vein in place.

"There's a good prick," John announced quietly. "And the needle might pinch a bit, too," he joked. Sherlock's lip quirked up slightly just as John lanced the vein with the cannula. With practised
movements, he withdrew the needle a bit, and then slid the plastic cannula in fully. The needle was then removed while pressing the vein closed, the tubing connected, and the whole thing secured with tape. John opened the slider clamp and watched first the fluid and then the antibiotic start dripping in after he turned the three-way stopcock in the tubing.

Mycroft returned with a pitcher of water, setting it down on the bedside cabinet next to the glass of water he'd already brought, and fiddling unnecessarily with the straw in it before stepping back.

“Thanks”, Sherlock murmured, his breathing already slowing.

John glanced up, his shock mirrored on Mycroft’s face. Sherlock certainly was ill if he was acting polite.

Still looking vaguely alarmed, Mycroft turned and left the room without another word, and John couldn't help smirking. If Sherlock found out that politeness was all it took to get rid of Mycroft’s hovering, he'd use it constantly.

John rose to his feet, gathering the bits of plastic that came from the IV equipment and picking up the used needle to be taken to the yellow disposal bin in the drug cabinet. "I'll let you kip," he told Sherlock and dimmed the lights as he made his way to the kitchen.

It wasn’t until after he had disposed of the rubbish, re-locked the drug cabinet and taken a deep breath standing by the sink that he realised that, during all of what he’d just done to sort Sherlock out, his leg had felt perfectly steady and his hands hadn't shaken at all.

John spent the next hour trying to keep himself busy; he read through the binder to be sure he hadn’t missed anything, made himself a cup of tea and promptly forgot about it, reorganised the drug cabinet. They needed to give the antibiotic time to work, but if Sherlock’s fever was still stubbornly high after the hour, they would have to reconsider their plan to postpone a trip to the hospital.

After the third time he and Mycroft nearly bumped into each other in the kitchen, he wondered aloud if the older Holmes wouldn’t be more comfortable in the main house. John promised to call him on the intercom if Sherlock took a turn for the worst.

Mycroft seemed hesitant but eventually left, pressing his phone to his ear the minute he stepped through the door leading into the main house. John could hear his sharp voice echoing down the corridors, barking orders to someone, possibly that assistant of his. John hadn't seen her since day one.

With Mycroft out of the annexe, the atmosphere seemed to lighten considerably. The haunted restlessness of the lord of the house seemed excessive even though the situation could certainly have turned dire. Towards John, the older Holmes usually acted polite yet semi-detached, but for a few brief moments earlier, John had been offered a less adulterated glimpse into what was beneath all that pomp. Mycroft had seemed downright spooked when John informed him that he had failed to realise the severity of the situation.

John felt pity for the man — it couldn’t have been easy to spend over a year looking after someone who seemed to care very little for their own safety and well-being. Even if some of the insults that
ricocheted between the two brothers were borne of fondness, Sherlock’s worst days must have been a rather disheartening experience for all concerned. It was clear to John that Mycroft cared a lot about Sherlock and had, so far, been rather alone in making decisions for their future. John couldn’t help wondering if the older man had felt a bit like he did when Harry had been out of control yet refused help from family even though she clearly needed it. It had torn at John's heart so badly that eventually, he had given up and removed himself from the picture in a very concrete manner with a deployment to Afghanistan.

What would it take for Mycroft to give up, to throw in the towel? *Could happen. No one has endless patience, not even someone as calculating and deliberative as him,* John reasoned.

After John had made a toast with cheese for himself, the intercom system buzzed, and Mycroft’s voice filled the annexe kitchen. He informed John that Tallie had just called and said she thought she might be able to make it to them by mid-afternoon since the storm was anticipated to stop by then. Mycroft wanted to know if that was all right with John, but the real question naturally was whether Sherlock would be all right until then. John considered it for only a moment before agreeing, noting that Mycroft sounded openly relieved when he rang off the intercom.

After rinsing off his plate, John peeked in on Sherlock who was dozing lightly but woke when John entered the room.

“Just me”, John murmured as he leaned over the bed to check Sherlock’s temperature with the ear thermometer. His fever had gone down a bit, so John still felt comfortable with his plan to monitor his patient at home and not attempt to battle the snow and ice outside to get him to an A&E department.

John settled into the chair beside the bed, watching Sherlock’s chest rise and fall with steady, slow breaths as he drifted back to light sleep. Through a gap in the curtains, John could see the rest of the world blanketed in white. It was peaceful and quiet in the bedroom, and John felt the rest of the remaining tension slowly uncoil from his limbs. For a long while, he simply sat and let his mind drift.

Half an hour later, he realised that he was shivering due to the lowered temperature of the room. He stood, stretching his arms overhead and grunting when his shoulder cracked audibly, sending a tendril of pain down his limb.

Sherlock was still sound asleep, mouth open slightly, his hair a dark halo against the white pillowcase. Not wanting to wake him, John gently touched the back of his fingers to his forehead and then his neck. Sherlock still felt warm, so John didn’t dare touch the thermostat even if Sherlock’s forehead and arms were glistening with sweat at least, signalling that the paracetamol was doing its job.

Hoping that there was a jumper or cardigan somewhere among Sherlock's collection of garments he could borrow, John spun in a slow circle in the middle of the room, realising he had no idea where any of the man's clothes were kept. He had only been in this part of the annexe a handful of times and hadn’t paid much attention to the layout of the room. He assumed that the sliding door next to the entrance to the en suite was just a large wardrobe, but upon further investigation, it turned out to be a big walk-in clothes closet. John switched on the lights and slid the door closed after himself to avoid making noise.

Surveying the contents of the room, he did a double take.

A set of shelves close to the door housed the kinds of clothes he was accustomed to seeing Sherlock in — loose, soft, comfortable fabrics easy to put on and remove. Bland colours but from

The back of the room, however, was a different story, and the cause of John's surprise. Lined up neatly on shelves along the far wall, there were pairs and pairs of shining, narrow leather Oxfords — Yves Saint Laurent, Loake, Grenson. Above them hung a vast array of beautiful suits in different hues of dark blue and several in black. No pinstripe, no grey. One set of tails. John checked a few labels, all bearing the name Spencer Hart. He couldn't remember ever having seen such a brand in shops, and clearly, Mycroft's stuff was all bespoke. John pulled out one of the jackets: a narrow model that would clearly be figure-hugging even on someone as slim as Sherlock.

On the next rack hung shirts. White, different shades of blue, black, emerald, and even a rather striking aubergine one. Some were from that same Spencer Hart bloke, some Tom Ford, some Dolce & Gabbana, with one from Thomas Pink whose name John recognised as a thing discussed reverently among the financially better-endowed classmates of his at medical school.

In a flash, John remembered some of the pictures he'd seen online of Sherlock. In most of them, he'd worn a long, handsome coat, buttoned up to the throat, but in at least one he'd been in a suit. Never anything casual. These clothes, abandoned at the back of this room, finally matched those glossy images in the papers. John wondered what had happened to that long, beautiful coat that was in so many of the photos. Had Sherlock been wearing it when he'd got into the accident? Had it been ruined by blood and dirt, cut off in strips and thrown on the floor in the acute bay of a hospital A&E department?

Something about all these beautiful things hidden away tore terribly at John's heart. Is this where you've been hiding? He wondered, looking at the closet door as though he could see through it to the quiet figure on the bed.

He ran his finger along the sleeve of a navy-blue silk dressing gown on a hanger next to the tails, and then pulled it out on a whim. He draped the garment gently over his arm and went back into the bedroom, having completely forgot about his need for a jumper. He hung the dressing gown on a chair beside the window. He had no idea if Sherlock would want to wear it, but somehow John felt a need to bring something out from the back of the clothes room, something that wasn't the almost hospital-style clothing Tallie dressed Sherlock in every day.

Something elegant and luxurious and striking — just like the person John was catching glimpses of beneath the heavy curtain of resignation and loss.

Sherlock’s voice, rough with sleep, roused John just before eight in the evening, and he flinched awake in the chair by the window. Tallie had been by a few hours earlier, her timing excellent since Sherlock's second paracetamol had just kicked in and his fever was down. She and John had agreed on a catheter change, in case the old one was so coated with bacteria that it might delay the antibiotics taking effect.

Tallie attending to the catheter allowed John an early dinner break. Having effectively acted as Sherlock's doctor that morning, he knew he could have stayed for the procedure, but since Sherlock had had no choice in what John and Mycroft had done that morning, he excused himself. Stripping someone naked like that... a doctor would never think twice about it when it was medically necessary, but John wasn't Sherlock's physician, not really. Even if the vows he'd taken demanded that he deliver medical aid when someone needed it, that wasn't what he was hired for, and he wanted to extend Sherlock the courtesy of defining the parameters of their acquaintance
where there was no emergency at hand. In his head, he tried to use the word acquaintance, because he wasn't yet sure about the word 'friendship'. That would be premature optimism, wouldn't it?

"You're cold," Sherlock muttered, eyes closed. "There are blankets in the closet and a throw on the opposite side of the bed."

"Yeah, I am. Thanks." John recovered the soft afghan from the foot of the bed and draped it on his shoulders. After returning to the clothes closet, he hadn't found a jumper or cardigan that would fit him. *Sherlock must have always been a thin, lanky git.*

"How do you feel?" John asked, sitting down on the opposite side of the bed. The obviously high-quality mattress and the expensive bedding seemed very inviting.

"Tired. Sore. Better than this morning."

"That's good. You sound better, too."

"Better, as a word, is dreadfully relative."

John exhaled. "Yeah, it is."

"This is going to keep happening. Pneumonias, UTIs, bedsores, limb contractures," Sherlock listed wistfully after a few moments of silence.

John looked up and met his resigned eyes. "There's a lot that can be done to prevent—"

"John," Sherlock interrupted in a tone that was hollow and sharply urgent. "All of it is just going to keep happening."

"Don't worry about that now."

"Sometimes it seems I am the only one who does," Sherlock replied with a sigh.

John was tempted to protest, to remind him of all the things Tallie and Mycroft and his doctors at the hospital did to keep him alive and well, but then it occurred to him to wonder if such platitudes really had anything to do with what Sherlock's words had really meant. Which must have been something along the lines of, *I'm tired of having to go through stuff like this*. Sherlock seemed to want to talk, and the last thing John wanted was to alienate him by not listening. Instead of flinging insults, the man was now honest about how he felt, and John didn't fail to recognise the significance of the moment.

Sherlock seemed to like facts and rationality, so John tried that approach. "You're not as susceptible to respiratory infections as those whose injuries are higher in the cervical spine, but yeah, the UTIs will probably happen."

"Oh, yes. How inspiring it is that I didn't contract some other injury such as needing a quadruple amputation or requiring a respirator with eye-rolling as my only moving bit. I feel terribly motivated now, John, thank you."

John sighed. "At least you have to admit that not dying and not having a brain injury are the silver linings here."

"That's what always strikes me as odd. Even those who are clearly made the most uncomfortable at having to look at me in this state always insist that those things are not preferable. How? If I did have a brain injury — if I wasn't aware of how things have changed, would that not be better? It
would at least spare me from the mortification of knowing I need someone to wipe my bottom, that I need a tube shoved up my genitals by hired help."

John bit his lip. Whatever he could say, whatever he could try, all Sherlock would do is twist his words to suit his bleak and sarcastic worldview. Yes, his life objectively sucked, but he still had an amazing brain, and he wasn't dead.

Mycroft's words returned to John's mind once again: 'There was an incident'. Sherlock didn't have a lot of people to talk to — or, more accurately, he didn't have people he wanted to talk to. What went through his mind on the day when he tried to——

It suddenly struck John that he felt a rather knee-jerk compulsion to sidestep what Mycroft's words had meant, what finding that syringe in the bathroom meant. Lying in bed alone in that bedsit after being either kept awake by depression and anxiety or having just been torn out of slumber by nightmares that left him hyperventilating in panic, John had thought of death, too. A lot. And if he'd had to linger in that life for longer, maybe those thoughts would have turned into plans.

Realising he had been lost in thought, John shifted his gaze back to his companion.

Sherlock's eyes were closed again, and a quiet snore marked the end of the conversation.

John nearly rolled off the bed when a cleared throat woke him up the next morning. He was tangled up in the soft, woollen blanket he had pulled on top of himself at Sherlock’s behest, and felt overslept and stale, still in yesterday’s clothes, his teeth fuzzy and unbrushed.

He yawned just as his sleep-addled brain began to turn on its systems. His eyes opened wide as he realised who was standing beside the bed, one patrician brow raised as Mycroft leant mock-casually against the frame of the bedroom door.

"Good morning, Doctor Watson."

John sat up, running a nervous hand through his hair. His ears picked up sounds from the en suite; must be Tallie and Sherlock. The right half of the bed was empty, confirming that he'd fallen asleep beside Sherlock without intending to. All he'd wanted is to close his eyes for a moment, and the bed had looked so inviting.

"Morning," he replied and tried to sound confident. Tried to sound as if it was a very absolutely utterly standard part of his job description to sleep in the same bed with Sherlock. "How is he?" he asked Mycroft.

"Natalia established that his fever is gone; the antibiotics seem to be taking effect. I applaud your quick thinking. It spared him a hospital stay."

"I needed to keep an eye on him," John pointed out, feeling the pressure to explain himself.

"Of course," Mycroft confirmed. "Your additional hours on duty will be compensated for."

John opened his mouth to protest but caught himself. Suddenly, it felt wrong that he was being paid for many of the things he did. He didn’t want to spend his evenings alone, haunting the halls of the main house — he liked spending time with Sherlock. It didn't feel like work last night, nor did
it feel like work that night when he'd come in to console Sherlock. It felt more akin to being flatmates, what they were doing, than being hired help.

John planted his socked feet — a pair he'd borrowed from Sherlock's collection — on the floor and rose to a standing position. He glanced at the chair in the corner; the dressing gown was gone.

Mycroft followed him into the kitchen.

"If you wish, you can take the rest of the day off. Natalia has kindly agreed to extended hours today."

Again, John was tempted to protest. He had nothing against Tallie being around more than usual, but he didn't want to be relieved of his duties.

They weren't just duties to him anymore, he realised with a start.

A definite line had been crossed last night, but he didn't care. Sherlock had talked to him, really talked, confided in him a little. He was anxious to see Sherlock, to see if the same open vulnerability would still be present, or if it had dissipated with the resolution of his fever. Everything John had done, since the day he’d arrived at Musgrave, had been because he’d wanted to. Could it be that Sherlock now wanted it too — wanted his company and his help? Was John reading too much into it? Last night it had felt like he'd properly got through the walls Sherlock kept slapping more concrete on when he was well, but would that effect last? Would Sherlock trust him, now? Trust him enough that they could maybe start doing more things together, perhaps even outside the house? It had to be making Sherlock feel worse always to be cooped up in the annexe, save for a monthly visit to the hospital.

John couldn’t help feeling hopeful as he made his way to his bedroom in the main house. After indulging in a long, hot shower, he wrapped a towel around his waist and went to his wardrobe.

The sight of his cane propped up in the corner by his wardrobe gave him pause. He hadn’t used it at all for days. That was something he would relish telling Ella about at their next appointment. Progress, he thought wryly as he gathered up his clothing for the day.

Sophie soon invited him for breakfast through the intercom. Making his way to the drawing room, John made a decision: he was going to assume that they’d taken plenty enough steps that Sherlock could be encouraged to agree to go somewhere nice, maybe wearing some of what John had found in the closet. Just for half a day for something he'd enjoy.

John decided to have a proper think on what that could be, taking into consideration everything that he had learned about his new friend.
Two Steps Back

Chapter Notes

This is it, the chapter that started the fusion of authorship known as... actually, that particular portmanteau is still open to suggestions. JBailsee? Elldollier? Jdotsee?

Regardless of our collective co-author name, this was the first chapter that J and Elsie co-wrote, after weeks of enthusiastic shouty head-canon-ing at all inappropriate hours of day and night. After the success of this chapter, affectionately known as just "Frimley" (and some pleading convincing asking very very nicely) J agreed to co-write the rest of the story with Elsie and our joint project was born.

Needless to say, this chapter holds a very dear place in our hearts. <3 <3

-J and ell

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Inspired by his findings in Sherlock's closet, John spent an evening a week later researching online, finally settling on a lovely, quaint hotel and spa just a few kilometres south for their first outing together. The MacDonald Frimley Hall had many glowing reviews and a lengthy list of services and accommodations, including an ADA-compliant pool lift.

It looked perfect.

Within the hour, John had scrutinised the extensive list of spa treatment sessions with fancy names and picked a nice-sounding massage. That would be paired with a swim in Frimley's "state of the art" pool. Since it was included in the package he'd picked out for Sherlock, John made an additional booking for himself and Tallie for cream tea in the afternoon, timing it so that they would be finished in plenty of time for Sherlock's massage. All they would have to do when they arrived was pay a small additional charge to be able to accompany Sherlock in the pool.

There, John thought, settling back against his chair with a smile. Surely this would help Sherlock remember a bit of the man he'd been before the injury. It was clear to John that Sherlock had once been a rather posh bloke; someone who wore bespoke Spencer Hart suits, styled his hair with luxurious products imported from the South of France and meticulously dabbed expensive aftershave on his porcelain skin. Judging by all the old media reports, he'd been a man who'd dashed through the streets of London with Scotland Yard's finest like some superhero and then probably went home to a sky-rise apartment to sip rare single malt scotch out of a crystal tumbler while experimenting on fascinating specimens, penning the results to his blog. It seemed a pity that this spa didn't offer classic shaves; surely, Sherlock would have preferred one to John and Tallie's middling efforts.

John sighed contentedly, steepling his fingers under his chin — not even realising who he was subconsciously mirroring. If he could help Sherlock regain even a bit of that former life, he'd consider himself successful. Thrilled, John slipped into bed and slept soundly, dreaming of Sherlock Holmes in all his glory.
Two days later, as the three of them stood before the sprawling, ivy-covered country house complete with a vivacious rose garden and meandering paths that led into a shady wooded area, John wasn't feeling as sure of his decision as he'd been on Tuesday night. Sherlock had been less than keen when John had breezed into the annexe the next morning to detail his plans. Even Tallie had seemed hesitant, but John's enthusiasm was eventually convincing, if not exactly infectious.

"I'm busy on Thursday," Sherlock had informed John.

"Doing what?" John had asked mock-innocently and dug out his phone from his pocket. "Mycroft’s secretary syncs me all your appointments, and there's nothing on."

Sherlock's eyes narrowed. His bluff had been caught. A bit of coaxing from Tallie, and he begrudgingly relented.

"If we must," he told John before leaving the room.

"You'll like it," John told his retreating back.

Who wouldn't? He had thought. Now, his conviction was waning, and John couldn't even place his finger on why. Maybe he should have talked to Tallie alone about this, asked for her support. But surely, she realised how important it was to get this right? She must agree that Sherlock should get out more, and she had joined John's endorsements when trying to get Sherlock to say yes. John cast a pleading look at Tallie, who replied with a courteous smile.

Rolling up next to his elbow, Sherlock scoffed loudly and rudely at the sight of the country house before them.

Tallie cleared her throat. "It's nice, John. Looks very… um… dignified?"

Ignoring the apprehension radiating from both of them, John strode ahead and into a cramped lobby. A large crystal chandelier loomed overhead; sending rainbow sparkles over every gleaming surface, adding another layer of visual stimulation to the already busy patterns and textures everywhere. Dark wood panelling wrapped around the bottom half of the walls, enveloping a tall counter in the far left corner. The carpet beneath their feet was lush and intricately patterned, clashing with the rich diamond pattern of the wallpaper. Large plants, heavy with tiny white flowers, dripped from the ornate bannister of the winding staircase. A large tapestry hung on the visible top corridor, greeting newcomers with ye olde charm. There were doors leading to banquet rooms on either side of the staircase, their plush chairs arranged around large tables visible from where he stood.

Everywhere John looked, decadence and grandeur competed for attention until he thought he might choke on the forced aristocratic air. It had all been stylish once, but now, it was all rather out-dated and a bit suffocating. He glanced at Tallie, who was eyeing the sight with a modicum of scepticism mirroring his own.

Determined not to let the discomfort of his own, much lower class upbringing keep Sherlock from having a wonderful day, John pressed on. With his chin raised, he marched to the counter and
announced their arrival.

The woman behind the counter pursed her lips as she looked between the three of them. Her blonde hair was swept up into a stiff-looking chignon, which did not move at all as she bent her head to consult the leather-covered folder clutched in her manicured hands. Her nails tapped against the desk, and for a brief moment, John saw her nose wrinkle. She smoothed her features into a flawless mask once more as she looked up at them, bland and emotionless even as she plastered on a smile.

"Yes, you are scheduled for the one o'clock tea, which has already begun."

Her gaze drifted pointedly to the grandfather clock perched ominously on the wall above her head. It clicked into place at two minutes past one. She continued, settling her practised gaze upon them once more. "Fortunately, you're not too late, so you should still be able to find a spot." She drifted one long finger in the direction of the hall that stretched out behind the counter. "Second door on the left. Have a lovely time."

John sniffed, indignant at the tone of her voice indicating they'd already done something wrong, failed to adhere to some unforgivable rule. He opened his mouth to explain that they would've been perfectly on time if the bloody parking lot's handicapped spaces could actually accommodate a disabled person instead of just being decorated with a nice stick painting of a wheelchair. None of the slots had the required accessible loading area, so they'd had to park at the far end of a row, half in the grass, just to have enough room to manoeuvre Sherlock's chair out of the van. It had still been a tight squeeze.

Tallie caught John's eye just as he was preparing to unleash his parking lot diatribe and she gave her head the briefest shake. Her lips were set in a very straight line, and John suspected she worried about drawing more attention to them.

*Sherlock wouldn't like that*, John reminded himself. He needed to keep his priorities straight, even if it meant squashing his annoyance. If he was to give Sherlock a glimpse of what he was missing by holing himself up in the annexe and never venturing into the real world, he desperately needed Tallie on his side — needed to prove to her as well as Sherlock that this was a good idea, that they could manage, that John could plan a successful outing. There had been so much improvement lately and John was determined not to be the one to derail that progress.

Spinning abruptly on his heel, he took off down the corridor, commenting pointedly about how lovely every gold-and-beige thing was that he passed. He didn't pause at the threshold to the appropriately named Gold Room, striding across without taking in much of his surroundings to the only empty table, perched directly in the centre of the room. It was round and draped in white linens, flanked by a pair of striped tub chairs. Ignoring the stares of the nearby patrons who sipped their tea with the sort of pinched, vaguely-scandalised look that could only be accomplished through a half-century of practice, John pushed the two chairs together as best he could to make room for Sherlock's wheelchair.

He was about to sink into one of them when a small commotion made him turn, wondering why his companions hadn't joined him yet.

Sherlock's chair was stuck on the thick, patterned carpet.

Instinctively, John stood and began moving towards the doorway to help, but Tallie was already bent at the waist, trying to untangle the unruly rug thread caught around Sherlock's wheel. Once she succeeded, John tried to catch her eye, but her jaw was set as she straightened and glanced around the room, stepping deftly out of Sherlock’s way.
John beamed at Sherlock as he slid into his own seat, but Sherlock's head was sunk onto his shoulders, and his gaze was focussed unhappily on the silverware on the table. John glanced over at Tallie, who was arranging her hands primly on top of her trousers and biting her lip. Instead of the scrubs she mostly favoured at the house, she was wearing a snug pair of black trousers and a loose, periwinkle-blue blouse with large pockets. She glanced at John and then pointedly at the cutlery, and John raised his brows in the equivalent of a shrug. He then tried to silently plead with his gaze for help in engaging Sherlock, in making this outing productive and enjoyable, just like he'd planned. Instead, her gaze shifted around the room, her sharp eyes taking in the couples dressed in their finest tweeds and florals. The air was heavy with a noxious mix of perfumes. She looked deeply worried — about what, John couldn't tell.

He followed her gaze, feeling suddenly and acutely underdressed in his jumper and jeans, even though they were his nicest pair. Then again, Sherlock looked like he'd been plucked from a juvenile detention centre in his usual grey attire of loose, soft cotton and bland practicality. John had got his hopes up about the clothes he'd found at the back of the walk-in closet when Sherlock had appeared at breakfast two days later in the blue dressing gown John had brought out. Tired as Sherlock was that morning — still recovering from his infection — he had been in much better spirits, even smiled as John had complimented the colour of the garment.

*Maybe he wanted to wear the hoodie today so he could hide under it*, John sighed. Certainly, Sherlock would be much more recognisable wearing a suit, but how many Frimleyans even knew who he was?

John cleared his throat. "Well, this is just lovely. Isn't this nice?" He tried, instantly hating the false note and the pretentious pitch of his voice. Forcing himself to be undeterred by the lack of response from either of his tablemates, he ploughed on, mentally digging through the brief history he'd read about the place to try and find something to get a rise out of Sherlock.

His voice dropped in a theatrical show of conspiracy as he leaned in, "You know, I read that this hotel is rumoured to be haunt——" he cut himself off, straightening as a flustered waiter in a wrinkled white shirt and black apron approached their table, handing each of them a paper menu with a selection of teas printed beneath a cheerful border of flowers. The waiter held out Sherlock's menu, his eyes darting around in an embarrassed panic when Sherlock didn't take it. It was being held too far away; John knew he couldn't raise his arms that high.

"I suppose I could hold it with my teeth," Sherlock told the waiter in a venomous tone, "But that would make reading it rather challenging, don't you think?"

John leaned over with a scowl and collected the menu from the young man as he scuttled away, laying it down on the tablecloth directly in front of Sherlock when he still refused to cooperate. "Wouldn't kill you to be less of an arse." He muttered, not sure whether he meant for Sherlock to hear him or not.

Sherlock didn't move, did not make any indication of having heard the comment. The waiter returned, directing his inquiries about their choice of tea to John, though his eyes darted nervously towards Sherlock more than once.

"I suppose I could hold it with my teeth," Sherlock told the waiter in a venomous tone, "But that would make reading it rather challenging, don't you think?"

"I don't know. Earl Grey alright, Tallie?" John scrambled to suggest.

Tallie glanced at him with a shrug. "Fine with me, but Sherlock would probably prefer the English Breakfast."

John wanted to kick himself for not remembering that Sherlock found the bergamot in Earl Grey
offensive. He had been so preoccupied with worrying about the tense atmosphere that he was losing his focus. Exhaling through his nose, he turned a smile to the waiter once more.

“English Breakfast it is. Ta!”

Sherlock ignored both of his table companions from then on. Thankfully, the vexatious silence was soon intercepted by the arrival of their individual teapots and a three-tier stand full of treats.

John stood to collect Sherlock's tumbler and drinking straw from the bag on the back of the wheelchair, grateful that Tallie had thought to pack it. Thanks to the physical therapy, Sherlock could now manage to lift the mugs at home, though he still used a straw to sip the warm liquid. Despite this development, John thought that the delicate teacups likely to be a feature at an afternoon tea would prove too challenging for Sherlock to manage.

John poured tea into the cup and reached for the sugar, fixing it the way he had learned Sherlock liked it.

"I haven't been to a proper high tea since I was a child," he told Tallie, setting Sherlock's cup in front of him and sticking in the straw. "My grandmother took us to one at a local café once, but it wasn't nearly this fancy," he continued, sinking into his seat and reaching for a Coronation chicken sandwich. Even the sandwiches had fancy names. He collected a second plate and started to fill it, pleased that the finger foods meant that Sherlock could probably enjoy them without too much trouble.

Tallie paused in her preserve-spreading, setting down the raisin scone she had just halved. She held her hand up, shooting John a look he couldn't quite interpret.

"Sherlock, can I get you something?" Tallie kept her voice light, but John felt every word like a dagger, taking a bite of his sandwich to try and swallow his embarrassment.

He'd just assumed, had just carried on doing things for Sherlock without asking when he should have known better. *Well the fuck done, Watson.*

"No. Thank you." Sherlock's reply was icy, and there was something about that sharply articulated politeness that underlined the coldness of his voice.

John took a too-large gulp of tea, wincing as it scalded his throat. "Sorry," he muttered, glancing sideways, searching the stiff-backed man next to him for any sign of the soft and vulnerable Sherlock that had been present just a few short days ago.

What have I missed? John wondered in frustration, as he cast around for another topic of conversation, anything to pull Sherlock from this massive sulk. This wasn't how today was supposed to go at all. *We're doing nothing but having tea — why is he being so difficult?*

Tallie came to the rescue, asking John to finish telling them about the ghost rumours connected to the historic building. He obliged, watching Sherlock out of the corner of his eye until the other man rolled his eyes and joined in, enumerating all of the ways that the 'guilty nanny that haunts the halls' theory was complete rubbish. As Sherlockian lectures went, this one was half-hearted and particularly dismissive, but John latched onto the effort, steadily choosing to ignore the furtive looks they were receiving from the other patrons as he tried to keep Sherlock talking, keep him distracted. Sherlock's tea still remained untouched by the time Tallie was pouring herself a second cup from her individual pot.

John wiped his mouth with a napkin, plucking a few of the cake pieces off of the tray with his
fingers and popping one in his mouth.

"Come on, Sherlock. I believe it's a British law that you can't leave afternoon tea without indulging in at least a scone." He tried to keep his voice light and teasing but heard an edge creep into it nevertheless.

All at once, John could see Sherlock's walls slam back up, his head sinking back down his shoulders. He stared stonily at the wall, his jaw twitching, the crease between his brow reappearing.

John looked away.

"I don't think he's very hungry, John," Tallie said after a moment of uncomfortable silence, her voice quiet but firm. It left no room for interpretation; John needed to drop the subject.

John wasn't sure if Sherlock was truly not hungry — even with his dexterity improving, he still ate very little each day, claiming that his 'Transport' had always required less food to survive than other people's — or if there was something else preventing him from partaking in the treats. John had learned that Sherlock's appetite seemed to be a good gauge of his anxiety level and mood and when he'd walked into the annexe that morning, Sherlock's breakfast plate looked as though it was largely untouched. If he hadn't eaten much that morning, either, then John had to believe there might be something else going on.

He glanced around. The average age of the Frimley clientele seemed to hover in the upper half of a century, and John noticed several people shooting covert looks their way. He wondered if it was the shock of seeing someone so young and healthy looking — that must have been a rare sight within these walls, it seemed — confined to a wheelchair, or if it was something about Sherlock specifically that was garnering so much attention. Either way, John itched to tell them all exactly where he thought they should shove their clotted cream and scones...

He gave a distracted nod to show that he'd heard Tallie, swallowing his frustrated sigh. It seemed he had no other option besides letting the matter drop for now. Thankfully, as a quick glance at his watch informed him, it was almost time for Sherlock's appointment.

Brushing crumbs from his lap, he stood. "It's ten minutes to two, Sherlock. Your first… um… thing is scheduled in ten minutes, so we'd better go and get you settled." His voice had taken on the bright cheeriness of earlier, sounding a bit more authentic this time. Perhaps afternoon tea wasn't Sherlock's thing, but John decided it had refreshed him at least, restoring some of his faith that Sherlock would still enjoy the rest of their time here.

With a sweep of his hand, he indicated that Sherlock should lead the way back into the gilded corridor. The spa was directly opposite, and they filed into the waiting area silently. The room was filled with a semi-circle of egg-shaped chairs, the fronts of them stretching out into an attached footstool. It was dimly lit, and some sort of flute music was being played quietly over the speakers. It smelled clean and fresh, with just a hint of lavender, which John knew was supposed to be calming. A handwritten sign informed them that this was the Relaxation Room, yet John felt anything but.

A marble bar counter ran along the wall to their left, a dispenser of water resting on top, an assortment of green and yellow things floating in it.

Sherlock scoffed as he wheeled past it. "Contrary to popular belief, floating a slice of fruit and a handful of leaves in water does not make it any more palatable nor does it contain any magical healing properties."
Tallie and John settled into the egg chairs while Sherlock looked apprehensively around the room. John heard him clear his throat twice. He was just about to offer to get him a glass of the infused water when Sherlock spoke, his voice deeper than normal.

"John. What are we doing here? Seriously, what? Do you really think that having someone rub a handful of oil over parts of me I can't even feel and stick cucumber slices on my eyelids is going to improve my quality of life? Perhaps you were hoping that a refreshing cup of grass-infused water would detox the paralysis right out of me?"

John turned to face Sherlock, whose eyes had lost the vacant stare of earlier and were now flashing with something dark and painful, despite his sarcastic tone. John thought this would be something he'd enjoy — an afternoon of pampering where he could just let go and relax. How could Sherlock not see how hard he was trying here?

John's fingers twitched as he flattened his palm against his knee, inhaling deeply before opening his mouth to speak. "Give it a chance? Please?" was all he could come up with, and he hoped that his earnest tone would eradicate Sherlock's dismay.

No such luck. If anything, Sherlock looked even angrier.

Fortunately, before he could unleash an even worse tirade, the door opened and a slim woman, her hair in a bun at the nape of her neck, walked in. She was wearing a pair of black pants and a light blue t-shirt that said 'B.r.e.a.t.h.e.' in white script. Slung around her waist was a black strap with attached pockets, stuffed full of a variety of jars and bottles, the pump tops of several sticking up. Following behind her was a man way above John's height, tanned and muscular, dressed all in white.

"Good afternoon." Her voice matched her calm demeanour, quiet but not breathy. John noticed that she stood a few feet away so she could address Sherlock without looking down at him.

"I'm Sasha. I have a booking for Sherlock Holmes?" Her gaze swept around the room, stopping at John, who smiled encouragingly as he cocked his head towards Sherlock.

She produced a polite smile and wisely did not extend her hand. "Welcome to Frimley Spa, Mister Holmes. Have you had a chance to fill out our health questionnaire?"

"What questionnaire?" Sherlock demanded.

"It's sorted," John interjected hastily. "I filled it out on the website. When I booked."

Sasha beamed. "Then it should be in the system, and I shall read through it all before we begin. Meanwhile," she gestured towards the muscular man who stepped in beside her. "This is Tom. He's going to help ensure that you are comfortable on the table before we begin. Would you like anyone else to accompany you since they are probably more familiar with your particular issues and preferences?"

John assumed Sherlock would want both him and Tallie — or maybe just him. Though Tallie was always professional and Sherlock seemed more comfortable around her than anyone, this felt different, somehow. Besides, this was John's idea to begin with, and maybe Sherlock would feel more comfortable between just blokes until everything was set up and ready for Sasha. Nudity hadn't ever bothered John, especially not after years of the military and the medical field, and he took pride in his professional ability to distance his personal feelings. He wondered briefly what Sherlock's attitude to nudity had been before his accident.
"No."

John froze, halfway out of the chair, startled at the firmness of Sherlock's voice. His head whipped around to find out to whom Sherlock was speaking to that way and was met with a pair of icy blue-green eyes.

"Tallie can do it. Stay here, John. You've done enough."

Without a backwards glance, the four of them disappeared through the door, leaving John blinking after them.

Feeling restless and rejected, he stood very still in the middle of the room, listening for any sounds coming from the space beyond the door, but all he could hear were the calming nature sounds that were now being played in the relaxing area. John did not feel relaxed — he felt like screaming.

Just as he was about to succumb to the questionable lure of the flavoured water to distract himself, he heard a deep baritone voice rise in volume from somewhere down the hall behind the door. He couldn't make out the words being said, but he was certain he could identify the owner. He poured himself a glass — wishing in vain it was whisky — and sank into the chair closest to the door.

After a few minutes, Tallie reappeared, her mouth set in a thin line. "He can't have the hot stones, John. He wouldn't be able to gauge the temperature, and they could burn him. Plus, his skin is very sensitive."

Something twinged inside John at the idea that Tallie knew about something as intimate as the sensitivity of Sherlock's skin and John didn't. He pushed that thought aside.

Tallie was still talking. "Thankfully, they can change the appointment on the go to a deep tissue massage, and Sasha has even had some experience working with patients with loss of sensation."

She poured herself a cup of water and sat in the chair next to John's, both feet planted firmly on the floor. Taking a sip, she leaned forward, letting out a soft chuckle. "Sherlock actually agreed to go for it, said it was probably just going to be like physio."

Her expression sobered. "It really was a good idea to come here, though. He's out of his comfort zone, sure, but a bit of pampering — even just pushing forward the idea that he deserves that — might be really good for him. In his own way, I think he appreciates the effort." She blew out a breath, settling back against the chair. "It's just that being out in public puts a damper on that. At any rate, it's better than just staring out of the window for the next few months until…"

Her mouth closed, the corners of her lips tucking in, and John could see that she was chewing on the inside of her cheek. She fiddled with the rim of her cup, not meeting John's eye even as he turned to stare at her, incredulous.

"Until?" John pressed, not sure he wanted to hear the rest of that sentence because it made his neck prickle. "Until what?"

She gave a small, nearly imperceptible shake of her head.

"Tallie. What?"

"His life is hard, John," Tallie said quietly, eyes still fixed on the glass of water in her hands. "I don't have to tell you that; you've seen it first-hand. You might have even seen more than me. He opens up to you in a way I've never seen before. With his brother or me, he mostly just…checks out." She turned toward him, her usually glowing, healthy skin looking washed out in the dim light
of the room. Her eyes were tired, but they held a fierceness that he understood. She cared about Sherlock. She cared enough to want to help him on his own terms and protect him from further disappointments and discomfort.

"I had actually been planning to quit," she admitted. "I'd moved back home to live with my Mum while I went back to school to do a Master's in nursing. I no longer needed this job, and the commute was getting to be a drag. But the day I meant to tell Mister Holmes I was leaving…" She inhaled, letting her eyes slide shut for a moment. "Sherlock convinced us that he would be fine being left alone while we went to the main house to talk; he could be persuasive when he wanted to be. When I came back to fix him lunch, I—I— found him and I didn't…when we were waiting for the ambulance, I didn't think he was going to make it, John."

John exhaled. "You gave him the naloxone."

Tallie leaned her arms on her thighs, tilting the glass in her hand. "I know I reacted quickly and did all the right things, but afterwards, I wondered if I had done the right thing," she said, and it was not difficult for John to gauge her meaning.

She still avoided looking at John. "His life is hard, and he's in constant pain. I helped him write the letter," she said in a low voice though nobody besides John was within earshot.

It sounded like a confession. It sounded as though she expected John to be angry with her, to yell or place blame for something.

"What letter?" John asked, profoundly baffled.

She frowned and then looked alarmed. "I assumed you knew — Never mind. Forget it."

"Tallie. What letter?"

"It's really not my place to say, John." She picked up a women's' magazine from a side table. "I'm sorry."

John opened his mouth to make one more demand for answers, but from her expression, from the way she kept her eyes firmly on whatever article to which she had randomly opened the magazine signalled that no answers would be forthcoming.

"Does Sherlock ever talk to you about his life… before?" John asked after a few moments, wondering if a different tactic would help him dig up some clues.

He remembered the brief conversations he'd had with Mycroft on the subject: 'Even as a boy, he was so lively… quicksilver, one might say. Athletic, won trophies in fencing at Harrow. And as an adult he was constantly darting about, leaping rooftops and climbing over furniture. And he's always enjoyed a grand entrance. Not quite the same with a wheelchair.'

She downed the rest of her water. "He doesn't talk about his old life, no. I think he tries not to think about it."

"Does he keep in touch with friends or workmates? Anybody?"

"No. There hasn't been anyone as far as I know."

"But the detective work— surely that's something he could still have, something he could pick up again?" John insisted. He was aware he was nearly pleading, despite Tallie's apparent reticence.
Had all the others who had held John's job before him just given up? No wonder Sherlock felt so rotten if no one around him was challenging the idea that nothing could ever be enjoyable again, that he'd lost everything.

Tallie shrugged, giving him a small smile though she didn't turn her head, "I honestly don't know. I remember Mister Holmes trying to talk to him about employment options, even offering to arrange something connected to his own work, but Sherlock wouldn't hear any of it. Told Mister Holmes that if he wanted to be a government paper-pusher, he'd hardly have gone to Cambridge to study chemistry."

"Has he ever worked in chemistry, then? Done research?"

Tallie shrugged. "I think he dropped out of university. He was a detective and liked his work. It's all I know."

John sighed, leaning his palms on his knees. He hoped desperately that Sherlock was finding the massage at least tolerable and useful, if not relaxing. Rather than put him off, Tallie's despondence had injected John with a newfound determination to keep trying, to try to find something that could shake Sherlock out of his bitter reverie and allow a crack in the wall he'd kept up between them. This wasn't the first time John noticed that Sherlock relied heavily on her when he was the centre of attention, deferring decision-making to her and distancing himself from the situation. It didn't fit at all with how Mycroft had described the man before the accident — fiercely independent, stubborn, never let anyone tell him what to do.

Today, Sherlock seemed downright wary of John — as though he feared that he would force him to do something genuinely unpleasant. It was the very opposite of what John had wanted to achieve. Then again, Sherlock seemed always to assume everything would always be unpleasant, so the game may have been rigged against John from the start.

All John could do was to keep trying.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, MacDonald Frimley Hall is a real place. Regardless of what happens in these two chapters, we are absolutely sure that Frimley is actually quite lovely. And the staff, too. We should go visit. It's just that the aesthetic wasn't really... our thing. Someday, we'll take a trip there. We'll take tea in the Gold Room and try not to giggle and/or cringe the entire time. Because we're adults. Stop looking so sceptical. Shoo.
Sink Like A Stone

John shifted in his seat, trying to get comfortable in the tense silence that had settled over the so-called Relaxation Room; the irony was not lost on him.

Tallie kept her eyes fixed on the magazine in her hands.

The door opened after precisely an hour had passed; Sasha peeked her head around the corner, flashing a smile at both of them.

"Tallie, we're ready for you again."

John scowled at his lap as she made her way to the door. But when she returned, holding the door for Sherlock, his irritation evaporated: Tallie looked relieved and Sherlock, while not exactly smiling, was no longer shooting murderous glares at everything in his vicinity. His left hand looked relaxed as it rested on his lap while his right one steered, his face was smooth and open, and he was sitting up straight instead of trying to sink through the floor.

John chanced a small smile in his direction as Sherlock wheeled past him into the hall. He didn't dare to ask if Sherlock had enjoyed his massage, so he settled for: "It was alright, then?"

"Yes," was the amiable reply. No clipped tone, no hostility of any kind.

John blew out a breath as he trailed after Tallie out into the hall, feeling almost light-headed with relief. Needing a moment to collect himself, he pretended to try to make sense of the signs directing them to different areas of the building. It seemed a bit pathetic how Sherlock finding something at least tolerable made him so thrilled, but it did give John some much-needed hope that maybe this day was salvageable. Finally, I got something right.

Sherlock glanced up at him when he turned back to the group and gave a tiny nod. "What's next, John? I assume that wasn't all you had planned for this… excursion."

Flashing Sherlock a carefully restrained smile, John took off down the hall, calling over his shoulder, "Definitely not."

He didn't even care how ridiculous he might look, marching down the carpeted corridor with an ear-splitting grin. Sherlock was starting to enjoy himself and even willing to do more. Maybe it's just the endorphins from the massage but who cares — there really is hope!

After Tallie and Sherlock made a quick loo stop to cap his catheter, they headed to the entrance to the locker rooms. There, John hesitated, and Tallie paused at the corner of the women's changing room with a questioning glance.

"Your bathing suit is packed in Sherlock's bag and Sherlock's—"

Before she could finish her sentence, the man in question rolled right between John and her, calling out a breezy, "We don't need an inventory, Tallie. I was there when you sorted everything out. It's all fine, John," he announced, then disappeared around a corner.

Until now, it hadn't occurred to John to think through the logistics involved in getting Sherlock into the pool. In a clinical sense, nudity hadn't ever bothered him. The human body was complex and exciting and nothing to be ashamed about. But this was Sherlock, and their relationship was not — strictly speaking — that of a doctor and patient. John was glad for that, certainly. So what was he?
A friend? Was this a normal thing for a friend to do? Surely, he had gained another rung on the ladder by now, but what would that even be? Of course, he'd already seen Sherlock practically naked when he was ill, but that was different; he'd hardly even been conscious. Shaking his head, thoughts whirling, he followed Sherlock into the men's changing area and to a quiet corner with enough space for the wheelchair.

"You'll need to remove my trousers."

John blinked. Right, yes, exactly—

"John." Sherlock's voice held an edge of exasperation. He loathed repetition. "The next activity on the itinerary is swimming, is it not? I do not wish to wear my trousers, however comfortable, into the pool. Therefore, I need you to remove them. Please don't tell me the shedding of clothing never occurred to you as part of a spa visit."

John nodded and immediately dropped to his knees at Sherlock's feet, untying his trainers and removing his socks. He had told Tallie and Sherlock that swimming would be involved so that they could prepare; she had mentioned in the car that Sherlock was wearing his swimming shorts underneath. John had been so preoccupied with trying to engage Sherlock in conversation and fretting about his plans that he hadn't really considered the practicalities much. They had Tallie with them, and Tallie always sorted those things out.

But of course, she can't come into the men's changing room, John had thought no earlier than right before she had disappeared from view into the ladies' side.

John stuffed the socks inside Sherlock's shoes, ignoring the huff of indignation at the apparent mistreatment of them and moved around to the back of Sherlock's wheelchair to unclip the bag from its hooks. He glanced around the spacious locker room, visualising how he was going to get Sherlock changed. He had no idea how he and Tallie usually did it at home, or how much help Sherlock was able to give, but John imagined it usually involved a bed or flat surface.

The locker room wasn't very large; white cabinets with slots for small padlocks lined the walls, and wooden benches divided the room in half. Near the back of the room was a small collection of plastic chairs; beyond that to the right, John could see white-tiled walls that he assumed must be a part of the shower area. There was at least the silver lining that they appeared to be the only guests currently in the changing room. There wasn't anywhere obvious that they could go to make this easy and John crossed his arms, annoyed at yet another obstacle. Part of him wanted just to go home and forget all about this bloody day, but no. This was for Sherlock, and if he was finally enjoying himself, John wasn't going to be the one to ruin that over a bit of logistics.

"My trousers, John. They will not remove themselves, no matter how hard you glare at them. Trust me. I've tried."

"Yeah, yeah. Just give me a minute, alright? I'm not sure yet how we're going to do this, let me work it out."

"John. I'm already wearing my bathing suit. I simply need you to stop thinking so hard and take off my clothes, preferably before we gain an audience."

Despite the repetition, Sherlock's voice held a growing trace of amusement and John gave in to a chuckle, feeling like a proper idiot. He squatted at Sherlock's feet once more, removing them from the footrest one at a time. He could feel Sherlock's eyes on him, but he didn't dare meet his gaze while this close.
"Ready?"

At Sherlock’s nod, John stood up, wrapping one arm around the lanky man’s torso and lifted, starting to tug Sherlock’s soft cotton trousers down over his hip to his mid-thigh with the other hand. He switched his grip to do the other side. He could hear Sherlock's breathing close to his hear, felt each exhalation against the side of his neck.

"I'm surprised Tallie has allowed to you to remain so useless about these things," Sherlock commented.

"Shut up," John growled just as he managed to free the man's left lycra-covered buttock from the garment. “You’re one to talk, you know.”

He lowered Sherlock down onto the chair again. Stepping back, John grasped the fabric of his trousers with both hands and pulled, shimmying them down impossibly long legs and over his feet, which were as pale and bony as the rest of Sherlock. They looked so normal that John half-expected Sherlock to stand up on them and walk away. His swim shorts were dark blue and well-worn; form-fitting and showed off his long, pale legs. The laundry tag was hanging out and attached to it was an embroidered name tape, making John wonder if he'd owned them since he’d been at school. Public school, John chuckled.

Balling up Sherlock's trousers in his hands, he stuck them in the bag he’d taken off the back of the wheelchair, pulling out his own swim trunks. He tossed them onto his shoulder, stepping around to Sherlock's front to help assist him with his shirt, but Sherlock had already managed to wrestle it up over his head and was slowly pulling each of his arms out. His head popped out at last, and he handed the shirt to John, looking somewhat pleased with himself.

John grinned. "Neat party trick."

Sherlock rolled his eyes, a flicker of amusement crossing his face. He was flushed from the exertion, giving a bit of life to his ivory skin tone. John hadn't noticed before that he had faint freckles on his shoulders and neck. In just his swimwear he looked boyish, hair slightly mussed from being pulled through the collars of his shirts.

"Your turn," he prompted John.

Without hesitation, John discarded his jeans and pants, folding them and setting them down on the closest bench. He quickly then stepped into his swimming shorts. He was used to changing in front of other people, but generally, those other people were occupied with the same task, not staring at him from a seated position. He grabbed the hem of his t-shirt, looking forward to a nice dip.

Starting to yank the garment over his head, he spoke, "I read that they have what they described as a 'state of the art' pool here, with a variety of amenities we might need, so I thought we could—"

His words died in his throat, because the moment he freed his head from the fabric, he felt the sudden heat of Sherlock's gaze even before he glanced up to confirm he was being watched. Sherlock's eyes were fixed on John's left shoulder where the bullet had entered, leaving behind a knot of unsightly puckered skin and a starburst of scar tissue on his back. John had been so caught up in getting Sherlock ready that he had all but forgotten that he would need to be shirtless in the pool too, with the scar he loathed in plain sight. He faltered, feeling his cheeks heat. He tried to pluck up the courage to look at Sherlock, to gauge his reaction to his disfigured body, but Sherlock turned his chair and headed for the showers.

Clearing his throat, John shook out his left hand, which he'd clenched into a nervous fist around his
shirt. He stuffed the garment into his still open locker, secured it with the padlock and followed the sound of the wheelchair.

Sherlock was waiting for him, parked diagonally from a simple, plastic wheelchair obviously intended for use in the wet areas. John wanted to kick himself again for not realising Sherlock couldn't possibly shower in his own chair with its electrics and cushions. All that seemed to have occurred to Sherlock very quickly; maybe pools had been a part of his rehab?

"It's all fine, John," he said quietly. His eyes flitted to John's scar and then to his lap. "If anything, that's really quite… fascinating. Forensically, I mean. I assume rifle rather than a handgun?"

"Yeah. The bullets they dug out confirmed that. Insurgents in that area were using a worrying amount of gear stolen from US forces, so there was a lot of interest in identifying precisely what caused injuries in Allied Forces soldiers."

"Can I see the back?" Sherlock asked carefully.

John indulged him but didn't linger long as he faced away from his companion. He also didn't step close enough that Sherlock could have reached out and touched the scar. Not that John thought he might have, but —

"Jacketed hollow point?" Sherlock asked when their eyes met again. "Since the exit channel doesn't look too big."

John raised his eyebrows at Sherlock’s ballistics knowledge, but shook his head, swallowing hard. "I don't know. I was in too much pain and on too much morphine to care."

Sherlock bit his lip and looked down, giving his full attention to the handbrake on his chair. John checked that the brakes on the shower wheelchair were also on. Thankfully, a transfer from chair to chair was one of the easiest things to manage with Sherlock's injury, and they'd done it several times after their evening of TV and Chinese. From Tallie's instructions, John knew that Sherlock was not supposed to have his arms around his neck, but that John should clasp his own hands tightly around Sherlock's chest and lift with his back straight. The transfer belt Tallie usually used and which was even now underneath Sherlock would have to be removed before a shower, so John reasoned that it was best to ignore it.

John wrapped his arms around Sherlock, unable to ignore how different it felt to be doing the transfer while they were both shirtless. Sherlock's skin was cool under John's forearms, but his breath was warm, where it puffed against his shoulder. The man was so thin that John couldn't help worrying that his tight grip was causing pain or bruising his ribs, but Sherlock endured the help without complaint. John settled him into the plastic chair, suddenly keen to put space between them before his mind wandered even more. Sherlock cleared his throat as John arranged his legs, but said nothing. Next, John kept one arm straight across Sherlock’s chest to prevent him from tipping forward, quickly fastening the safety belt. He knew that while Sherlock could sit up for short periods, his balance was easily tipped. If he slumped forward, he didn't have enough torso muscle control to lift his upper body back up even by pushing with his hands.

"Alright?" John asked, straightening his form as he stepped back.

His reply was a nod. They were no longer alone in the locker room: a group of older men had arrived and were merrily chatting away at the opposite end of the room behind a row of lockers.

Sherlock dropped his hands over the armrest. He ran his fingers along the edge of the wheels but didn't try to propel himself forward. John knew from talking to Tallie that he didn't have the
strength — not yet, at least. From his own googling, John knew that many tetraplegics with even higher-level injuries could operate a wheelchair that combined a power chair and a manual one. **Maybe with more physical therapy...?**

After making sure that Sherlock's feet were safely on the footrests, John grabbed the handles and headed for the showers. He realised that he hadn't explicitly asked Sherlock if he wanted to go swimming, but Sherlock's purposefulness in the preparations seemed to signal consent. That unspoken agreement would have to suffice since they were now in the shower room.

"How do you usually do this with Tallie?" John asked. He remembered the showering contraption Sherlock had at home; it was very different from the rather normal-looking wheelchair he was in now. They wouldn't need to do a full scrub-down to enter the pool, but John realised that Sherlock might want to do a proper wash-up after.

"Washing mitt with a wrist belt, which I then give to Tallie who sorts out what I can't. I believe she has packed one for me."

John engaged the brakes of the wheelchair. "Must be at the bottom of your bag, then. I can get it for you after the pool. Now, we could probably just..." John grabbed the handheld head from a corner shower and noticed that all of the shower rigs had them — at least in this area, Frimley did seem to cater to a disabled clientele.

Sherlock was looking at him expectantly, his pale and skinny arms and thighs already broken out in goosebumps; it was draughty in the room. John could see a spasm beginning on Sherlock's left thigh which the man covered with his palm, averting his gaze.

John hurried to turn on the shower and took care to find a safe, warm temperature. He did his best to be thorough in rinsing all of Sherlock, including getting his hair wet. He couldn't help but smile at the sight of those curls plastered down; Sherlock looked so odd without that soft dark halo around his head. He pinched his eyes closed when John rinsed his face, holding his breath and letting it out when the water no longer ran down his cheeks.

"A warning would be appreciated. Tallie uses her hand on my forehead when she rinses my hair so that I don't feel like a rat being drowned." Sherlock's words were harsh, yet somehow patient in their exasperation. "Not really a part of a trauma orthopaedist's job, is this?"


"No harm done."

Satisfied that he had pointed the hose at every visible part of Sherlock, including what he could reach by lifting the man's thigh, John frowned. "Should we do the bits under your trunks?"

"I don't know, John. Should we?" Sherlock's tone was teasing, mock-innocent. "You are clearly the cruise director of this endeavour, so I defer to you."

"You can be such a right cock sometimes, you know," John grinned. He slipped his fingers underneath the elastic waistband of Sherlock's shorts and pointed in the water jet from the showerhead. He made sure to keep an eye on the catheter; if the water pushed it out of the trunks where it had been tucked in by Tallie, he'd have to shove it back down and wasn't sure how precisely she had positioned it.

"That's not how Tallie usually—" Sherlock piped up again, his superior tone blunted by the way his lip had quirked up.
"While you consider finishing that sentence, may I remind you that I'm a doctor; I know how to sprain people," John told him, his smile matching Sherlock's.

"I do wonder what Hippocrates would think if he heard one of his disciples threatening people in wheelchairs," Sherlock quipped back. He was looking down at the swimwear fabric tenting on his thighs from the water.

When John pulled the shorts away from his waist off his back, too, and directed the water down between his buttocks, Sherlock commented tiredly: "I'm sure you've now been admirably thorough."

After John temporarily removed his trunks and took a quick shower with his back firmly turned to Sherlock, they made their way to the pool area. Unlike in the communal swimming halls John remembered from school, the area was pleasantly warm.

Tallie emerged from a hot tub in the corner, wearing a black-and-white-striped, sporty swimsuit. "You two took your time," she commented but didn't sound irritated.

"John required some instructions," Sherlock replied. He was glancing furtively around them; they were now surrounded by several people making their way between the changing rooms and saunas and the pools.

John realised he needed to gain Sherlock's focus before the attention of others made him withdraw into his shell again. Things were getting so much better when it was just the two of them alone; being around others who weren't Tallie or Mycroft still made John feel as though they'd been flung right back to the start where Sherlock had been adamant about shutting the rest of the world out.

"Hot tub or the big pool? I'm heading back to the former after we get the two of you settled somewhere," Tallie said.

John was relieved that she assumed she could leave them to it. It meant that she thought that John could handle things. He could only hope that Sherlock had the same idea. John glanced at him; Sherlock's gaze was focused on the two raised hot tubs. Neither was empty. He said nothing.

"Big pool's got a lift, doesn't it?" John suggested though he suspected using such a thing would make Sherlock feel even more under the limelight.

Sherlock shrugged, averting his gaze.

Moving him from the chair to the lift was easy; Tallie did most of the work with practised ease. John assumed she had operated similar devices before.

He made his way down a set of steps into the shallow end with the lift. Next, it took a bit of manoeuvring, but the three of them finally got Sherlock lowered deeper into the water from the lift, his back pressed up against John's front. He was rigid, breathing in short bursts through his nose. In one quick movement, just as Sherlock's weight stopped being supported by the chair, John wrapped his arms securely around his friend's chest and locked his hands together.

"Gotcha. We're good!" He nodded in Tallie's direction; she was hovering nervously near the edge
of the steps. "We're good?" This time it was murmured, a question meant just for Sherlock's ear, which was millimetres from his mouth. Sherlock gave a quick, jerky nod.

John stepped slowly backwards, into deeper water. Sherlock's eyes were open, but he seemed shuttered again, staring vacantly at the ceiling even as a muscle twitched in his jaw. While Tallie and the other women fussed with getting the lift hoisted back up, John drifted further into the pool, keeping his arms locked firmly around Sherlock as he found a good spot in chest-deep water at a distance from the only other two people in the pool: two older ladies aqua-jogging in the deep end. Sherlock's arms floated to the surface, and he flexed them experimentally, the movement causing tiny ripples to break across the water and lap gently at their chests and shoulders. John wondered if Sherlock's arm strength might ever allow swimming — it would have to be carefully supervised, of course, and some sorts of flotation devices might be needed. He also wondered if Sherlock realised that, while submerged, they looked just like any other spa patrons having a dip. Maybe he had, and the realisation would allow him to let down his guard, even just incrementally.

John wanted to say something, to offer encouragement or reassurance, but was afraid to break the peacefulness of the moment. He settled for a hum of contentment deep in his chest, feeling the vibrations travel into Sherlock's back. He was content, he realised, and hoped that Sherlock felt that way, too.

Slowly, hesitantly, as though asking for permission, Sherlock's head tipped back until it was resting on John's shoulder. They took their time, staying in the quiet spot John had found. Sherlock's breathing calmed down, and the tension from his shoulders disappeared. Little effort was needed to keep him in place. At one point John shifted his weight to accommodate a swimmer making her way between them and the edge of the pool and was suddenly made acutely aware of how close he was to Sherlock; the water seemed to add a whole new layer of intimacy to the experience. We probably look like a couple, he realised, and the notion bothered him surprisingly little. He reminded himself that he had more important things to worry about, but his thoughts lingered on the topic, and he found himself wondering if Sherlock had done things like this before with someone he had liked. Had he been single at the time of the accident like his reply had suggested when John had asked about boyfriends?

A few moments and some more errant thoughts later, John chastised himself for letting his imagination run riot like that. They changed spots a few times, trying to steer clear of other patrons. Sherlock said very little, apart from monosyllabic affirmations when John suggested a direction, and he allowed John to tow him around with nary a disapproving glance. John was reluctant to think the earlier mortifications of the day were no longer affecting Sherlock's mood but hesitantly admitted that Sherlock seemed to be if not enjoying himself, then at least relatively calm.

Minutes passed, turned into half an hour and then ticked even further. Eventually, Tallie called from the side of the pool, positively startling John: "It's ten to five. If we want to get home before dark, we should head back to the lockers."

A glance at the hoist told John that it was ready to be used again. He felt intensely disappointed that it was time to go — Sherlock seemed to have slipped out of resentfulness and relaxed, and John wanted to give him a chance to enjoy what they were doing as long as he could.

Turning them around slowly, he guided Sherlock back to the edge of the pool where the large contraption was waiting, lowered so that the bottom of the seat was below the surface. Tallie had piled her hair on top of her head and was waiting for them in the waist-deep water. John widened his steps and loosened his grip, but Sherlock tensed immediately, sucking in John's name on a gasp. John's arms tightened as they reached the hoist and, instead of allowing Tallie to grab hold of Sherlock as well, he pressed his back against the wall so that he could do most of the lifting.
Between the three of them, they more or less gracefully managed to slide Sherlock into place.

John was just leaning forward to pull the second, diagonal safety belt down when Sherlock's leg spasmed, his knee snapping straight and his foot catching in John's swimming shorts. They yanked down, and in a split-second reflex, he let go of Sherlock's shoulders to pull them back up.

Sherlock let out a strangled cry before his head disappeared under the water as his upper body lurched forward, ending up bent double with his lower half still strapped in. John reached for him immediately, hands tangling with Tallie's as they scrambled to pull Sherlock's face and shoulders back out of the water. He was gasping for air, head whipping back and forth, eyes wide and wild. Water was running in rivulets down his cheeks, and his eyes were bloodshot, pupils blown wide as his gaze briefly met John's before fixing on Tallie whose hands were now firmly gripping his shoulders. This wedged her between the two men, forcing John to wade to the side of the hoist so he could see better. Sherlock coughed feebly, dryly, and John was glad that he wasn't spitting out water. He had only been submerged for a second, perhaps two. Not enough for any sort of lasting damage, John tried to console himself. Lasting physical damage, at least.

Guilt hit John like a kick in the chest. He couldn't even imagine what it had been like for Sherlock.

"I'm so sor—" he began, throat dry despite the rest of him being sopping wet, the words cracked and hesitant. He trailed out once it registered that Tallie was also talking to Sherlock, her tone quiet as she repeated the mantra that everything was alright. She wasn't moving Sherlock just yet; instead, she was letting him take his time to calm down. John heard the door from the locker rooms open, but he didn't dare take his eyes off of Sherlock to see to whom the footsteps belonged.

"Enough. I want. To go home." Sherlock's words came out in a clipped snarl between heavy breaths. He still looked worryingly ashen, arms braced against Tallie's and his fingers clenched against her forearms.

Tallie nodded, business-like as ever. She looked up where Tom had appeared. He was watching the pair of them with professional concern. So were all other patrons in the pool hall.

"Could you give us a hand, please," Tallie asked Tom sternly. Despite the polite words, it was a command.

Tom wasted no time in climbing down the ladder, clearly not caring that his crisp white uniform would get wet. John was left with no other option than to step aside and watch, feeling rather useless as Tom and Tallie teamed up in manoeuvring Sherlock out of the pool. Tallie then spoke to Tom briefly, and then the latter grabbed hold of the handles of Sherlock's chair.

John strode up to them.

"Tallie asked if I could give you guys a hand with the shower and all," Tom said with a smile.

"Yeah," John relented. "That's fine."

It wasn't.

The ride home was spent in an uncomfortable silence after Tallie asked John resolutely to please stop apologising after his fourth attempt. Sherlock had ignored every one of them. John had to then contend with staring out the window, wondering how he could have screwed things up so badly.
The entire day had been a bust. Firstly, the place had been outdated and crowded with geriatrics. Sherlock had made his discomfort clear from the beginning, and yet John kept pushing onward, determined as he was deluded. Secondly, he hadn't known what to do because not even half of the things Sherlock would need help with had even occurred to him. As much as Tom had been a godsend after the pool in that he knew exactly how to assist Sherlock with showering and putting his clothes back on, John resented his presence. He felt useless, embarrassed, and angry with himself.

*Thirdly…*

He glanced in the rear-view mirror; Sherlock's head was turned away, tipped back against his seat. His eyes were closed, and he was making an apparent effort to control his breathing. John opened his mouth to ask if he was okay, but a movement out of the corner of his eye caught his attention.

Tallie was shaking her head, her eyes still focused on the road. "I don't think so, John. Do you?" she asked quietly, and John could tell it was rhetorical.

When they arrived back at the house, Tallie stopped him from entering the annexe with a hand on his elbow. An instant irritation flooded in, brought on by the pressing urgency John felt to do something — to somehow come up with a new plan to make up for what had happened, to find a thing for him and Sherlock to do that would improve the evening.

"I'll sort him. Why don't you go on up to your room and change, John? We'll see you at dinner?" she suggested.

John flicked his gaze to Sherlock, expecting him to protest, to insist that John stay or to scold Tallie for dismissing him, but his face was blank, expression unreadable, eyes focussed on the tips of his trainers. His left thigh was spasming, and he was pressing his forearm against it as best he could. Tallie lowered the ramp, squeezing past John who was still standing there uselessly, his left hand clenching at his side. John stood and watched as she climbed into the back seat and kneaded the heel of her hand into Sherlock's leg expertly. John expected to hear the usual murmured *thanks* Sherlock reserved just for her, but this time there was nothing.

'*He checks out.' Tallie's words echoed hollowly in John’s head. After tonight, would Sherlock be tempted to do just that with John all the time, too — more determined than ever that all he wanted was to check out from reality entirely?*

Without a further glance at the pair now working on getting Sherlock out of the car, John turned and limped into the main house.
Four days after what he had privately dubbed The Frimley Fiasco, John made his way to the annexe kitchen, expecting to find Tallie and Sherlock there having breakfast. Instead, the space was quiet, and the door to Sherlock's bedroom was closed. John could hear light footsteps from inside, which he assumed were Tallie's, but not the familiar faint electric whirr of the wheelchair.

He lingered by the kitchen island, unsure what to do, tempted to go back to the main house and return a few hours later. It wasn't as though he had been actually fulfilling his duties in the past few days.

Not for lack of trying, though — Sherlock simply wouldn't let him. The way the man had withdrawn into a quietude on their ride back from the spa hotel continued, and what little hobbies and pastimes Sherlock had seemed to have before were now gone, in lieu of staring out of the window into the garden or sitting with his eyes closed as though meditating. For four days, John's only interactions with him had been borne solely out of absolute necessity. Unless he planted himself in Sherlock's route so that he would need to drive over John to get somewhere, the latter found himself wholly ignored. What little attention Sherlock had deigned to award to others after Frimley belonged to Tallie; even Leo the PT whose help Sherlock had seemed to accept before left early from his latest visit, shaking his head as he passed John in the hall.

Now, John could hear Tallie's voice from the bedroom; while he couldn't make out the words, he could make out the tone: pleading, patient but resigned. John was desperate to hear a reply in a familiar baritone, but none came.

When the silence and the feeling of uselessness became too much, John did the only sensible thing he could think of: he put the kettle on. Just as he was pouring water into three mugs with teabags, in two of which he had dropped spoons and added milk and sugar, the bedroom door slid open and Tallie exited, dressed in her usual scrubs. Instead of using the turnkey of the electric lock to fasten the door open for the day, she let it close and joined John by the kitchen island.

John needed only to raise his brows, expression sober, to inquire about the ambience of the day. Tallie shook her head slowly, lips pursed. She pulled up a chair and looked grateful to receive a warm mug from John, holding it close to her chin as though seeking comfort in the familiarity of the ritual.

"I'm worried, John."

It wasn't her precise words that were the most startling — it was the fact that this was Tallie saying them, looking far removed from her trademark cheery and hopeful and energetic disposition. At Frimley, John had been surprised by the change in her behaviour towards wary and protective, but the last few days had led to a realisation that perhaps Tallie had foreseen what he hadn't — that Sherlock's moods were unstable, prone to be plummeted by any adverse experience, and that Frimley would be a minefield. To be able to predict such a risk, Tallie must have seen all this happen before.

John hadn't spared much thought to those Mycroft had hired before him, assuming they had been just nursing staff, but now he couldn't help wondering what things they had tried to engage Sherlock in. Then again, obviously none of it had worked so there was little point in dredging up
those failures by asking Tallie. He felt the expectations of Mycroft Holmes heavy on his shoulders; the man must have been counting on John to think outside the box, to come up with... something. To succeed in connecting with Sherlock in some meaningful way, a task in which others had failed.

*Why me? Because I got injured, too? A bum shoulder and a limp that comes and goes is hardly comparable to what Sherlock's gone through.*

Up until now, John had expected — hoped — that Sherlock would sulk for some time and then thaw, come out of whatever this was on his own. Now, he could no longer deny that every day, he felt as though one more strand of the rope connecting Sherlock to the rest of them snapped, and he drifted further away.

John nodded to Tallie, arranging himself into a chair across from her. His tea sat untouched, its warmth and taste having lost its appeal. "Bit not good, yeah," he confirmed, and it felt like admitting defeat.

"Perhaps..." Tallie bit her lip, "Perhaps it would do to have a word with his neurologist."

"A word about what?"

Tallie stirred her tea needlessly, her eyes fixed on the handle of her spoon instead of meeting John's. "About what's going on. About his meds. Maybe there's something they could try."

She didn't sound very convinced, but her tone was still determined, "When I was going to resign, he was going through something similar. He has these... periods and they're getting longer. Hasn't happened since you moved in, and I thought maybe it was getting better. But this is what he was like right before he..." Tallie drowned the rest of the sentence into a sip from her mug. "He's got his usual neuro appointment next week, but I'm not sure we should wait that long. Maybe Mister Holmes could get it rescheduled."

"Would Sherlock agree to go to see his doctor if he won't even get out of bed?"

"If he doesn't, he'll have to endure a shouting match with Mister Holmes about it, and even at his lowest, he would do just about anything to avoid that," Tallie said with conviction.

John wasn't so sure, but it seemed fruitless to exude more scepticism. Instead, he racked his brain, trying to remember some of the names of medications he'd spotted in the folder sitting on the opposite end of the kitchen island. He stood to collect it, flipping through quickly to find the right page. He recognised several of the medications listed — and later struck through with a pen to mark that they were no longer in use. Zoloft and Avanza were both relatively modern antidepressants. Norpramin he couldn't be certain about, but the name suggested an older, tricyclic antidepressant.

John had been recommended similar meds during his stint in rehab, but he'd declined them all. "Sherlock's not on any of these now, is he?"

"No. Norpramin seemed to be doing something until it wasn't, and after the overdose, Mister Holmes refused to have anything in the house that was known to cause severe symptoms when taken in large doses. Hence only SSRIs and SNRIs from then on," Tallie replied, referring to newer antidepressants with a wider overdose safety margin.

John nodded. To exaggerate only mildly, one could eat handfuls of those and not suffer life-threatening toxicity. Tricyclic antidepressants, however, were notorious among emergency
physicians as a cause of severe poisoning even in surprisingly small doses.

"None of it did much," Tallie said plainly. "Sherlock refused any further attempts to find something that would help. He said that as long as there's no pill to fix his spine, it's all utterly pointless," Tallie said.

The smile John responded with was joyless. _Sounds just like Sherlock._

The next day, when John returned from lunch with Harry, he found Tallie and Mycroft standing stiffly in the corridor connecting the annexe to the main house.

It was only March, but it was an unseasonably warm day. Briefly escaping the suffocating silence of Musgrave Court had felt like an indulgent escape, and time with his sister had been pleasant. It had been good to spend the lunch hour hearing about Harry's everyday comings and goings, about her struggles and triumphs in staying sober. He had offered encouragement and a listening ear and was pleased by the end of the meal that he had hardly thought even once about Sherlock's worrisome moods. His conversation with Tallie had left John with the sense that, like his employer, she expected him to be the one to intervene — to talk to Mycroft, perhaps? _They think I messed things up, so now they expect me to fix it_? He bristled at the notion that he was solely responsible.

Or _was_ it his fault? Sure, Frimley was a disaster, and it had been John's idea, but Tallie had said that Sherlock had had these… episodes? periods? since long before he'd showed up.

A part of John was still tempted to believe things might turn around on its own. He was aware of his propensity to put difficult things off, hoping that someone else might sort them out — Ella had called him out on that numerous times. If only Sherlock would talk to him, instead of everyone else having to talk behind his back! Tallie looked apologetic, glancing warily towards the annexe as John arrived — as if to make sure they weren't being eavesdropped on.

Mycroft was frowning, his mobile held in his hand, as though he had only just rung off of a call. Out of embarrassment, John hadn't spoken with the older Holmes about what had happened at Frimley, but he suspected that Tallie might have filled in their employer. It may have been John's imagination indulging in mild paranoia, but it seemed as though his grand flop at the spa hotel had been expected by everyone else in the house. _Just another one of Sherlock's little helpmates, pathetically failing again?_

"Ah, John, impeccable timing," Mycroft cordially acknowledged. "It appears we have a logistical conundrum to solve."

"I would do it, but I have exams next week, so I really need to attend this week's lectures," Tallie explained apologetically to Mycroft, who nodded solemnly. "John could do it…" Tallie suggested hesitantly, her eyes darting between the two men.

Mycroft sniffed, pinning John with the kind of look that made him feel like a proper idiot. John wondered if that look was a family trait. He certainly received enough of those from Holmes the younger.

"I could do what?" John asked.

All their heads turned when several pairs of clunky footsteps began sounding in the main corridor of the house; perhaps some of Mycroft's renovation workers had arrived. Soon, rowdy voices
echoed from that direction, accompanied by metallic clangs. John remembered the older Holmes mentioning that some windows were being replaced upstairs.

Mycroft scowled and turned to enter the annexe. Tallie's hesitant smile brightened as she beckoned John over. Together, they reconvened in the kitchen, and John could hear what sounded like Japanese coming from behind the closed door to the sitting room. Sherlock must have had a film on.

John draped his jacket over the back of a chair by the kitchen table, rolling up the sleeves of his plaid shirt. "Right, so…?"

Mycroft held up his mobile. "There's been a last-minute rescheduling of Sherlock's neurologist appointment to tomorrow afternoon. His doctor was very accommodating, fitting him in on such short notice to discuss certain medication issues."

John glanced at Tallie. She must have decided that John wasn't going to lift a finger about their problem and gone to Mycroft.

"Yeah, that's… that's good."

Mycroft's piercing gaze was focussed on him. "Both Mister Brinley and Natalia have expressed concern for Sherlock's mental state. I must say I would have liked to have heard your medical opinion as well," he berated. "Perhaps you don't feel that the situation warrants intervention?"

There was a challenge in the tone, a dare to contest the notion which Mycroft obviously seemed to consider fact — that an intervention was, in fact, very much needed.

"I—" John began hesitantly.

"Precisely," Mycroft cut him off. "Unfortunately, Natalia isn't available to take Sherlock to Amersham, and I must go to London tomorrow; I am due to meet with the foreign secretary of Belarus in the morning. However, Natalia seems confident in your ability to accompany Sherlock to his appointment."

Mycroft's tone belied the fact that he didn't share that confidence.

A thousand thoughts flooded John at once, but the one most prominent was screaming at him that this could be his chance to prove his worth, to show Mycroft and Tallie — and Sherlock most of all — that he was worth his salt, that he could manage with the car, that he could get Sherlock out of the house, even if it was just to a routine doctor's appointment, and not completely screw it up. He felt a flare of terror at the idea, but the opportunity had to be seized. It would give him a chance to try to talk to Sherlock without others available to hide behind.

"Of course. ‘Course I can, yeah." John nodded to emphasize his agreement.

Mycroft scrutinised him for a moment before returning the nod briskly. "Very well; that shall be settled, then. I am certain that, come tomorrow, Natalia will have equipped you with all of the knowledge and practical instructions necessary since she knows the ropes, so to speak."

"As opposed to me, of course," came a scathing retort from behind them.

John jumped, feeling guilty for having been so rattled up by the conversation that he hadn't registered the sitting room door opening or the sound of the wheelchair.

"Because I can't possibly be expected to know anything about my own care," Sherlock commented venomously, his words directed at his brother.
Tallie opened her mouth, though whether to agree or disagree with Sherlock, John couldn't be sure. Eventually, she seemed to think better of it and snapped it shut.

"Little brother, you have been demonstrably terrible at your own care since well before your accident. Thankfully, you have several people here who are willing to learn, for your sake."

"Must make you all tingly inside, having found such like-minded friends to scheme with," Sherlock snapped.

Mycroft responded with a weary look and, "Doctor Patel will be expecting you tomorrow afternoon. Doctor Watson has kindly agreed to accompany you." He then pivoted on his heel and strode back to the main house.

John watched him go before turning back towards Sherlock, expecting to be treated to a rant about overbearing siblings. Instead, Sherlock's expression had returned to blank, everything carefully shuttered away once again. He rotated slowly and rolled into his bedroom without a word, letting the door slide shut behind him. John knew he should have been glad even for such an outburst during a time when Sherlock had mostly stopped talking altogether, but it was hard not to get cynical.

At least he got out of bed today.

The next day, Sherlock seemed to shrink as Tallie helped John align onto the car ramp the wheels of the lightweight electric wheelchair designed for travelling which John had already encountered during their Frimley outing. The vehicle looked like a regular minivan from the outside, but when the back door was opened, a ramp could be made to descend from the side and lower itself to the ground. Once all four wheels were squarely situated and the electrical lock-down brake engaged, the ramp lifted Sherlock up and into the car. Tallie hopped into the van to belt him, and John double and triple-checked that the wheels were locked onto the rails on the floor. He shuddered to think of what could happen if the chair came loose.

There was a chill in the air even at noon; the unexpected heat of the previous day had vanished overnight. John popped back into the annexe to grab a woollen blanket to drape over Sherlock. He had been surprised and pleased to see him dressed in a beautiful dress shirt and a navy suit and told him so as he arranged the throw over Sherlock's slim shoulders and pooled it in his lap. He didn't receive a response; Sherlock's gaze had settled on the car window, his mask of indifference firmly in place.

Last week, John had mentioned to Tallie the clothes he'd found in the walk-in closet. She had told him that they were all from before the accident and that Sherlock very rarely asked for any of them. According to her, the only occasions were when he felt the need to pretend that he cared what he looked like so that he could get others — mostly his mother — to stop fussing and worrying. Sherlock obviously had no fondness for the soft, easy-to-wear items Mycroft's assistant kept his wardrobe stocked with, but such as was the case with all other parts of his old life, Sherlock simply showed no interest or downright shunned things which had once given him pleasure. Despite her sobering words, John still insisted that Tallie could at least keep suggesting the clothes to Sherlock on occasions when they left the house. He tried not to see it as too positive a sign that Sherlock looked less like a sixth former today, but it was something.

With a wave to Tallie as she made her way through the courtyard to her own car, John slid into the driver's seat of the van, swallowing a lump of panic. He hadn't made much use of his driver's
licensure after enlisting, and even though he'd spent a couple of hours practising with the van yesterday with Tallie while Mycroft was enforcing some TV on his brother, it was a whole different thing to be solely responsible for Sherlock. Mycroft had dispatched him on this task instead of hiring extra personnel from the nursing agency; if I fuck this up, he probably won't give me another chance.

He glanced into the rear-view mirror as he shifted into reverse; Sherlock still sat like a statue, eyes fixed on the window.

Unsurprisingly, the drive to the hospital was quiet. Instead of emanating outward the more energetic iciness of one of his signature sulks, Sherlock's presence was like a blankness in the atmosphere of the car; neither there nor gone. John shivered at the thought and turned on the radio, which earned him a rare spoken word uttered by his passenger: "off". John obeyed with a sigh.

At one point, he noticed Sherlock pressing a fist into his thigh; he must have been having a spasm. "Need a hand with anything?" John asked. "I can pull over."

His answer was a curt, "no", and Sherlock hid his hands inside the bunched-up blanket.

"So, what's this about, then?" John asked, keeping his tone light. "Mycroft said something about your meds needing a re-evaluation?"

"Pointless nonsense."

That was the end of that conversation, then. John wondered how Mycroft had explained to Sherlock the need to prepone the appointment. The Holmes senior never minced his words; he'd probably confronted Sherlock about what was going on. John was glad not to have been present for that conversation — the second-hand mortification would have been intense. John recalled easily how barmy it had felt to hear his thoughts and feelings reduced to a few unflattering clinical terms by the psychiatrist he'd been assigned at rehab.

He was a doctor. He should be optimistic about what could be medically done for Sherlock's problems. There were plenty of drug options for this sort of thing — depression, anxiety, difficulties in adjusting to a new life situation. Yet, Sherlock's own words, as quoted by Tallie, seemed to slice right through all of that like a pathologist's knife: if they can't fix my spine, what's the point?

His heart heavy with worry and frustration, John was relieved when the turn from the A404 to Whielden Lane came, and he spotted the signs directing them to the parking lot of Amersham hospital. He had been to the NHS unit once before to pick up a refill of Sherlock's anti-spasm medication with Tallie. It was only a twenty-minute drive from Musgrave Court and situated at the edge of the historic Amersham Old Town. The main building looked more like a care home than a hospital, possibly because it housed not just the neurological rehabilitation services of the Buckinghamshire NHS Trust but also the Trust's main base for the care of elderly people — a detail that John knew must delight Sherlock to no end. At least the fact that the location had been purposefully built for these patient groups meant that disabled parking was well-designed and plentiful. As usual, there were many spots available, and John slid the van into one with practised ease.

After making sure Sherlock got out safely, John leaned over the driver's seat to press a button to close the electric back door. As he locked it, he noticed that Sherlock had discarded his woollen blanket. John opened his mouth to mention it — to ask Sherlock if he was sure he didn't need the extra warmth — then thought better of it, wondering if it might seem like mollycoddling.
He turned and followed Sherlock towards the front of the building, trying and failing not to let his eyes linger on the sleek line of Sherlock's shoulders in the sharp navy jacket, or the strip of pale neck he could see peeking up over his collar when Sherlock turned his head, and his longish curls shifted. Sherlock's hair had been significantly shorter in those old photos, but John decided he liked it this way, too. As tired and pale and too thin as Sherlock looked, the suit did wonders to his visage and made John's heart clench in his chest when he thought of how much had changed in Sherlock's life. It was moments like this that still caught him unawares — moments when the contrast between Sherlock Holmes, London celebrity and the only Consulting Detective in the world and this Sherlock were the greatest.

*It's still you, John thought. It's still all you even if you don't want to remember it.*
John swallowed as he blinked in the bright sunlight, firmly telling himself to stop being stupidly soppy. If Sherlock caught a hint of what he was thinking — and deducing some of it would doubtlessly be an easy feat for the former detective — it would make things infinitely worse between them. Sherlock would certainly read it as pity.

Clearing his throat, John strode after the wheelchair as it disappeared through the doors of the main entrance. Sherlock knew precisely where to go, so John followed him through the reception area and into a lift, hanging back while Sherlock checked in at the desk on the third floor. When a nurse called his name, John stood as well and followed him into the exam room without giving it a second thought. Once in the room, however, he fidgeted, unsure whether he was wanted, feeling again like he was crossing some invisible line.

*Mycroft wouldn't even think twice about intruding,* he tried to justify to himself, but that was the gist of the problem, wasn't it? The way the older Holmes steamrollered over his brother rubbed John the wrong way, and he wanted to do things differently.

He glanced at Sherlock: he was rigid, his hands folded so tightly in his lap that his fingers were blanching. His head was sunken onto his shoulders in the way John had now learned to associate with self-consciousness and discomfort, though not of the physical sort.

A nurse entered, introduced herself, helped Sherlock remove his jacket and took over a small desk in the corner of the appointment room. He complied wordlessly while John stood behind the wheelchair. Just as he was about to make the decision to return to the waiting room, the door opened again, and a man in a navy suit, light blue tie and white dress shirt strode in, shutting the door behind him. Instinctively, John knew this must be the neurologist. He was in his mid-fifties, John estimated, with thick dark hair, wire-rimmed glasses perched on his hawk-like nose, and a Middle Eastern accent. His eyes were sharp and calculating but not unkind. Before addressing his patient, he used an automated container on the wall to get some disinfectant onto his palm, which he then spread on his hands.

"Mister Holmes, hello. It's good to see you again," he said, holding his hands still in mid-air so that they would dry faster. "Your brother called ahead, got me up to speed with how you've been."

"He fancies himself quite the expert on that, yes," Sherlock replied coldly.

His tone seemed to surprise the neurologist, who took a seat and a moment to study the sight of his patient. "And who do you have with you today? I don't believe we've met?" He offered, attention shifting to the third person in the room.

"John Watson," John said quickly, purposely avoiding any title.

"He's my… he's a doctor," Sherlock explained hastily.

John heard Sherlock's words just as his own slipped out: "His PA," he explained, the abbreviation foreign on his tongue. *Personal assistant* sounded less demeaning than *a caregiver,* and he was curious about how Sherlock had been planning to finish his first sentence. Making a mental note to try to address it later, John risked a glance down at Sherlock whose eyes were fixed steadily on the
other physician in the room.

"I'm Shamil Patel, Sherlock's neurologist. Pleased to meet you, Doctor and PA John," the older doctor said with a playful smile. He rose from his chair momentarily to offer John his hand, which he then shook firmly.

Relieved at the man's disarming tone, John planted himself in the third chair.

"So, then—" Doctor Patel began.

Sherlock interrupted him: "The hallway, if you please, John. Surely you don't need to start personally assisting Doctor Patel as well." He rolled his eyes and John could feel the bitterness laced throughout as though it was suddenly coating his tongue, too.

He let himself back out into the hallway and sunk onto a chair. The door was well insulated for sound, so no amount of straining his ears clued John in to what went on behind it.

He dug out his phone, desperate for a distraction. He opened a new message.

at amersham, he texted Mycroft Holmes.

Was the appointment this brief? MH

no hes still in there, John replied, confused. It was just ten minutes past the allocated appointment time.

I expected you to attend as well. MH

John could easily imagine the high dudgeon in which the message had been written.

he didnt want me in there

Sherlock cannot be trusted to deal with these matters without firm guidance. MH

He certainly firmly guided me right out of the room. It's called doctor-patient confidentiality, you twit, John thought. Mycroft probably never listened to Sherlock's protests, and most doctors would perhaps be intimidated enough by the man that they'd let things slide. Mycroft Holmes had that strange charisma about him that people believed what he said even if they should have known better.

Yet, John found himself immune to such bullying. So what if Mycroft Holmes was disappointed? He wasn't above the law, and Sherlock was not a vulnerable adult without legal rights. Even if the older Holmes paid John's wages, the only person whose opinion really mattered was Sherlock. And if John started walking over what Sherlock did or didn't want, he was doomed to fail just as surely as all the others had, wasn't he?

Deciding to ignore the text message machinations of his employer, John slipped the phone back into his pocket and tried to muster up interest for a boating magazine someone had left in the waiting area.
Sherlock emerged from the appointment room some twenty minutes later. He didn't reply to Doctor Patel's goodbye, simply headed back towards the lifts with hunched shoulders and nary a glance at John.

John tossed the aside the magazine — still open to the same inane article on boat ramp etiquette — and hurried to catch up with him.

“Pharmacy?” He asked as he squeezed into the lift next to Sherlock, trying to infuse his voice with an air of professional nonchalance. Sherlock muttered a no and shook his head, reaching around John to stab the button for the ground floor impatiently.

The rest of the ride was endured in silence.

After pulling out of their parking spot ten minutes later, John bit his lip. He knew he should at least try to ask about the appointment, but he doubted Sherlock would be very forthcoming about what had been discussed.

"Everything in order, then?"

Sherlock turned to look at him via the rear-view mirror with a non-committal hum.

"Any developments you want me to relay to Mycroft?"

"I see you've been demoted to chauffeur and messenger boy."

"I'll take that as a no, then," John replied mock-cheerily, gritting his teeth.

He kept stealing glances at Sherlock as he navigated the sparse early afternoon traffic. Sherlock's biting comment still grated on his nerves even though he was loath to admit such a thing getting to him. He didn't think he deserved all this ire even though he understood that there was a dark place it was coming from and that he was more collateral damage than an intended target. He couldn't help but feel a newfound sympathy for those who had cared for Sherlock before, but also for those who had cared for John himself during his rehabilitation for the gunshot wound — he knew he'd been vicious, too.

At least anger is better than just... that, John thought, briefly letting his eyes linger once again in the back of the van where Sherlock sat looking like he'd donned a death mask: waxen, expressionless, gone and far away.

After fifteen minutes, John found himself unwilling to take a left turn from the roundabout connecting the M40 with the A40. Instead, he allowed the sight of a Tesco Metro to attract him like a moth to a flame. He pulled into an accessible parking spot in front of the store. Since it was a weekday afternoon during office hours, the large lot was mostly empty.

The idea of a grocery store full of people felt intimidating but less so than going back to the house; John really didn't want to go back there like this. Not when Sherlock would just disappear into his head once they were home, leaving John to flit purposelessly between the annexe and his own room, his inquiries and attempts at small talk ringing on deaf ears. He was tired of being invisible and lonely, but most of all, he missed the hesitant connection he'd made with Sherlock in the early days. He missed their banter, he missed the new friend he'd thought he'd found.

It took Sherlock fifteen minutes of sitting in a parked car to emerge from his reverie and ask what they were doing there.

"I thought we'd go in," John announced.
"To do what?" After being given such a silent treatment for four days, it felt almost strange to hear entire sentences out of Sherlock's mouth.

"Whatever it is that people do at grocery stores," John quipped. "I couldn't possibly know."

Silence. Unsurprisingly, it seemed that humour was unwelcome.

It was getting chilly in the car. John drew a breath and placed his palms on the steering wheel.

"Look, Sherlock… I… Can't we just, I don't know, try? I know it's not been a great week. Not for me, either, I can tell you. And I should have… I know I should have asked you about what it is you want. Or don't want. Which is a lot of things nowadays."

He watched a family pushing a trolley towards a minivan before continuing, "I'm rubbish at this, okay? I'm as rubbish at talking as I am about knowing all the stuff about you that Tallie knows like the back of her hand, but I'm not going to stop trying. But I'm bloody tired. I'm so damned tired of being cooped up in the house and not being able to talk to you when you're right there. I just want to feel normal for a moment. Don't you?"

"I don't really know what that's like," Sherlock said, the dismissiveness in his tone diluted by disinterest.

*Keep him talking*, John commanded himself. *Just… bite the bullet. Say something that actually fucking means something.* "It wasn't easy for me, either, going out to places after I came home. The first time I went to buy food after I got home from rehab, I had a row with a chip and pin machine. You know those that weigh your basket and all? The people in the queue after me must've thought I was mental. Ended up just leaving everything there and going home."

It then occurred to John that a horror story about feeling stared at and embarrassed at Tesco was probably not the best way to try to get Sherlock to enter one. At least John had left out that he'd had a panic attack and that's why he'd ended up shouting at the machine and dropped his basket on the floor and fled. He still remembers the sound of it toppling over, an apple rolling under the automated cashier.

He forced himself to look into the rear-view mirror. Instead of ignoring him, ensconced in an uncaring silence, Sherlock was looking at him with at least mild interest.

"So… yeah. I have some stuff I need," John rambled on. "Shaving cream, for instance. I've been putting off getting it because it’s... hard for me to go out on my own."

"You can have things delivered, and Mycroft keeps the bathrooms in the house well-stocked for visitors."

*How many visitors do the Holmeses ever actually entertain?* John wondered. Maybe things had been more social for Mycroft before Sherlock's accident, but the older Holmes seemed to have become a bit of a recluse now, too.

"It's still something that people do, go to the shops to buy things. Go get a newspaper. Ride the Tube. Go see a movie. Go to work," John pointed out. "My therapist has been nagging about it, complaining that I've not been doing those things. It feels safe just being in the house if you know what I mean."

Sherlock's reply was a hum that could be a yes or a no. John couldn't tell.

"But I think it would be good if I started doing all that again. At some point. And it would be a hell
of a lot easier if I had some company." He flashed a careful smile into the mirror.

Sherlock was watching him very carefully, and John's heart skipped a beat. *Anything’s better than just shutting down, ‘checking out’ as Tallie calls it, withdrawing into that Mind Palace of his.*

Sherlock had explained to him about the Palace — it was some sort of an elaborate memory technique which Sherlock seemed to have honed into an art.

"So, care to do me a favour?" John asked hopefully.

Sherlock was frowning as his eyes scanned the front of the brightly lit store. "You want me to help you buy shaving cream?" He sounded suspicious.

"Well, yes. And whatever else we'd like. About time we replenished Tallie's biscuit stash, don't you think? We could watch some crap telly tonight and make popcorn. Get some crisps. Or a pudding for the three of us? Tallie'd like that. Mycroft wouldn't," John enticed conspiratorially. "I think we're old enough not to let your brother decide when we're allowed a treat," he joked.

"The chip and pin machines are quite simple. I cannot fathom how the logic could have eluded you."

John would never have thought that he'd be so delighted by the insinuation that he was an idiot. "I'd be most grateful for a lesson on their finer points from such a genius as yourself."

"Open the door, then." Sherlock released the handbrake of his chair and the remote-controlled locking mechanism on the floor of the van.

John nearly dropped his keys in his hurry to get out of the car.

However, by the time the doors to the shop slid open before them, his confidence was already waning. He'd been honest in saying that he'd been avoiding getting out of the house, that he needed to re-join society — even if just in incremental doses. The small, cosy restaurant dates with Harry had been okay since he had her for company and support, but he inevitably felt more exhausted afterwards than anyone should be after a nice restaurant meal. Frimley had been alright since he'd had two other people with him and he'd been so focussed on Sherlock. It seemed so irrational that open spaces and grocery stores should give John so much more anxiety, but he couldn't deny that they did. It was too easy to hide at Musgrave, to pretend that all that existed were the people that lived inside those thick walls, far away from the crowds of London — but he knew that he and Sherlock both needed some normalcy, even if it meant enduring Tesco's bright lights and the pounding pop music that greeted them at the entrance. These places were just a bit too bright, a bit too loud, and John cringed. A familiar over-vigilance began to creep in, and by the time they reached the outskirts of the produce section, he was battling the sense of waiting for an attack. Though Sherlock's presence next to him was calming, he was definitely on edge, and every time the physical distance between them stretched, he felt more uneasy.

He needed a solid distraction he could cling to so he cleared his throat, moving to the first display he saw, picking up a package at random.

Sherlock stopped next to him but didn't say anything, watching John with the same carefully blank look he'd had in the car. Not exactly shuttered, but hardly interested, either.

"I hate how packages of stuff are often too much for one person. It's always family size or two or three pieces, and I end up forgetting I have the extras left over and they spoil," John rambled as he set the package back on the display, moving further into the bowels of the store. "When you lived
in London… before. Did you cook, or…?"

"Not really my thing."

"Oh. So did you live alone, or with a flatmate or…?" John was aware that prying into the past was usually not on, and that this conversation could end in a wary sulk at any minute, but he wanted to keep Sherlock talking. Needed to keep himself talking. Tesco. Home. Safe.

Sherlock kept his gaze straight ahead, staying in John's proximity as they wandered past the butcher cases. The faint scent of the meat reminded John of something unpleasant which he couldn't — and hardly wanted to — identify. He held his breath and quickened his steps.

\textit{You're tired and stressed, and this was a shit idea,} John chided himself. \textit{Just get through this. It's just Tesco.}

"Alone, though my landlady lived downstairs," Sherlock replied. "Occasionally, she took pity on the state of my fridge and kitchen and tidied things up a bit. She did most of the grocery shopping. Insisted she wasn't my housekeeper, but she nevertheless did seem to find some meagre purpose to her existence fussing around the place."

John glanced sidelong at Sherlock and was surprised to see the corner of his mouth twitch briefly. \textit{A good memory, then.}

He pulled in a slow breath through his nose once they were past the butcher cases, and cleared his throat as they meandered past the packaged cheeses. "So you… ate mostly out, or…?" There were plenty of things about the past that John was more interested in than Sherlock's food habits, but it seemed like a safe start. \textit{Just keep talking and calm the fuck down.}

Sherlock shrugged. "Sometimes. Sometimes there was takeaway. Sometimes a sandwich grabbed from somewhere. The DI I used to work with had a habit of tiresomely insisting on meals during cases even though digestion slows my thinking."

"Most people function better with a bit of sustenance."

Another shrug. "I'm not \textit{most people}."

John could easily agree. "Hard to find the energy to cook for just one person. I did put together bits and bobs when I had someone over, though. Before Afghanistan," he volunteered, bagging a few tomatoes. Tallie liked them with cheese on the wholegrain bread Sophie baked.

Sherlock picked up a mango, holding it carefully with both hands as he eyed it suspiciously. "This is raw."

"You can wrap it inside a newspaper, and it ripens."

"Why would I do that?" Sherlock asked, as though his consideration of the fruit had been purely academic.

John chuckled, but it sounded high pitched and forced, even to his own ears. "Want to get anything else from here?" John swept his palm across the produce aisle.

"No."

"So… snacks for a movie, then?" He hoped his tone wasn't too over-eager in its hopefulness.
"A possibility, yes," Sherlock replied in a tone that was hard to interpret regarding his level of commitment.

"Crisps?"

"I suppose."

"I assume you have flavour preferences."

"Plain. Most of the so-called seasoned ones are ghastly. Sea salt and black pepper will do in a pinch, or red onion and vinegar if we must."

"You got it." John began to stride towards where he assumed the snacks would be but then ground to a halt, an idea occurring. He felt marginally less nervous, now. Having Sherlock around to talk to certainly helped.

"Can you get the crisps, then?" He asked carefully.

So far, Sherlock had trailed behind him, picking up random things and inspecting them with the intense scrutiny of a scientist, but he hadn't put anything in the basket. Sherlock wasn't behaving like someone who had come to a grocery store to buy anything — he acted more akin to an alien on a strange planet. How the hell did you even stay alive if you only ate when someone else told you to? John wondered and shook his head. He then realised that this DI — did that mean detective inspector? — and the landlady were the first people from his past Sherlock had willingly mentioned. They sounded like nice and caring people based on this limited evidence, so where were they now? Had they not cared enough to keep in touch, or had Sherlock banished them from his life like everyone else?

Sherlock studied his expression, then whirred off towards the cashier counters — precisely in the direction where John had caught a glimpse of towering, piled boxes of crisps. It shouldn't feel like a triumph to get a grown man to buy some bloody crisps, but John had learned to count his blessings.

He stopped by frozen foods and picked up a carton of chocolate ice cream from the gourmet section. On his own, he tended to go for the reasonably priced store brands, but Sherlock seemed to favour proper, high-quality ingredients. John hoped that the German-sounding brand he picked would pass muster. The flavour was Swiss chocolate, and who didn't like chocolate? Should he get some sauce or biscuits to go with it? Sherlock seemed to want the different foods on his plate separated, without any unnecessary condiments or sauces. Gravy was allowed but only in highly regulated quantities and configurations.

Moving from one shelf to another, John caught a glimpse of Sherlock at the far end of that aisle, scrutinising different brands of tortilla chips, and his evident dedication to the task made John grin as he headed to the toiletries section. He cut across several aisles, aiming for the back of the store where the shaving cream was kept. They had only come across two other patrons in the shop so far — an elderly couple picking out bananas — and he could feel himself relaxing slowly, the gnawing urge to check over his shoulder quieting with each step. He rounded the corner, his mind drifting to their evening plans: crap telly, some snacks and — if he was lucky — more steps towards the same comfortable ease between him and Sherlock that had existed before their trip to Frimley.

Suddenly, there was a loud, metallic crashing sound nearby, and John froze on the spot. He drew a quick, ragged breath, and without delay, his palms began sweating. He tried to wipe them on his trousers, but his movements were fumbled, uncoordinated. He could feel his entire body fighting to
regain control of his breathing. It was harsh and sounded unnaturally loud in his own ears. Another clatter next to him made him flinch violently, and he squeezed his eyes shut, recognising the syncopated ringing of retreating gunfire. He knew he needed to flee, take shelter, attend the injured but he couldn't move, his legs locked in place.

A shout and another sound echoed, drawing closer. The enemy.

John threw his arms over his head, the roaring in his eyes drowning out the whimper that escaped his lips. He was trembling from head to toe.

He barely registered something bump softly against the side of his right leg, pushing him to take a few stumbling steps to the left. He couldn't open his eyes; couldn't possibly cope with the sight of the fallen, couldn't deal with seeing crimson blood spilt on hot white sand, not yet. He was breathing so hard it felt as though his ribs were being stretched to a snapping point. He needed to regain control; he needed to help them, he needed —

"John."

The voice was deep, pitched low for only his ears to hear. It wasn't distant like the gunfire ricocheting around his skull but warm and alive and right there. He flinched when a gentle weight settled against his wrist and encircled it. It should have made him want to wrench himself free and escape, but something about that touch broke through his panic, made him want to accept it, to focus on it.

"John, it's alright."

He knew that voice, and his drowning mind clung to it like a lifeline. He struggled to open his eyes and saw Sherlock's long fingers wrapped clumsily around the cuff of his jumper. John swallowed and kept his eyes down, fixed on the contrast of long, pale digits against dark blue wool while he counted his breaths. One, two... in, out...

“You’re at Tesco, John. You’re safe.” Sherlock continued in the same low, warm voice.

John felt his heart rate slow, and his muscles relax incrementally with each repetition. Tesco. Amersham. Sherlock. Safe.

His breath left him all at once, and he sagged, feeling faint and ridiculous as the worst of the panic began to evaporate, leaving behind an intense shakiness and mortification. He reached out and steadied himself on a nearby shelf.

After a few moments that felt like hours, he was able to lift his head and glance around. It seemed so absurd to see rows of canned peaches instead of a barren wasteland, light grey linoleum instead of blood on sand.

Sherlock had manoeuvred them both towards a quiet corner between the tinned goods section and a shelf lined with biscuits. To any passer-by, they surely looked just to be discussing the various flavours of Hobnobs.

Sherlock's fingers squeezed once more around John's wrist before letting go, but he didn't retreat. It was as though he'd barricaded himself protectively between John and the rest of the world.

"Bold move, that, grabbing me," John told him in a shaky voice. "Could have punched you without realising."

He could now identify the source of the sound that had startled him: a child had crashed a cart into
a display of pineapple cans, causing a small avalanche of tinned fruit.

"Flashback? I've recently read that dissociative episodes are common with PTSD," Sherlock ratted off in a business-like tone, studying John with a gaze swept from top to toe.

John swallowed, tearing his eyes away from the colourful packages of flapjacks. Why's he been reading up on PTSD?

Sherlock met his gaze, one eyebrow raised, questioning. John gave a swift nod.

"This has happened before," Sherlock deduced. "Maybe also that time you told me about, with the chip and pin machine?"

John nodded again. "I…" His voice sounded strangled, but Sherlock didn't point it out, waiting patiently for him to gather his wits.

"That's… yeah." John swallowed. It suddenly occurred to him that Mycroft Holmes had known so much about him that it might have even included the medical details of his recovery. Maybe the man thought John would lead by example when it came to recovering from an injury. What an idiot.

John was certainly no example; instead, he felt quite pathetic. He wondered if the older Holmes had shared some of what he knew with Sherlock, or if Sherlock had deduced all this by himself.

John cleared his throat and tried again. "I'm seeing a therapist."

"I know. Those appointments used to correlate to your cane use. You're an army surgeon who doesn't employ his surgical skills as a civilian. I assumed there had to be complications from your injury, and possibly not just of the physical variety."

"I can't just… freeze, when someone drops an instrument tray. I can't stop doing my job like that; it'll get patients killed."

He'd never said this out loud, not even to Ella. Detached from the feelings those words aroused, the statement sounded admirably responsible and realistic, but the truth they held was crushing. There was no guarantee that the risk would ever go away so completely that he could trust himself not to flinch and sever an artery, not to dissociate and allow a patient to bleed to death.

"There are hundreds of potential career and employment paths for a trained physician," Sherlock pointed out. "I'm not saying any compromise away from the one speciality you must have greatly enjoyed would feel good, but I'm sure there are options to explore."

Pot, kettle? Still, John couldn't find it in himself to call Sherlock out on that. He was trying to help John, and his matter-of-fact commentary didn't feel condescending or as though they were sidestepping the real issue. Sherlock just spoke the facts plainly. John knew all this, of course — knew that there was plenty he could be doing that just wouldn't involve chaotic critical situations and OR work. Yet the thought lingered that if he couldn't be precisely what he wanted to be — if he couldn't be a trauma surgeon — then what was the point?

Pot, kettle.

John had put a lot of thought into trying to understand why Sherlock would shun his entire old life because he couldn't go back to it precisely the way it was, without realising he was doing the same.

We're a right pair of idiots, aren't we?
He reached out to grab one of the smallish bags of crisps Sherlock had on his lap: *Kettle Chips Sea Salt and Vinegar*. He dropped it in their basket, then accepted the rest of the three bags Sherlock had selected.

They picked up some more things John thought the annexe should be better stocked with, then made their way through the cashier section. Sherlock insisted they should use the unmanned ones and seemed downright smug in instructing John how they should be operated. The attendant keeping an eye on the area approached them to ask politely if Sherlock needed any help packing things. Surprisingly enough, the inquiry wasn't met with a bite-your-head-off snap. Sherlock declined curtly and politely; his attention was still intensely focussed on John.

Back in the car, the tension truly seemed to have evaporated from between them. John was glad and relieved that he'd told Sherlock beforehand, albeit in abstract terms, that he'd had a hard time going out in public after returning home. In hindsight, he didn't even feel as embarrassed as he would have expected over Sherlock witnessing his panic attack. After all, he had seen Sherlock in a similar state that night when he'd dropped his phone. They had now shared some of their lowest moments; could they get back to sharing some of the better ones? It had been a bit unfair, really, to expect trust from Sherlock without meeting him halfway.

"They say it can take years," Sherlock broke the silence in the car when they had left behind the street lights of the village.

John wondered if he felt safer talking in the dark. It certainly felt more intimate.

"What does?" He asked. Sherlock's brain often skipped ahead in conversations and left others far behind.

"To start having dreams where you're in your… current state, instead of the way you were before."

John couldn't quite follow. It didn't sound like Sherlock was talking about the events at Tesco. He sometimes spoke in generalities when really referring to himself.

"Studies show that even people who have always been paralyzed dream of walking. It's as though our brains contain a pre-programmed idea, a blueprint of it, that remains even if the body never gets to execute it."

Still generalities, but the moment had somehow become so brittle that John racked his brain to say just the right thing, or at least to not say the wrong one. *Don't spook him*, he begged himself. *Don't mess this up.*

Sherlock continued. "I have dreams like that all the time. They're not nightmares; it's the opposite, really — one might say the nightmare is the waking up part. If I wake up in the middle of one, it's… this may be completely off the mark, but I have wondered if it may be a bit similar to what a flashback feels like?"

"Being ripped back into a reality you want to forget exists?" John suggested.

Sherlock hummed in confirmation. John glanced at him in the rearview mirror. He was looking out the window into the darkness outside, biting his lip.

"Yeah, that's… spot on, really," John confirmed.

"No method to hasten the brain's adjustment process has been discovered," Sherlock said.

John nodded. "Yeah, no." There was no pill that he could take to prevent a loud noise or some
other startling thing from flinging his brain right back to fighting for survival in Afghanistan, and there sure as hell was no pill that could control dreams about being able to walk again. Therapy might help, but it was hardly a magic button to press.

"I hate those dreams because of what it's like just after, but I also don't want to stop having them." Sherlock's quiet words seemed to be directed mostly at himself.

Did John wish he'd never gone to Afghanistan? No, apart from the moments when he woke up gasping for breath and wanting to flee, thinking he was still under fire and bleeding to death. Sometimes, he dreamed of the good things: the bleakly beautiful landscape, the camaraderie, the sense of purpose. Having had those good experiences both disheartened him and made him want to reclaim them, knowing he shouldn't settle for less. He tried to come up with something to say, but all the words that offered themselves felt trite and useless. He didn't want to be those people who hid behind clichés and empty promises. They saw through all that nonsense, he and Sherlock.

He turned the car from Winchmere Road to the private road which would take them through the main gates of the Musgrave estate and past the gamekeeper's cottage. "We're almost home," he promised.

"No, we're not," Sherlock said, and John knew he wasn't just talking about the distance to the Court.

Chapter End Notes

We've recreated our writing soundtrack as a Youtube playlist.
John woke up well before his alarm, energised by the events of the previous night. They'd done nothing more exciting than watching television with the loot of their Tesco visit, but the disappearance of the silent heaviness in the annexe, in lieu of a tentative new connection between him and Sherlock, felt plenty special enough to make John enthusiastic for a new day. Sherlock had still been quiet last night, drifting easily off into the deeper recesses of his brain when no one was actively trying to engage him in the real world, but John had managed to coax at least one careful smile out with an arbitrary joke comparing guys in the military to the mountain gorillas in the nature documentary they had watched. Tallie had come in for Sherlock's evening routines at nine and, instead of saying goodnight and making his way to the main house, John had stuck around to finish watching a movie. Plucking up the courage to linger close to the bedroom door in the kitchen and keep up small talk while Tallie and Sherlock changed the latter into pyjamas, John had asked if Sherlock wanted to go to bed after his bathroom trip or to stay awake a while longer. Even though Sherlock did, in the end, choose to go to bed, even just his hesitation upon making the decision gave John cause for joy after days of feeling utterly useless.

After Tallie had left, John watched the news before going to Sherlock's bedroom to say goodnight. Sherlock replied in kind without shifting his eyes from the tablet attached to the bedside cabinet; presumably, he was reading something from his Kindle app.

John hesitated at the door, hand hovering on the button that would activate the electric opening mechanism. "Sherlock?"

A pair of tired but not wholly disinterested eyes met his from across the room. "Yes?"

"It's fine, you know, whenever you want to stay up late. I could help you to bed if Tallie's left for the night. Unless you feel that's…" He thought back to Frimley; he hadn't exactly considered how intimate it would feel to be the one to look after Sherlock in the changing room. Perhaps his apprehension that day had put Sherlock off? Then again, Sherlock hadn't seemed to have a problem with it in the changing room.

"I just want you to know it's fine. That it's all fine." John's working hours ended in the afternoon, but he wouldn't mind helping Sherlock at night on days when Tallie had somewhere to go. How complicated can Sherlock's bedtime routines be? Changing clothes, brushing teeth, evening meds, emptying the catheter bag. Maybe helping him wash his face?

"I know it's fine." Sherlock's expression was difficult to read; he was watching John carefully. "As you are often keen to insist."

John squared his shoulders. It was probably all that he was going to get out of the man that night, but it was something, at least.

"Goodnight, Sherlock," he'd said with a smile.
Sherlock shifted his eyes from his Kindle back to him. They were soft and inquisitive, yet careful — as though he was trying to appear nonchalant; trying not to let on there was something he wanted. "Goodnight, John. Will you be here for breakfast?"

It was nothing but a simple, polite question, but John hadn't dared to hope for even that much. "Yeah, absolutely," he promised.

He'd fallen asleep easily, perhaps exhausted by the travails of the day. His PTSD flaring up drained his energy even on good days, and the past few had been… No, John decided. *Time to look ahead.* Wasn't that what Ella was always yammering on about, focussing on the future instead of dwelling in the past? Two things so far had really helped John cope with his anxiety outside the house: focussing on making sure Sherlock was comfortable and looked after, and Sherlock reaching out to him during his panic attack. He worked for the Holmeses and not the other way around, so it certainly wasn't Sherlock's job to help him. But still; had witnessing John's issue been the thing that made him want to talk, really talk, about things he found so hard in his new life? Could it be that simple? *You show me yours, and I'll show you mine?* Sherlock had truly surprised him last night: instead of John having to carry the entire burden of keeping his own head on straight and looking after Sherlock, it had been his friend who had been able to put aside his own discomfort and helped him, leant him a bit of confidence.

If only John were any good at that sort of thing — talking about himself, opening up about his problems.

Nevertheless, he woke up in lifted spirits at seven. After uselessly and restlessly flitting about in his bedroom, he flipped open the lid of his laptop and perused the internet for local events, making notes of a few of them to run by Sherlock for the coming weeks. He didn’t expect a complete turnaround in Sherlock’s willingness to leave the house, but it had been nice to leave behind the ghosts of Musgrave for a little while yesterday and pretend to be just a couple of normal blokes at a supermarket — even if John had had a wobbly moment.

After jotting down a few more things, he went to brush his teeth, contemplating the events he might suggest to Sherlock. There were plenty of museums nearby, a film festival early next month, wine tastings every second weekend at a local retailer. He had no idea whether Sherlock actually enjoyed wine, though, and John knew next to nothing about them. Perhaps he was making the sorts of assumptions again about Sherlock's upbringing and background which had sunk his boat at Frimley. Then again, he could always ask. Sherlock would hardly hesitate to shoot down bad ideas. It was still early, but it should hardly be a problem if he began making his way to the annexe. He could read the paper, chat with Tallie while waiting for Sherlock to join them. Perhaps he could use Tallie as a sounding board for things to do out of the house, employ her expertise to plan to continue easing Sherlock — and himself — back into being a part of society.

John didn't feel as embarrassed by his admissions last night as he would have thought. It had felt good to say some of those things out loud, and he hoped the same was true for Sherlock. *Does Sherlock ever talk to Tallie about such things?* John certainly couldn't imagine him opening up to his big brother, judging by how strained and tense their interactions always were. *What was the brothers' relationship like before Sherlock's accident?*

Tallie was in the annexe kitchen, preparing breakfast. The juice press, filled with oranges, was gurgling away and when she spotted John, she reached into the open hatch of the dishwasher to dig out a third glass. After saying good morning, John sat down at the end of the kitchen island and grabbed the newspaper.

While he was leafing through the first few pages, a strange sound caught his attention, and he
The sound turned out to be produced by a small pestle and mortar in which she was grinding something up. John's instant assumption was seasoning for something fried since there was a pan out, but he then noticed the medicine bottle on the counter. He grabbed it to read the label: Zoloft — one of the antidepressants Sherlock had once been on. There were four months left before the expiration date.

Alarmed and astounded, John watched as Tallie poured a tall glass half full of fresh orange juice, and stirred in the powdered tablet, then added a straw.

John opened his mouth to protest, but Tallie must already have spotted the dismay in his expression. "Mister Holmes' orders," she declared.

John sniffed. "Orders to what? To trick Sherlock? To lie to him? Hmm?" His nose crinkled in anger.

"You think I like doing this?" Tallie asked, meeting his gaze fearlessly. "You don't think I want Sherlock to have a say in things? People get sectioned for depression, John, and then they sure as hell don't get to decide whether they are going to take the meds they need."

John glanced at the wall clock. Mycroft had returned from London very late last night; John had heard his arrival while he'd been preparing for bed. He couldn't have spoken to Sherlock about his neurologist appointment then, and the brothers never seemed to speak on the phone, so Mycroft must have found out some other way that no new medications had been prescribed. Does he somehow monitor Sherlock's NHS and pharmacy records? Would Sherlock have given him permission for it?

"I won't be complicit in this," John hissed to Tallie. He then plucked the straw out of the Zoloft-laced orange juice, unceremoniously poured it down the kitchen drain and marched back into the main house.

After giving a hurried nod to Sophie as they passed one another in the corridor, John found Mycroft in the drawing room partaking in a breakfast of toast with marmalade and butter, tea, and half of a grapefruit.

"Good morning, John," the older Holmes offered courteously. "I am expecting the bricklayers at eight to repair the kitchen flue; I see you are up early, too."

"Yeah, I am," John replied, a challenge in his tone. He took up a standing position at the side of the long table, arms crossed. "And that's a bloody good thing because otherwise, I would have felt like an idiot later when — if — someone bothered to mention the stunt you're having Tallie pull."

"You're going to have to be more specific than that," Mycroft commented, demeanour admirably cool as he dabbed marmalade from his lips with a linen napkin. "What is the matter?"

"You don't think Sherlock should have a say in what meds he takes? You're just going to go behind his back and risk Tallie losing his trust if he finds out she's been slipping things into his food?"

"I was actually hoping to talk to you about this later today. Surely you see that Sherlock's condition has deteriorated to the point of warranting invention, just as we agreed before his Amersham visit."

"You don't think a doctor should be the one to make that assessment?"

"A currently practising one, yes," Mycroft replied, and the barb did not go unnoticed. "If only
Sherlock would speak candidly with one instead of working hard to thwart their attempts at an objective assessment. His current neurologist is clearly a man of straw; rest assured I am already in the process of finding someone more capable of dealing with Sherlock's indocile fractiousness. Doctor Patel did consult, prior to their appointment, a psychiatrist who has worked with Sherlock before, but since brother mine was allowed to decline any and all options during the appointment without being sternly contested, nothing came of that visit."

"Doctors are supposed to make decisions together with patients who are not sectioned."

Mycroft ignored this. "Nurse Mullan proved her trustworthiness by coming to me with her concerns. Frankly, I find it troubling that you didn't see fit to approach me about the same. You have turned out to be very loyal to Sherlock, very quickly — a fact which cannot have gone unnoticed by him, and one of which he will undoubtedly take advantage."

"He has these bad periods that come and go; Tallie said so too. Could be a bit hasty, trying to put him back on antidepressants," John argued. "I hoped I could fix things, fix his... episode, because I may have been responsible. And I did, didn't I? Last night was better, John reminded himself. At least a bit.

Mycroft looked surprised. "Hasty? You can't possibly think that his baseline is stable enough not to warrant long-term medication? There have been occasions even before the accident during which such matters have been discussed." He tilted his head, studying John with his piercing gaze. "No, that's not it. You are an army physician; not likely to sidestep obvious things unless there is a personal reason to do so. Could it be that a need to regain your tentative good standing with him may be clouding your judgement? Perhaps you have an acute need to sugar-coat things because you fear that this troubling development with Sherlock's moods might be pinned on the recent outing to an establishment in Frimley you planned and executed?" He suggested, emphasising the last word so that it sounded quite damning.

John grit his teeth. "You need to understand something, Doctor Watson. Any setback, adverse event, or even just someone's eyes lingering on the visage of Sherlock in his current condition are enough to strip him of whatever steadfastness he has found to endure his predicament. In any given situation, my brother is outstandingly gifted in finding evidence that the glass is not half full but nearly empty. He has never been a person with a cheery disposition, or with what one might describe as a sturdy mental equilibrium; I might even go as far as to say that because of many of his particular traits, this injury is outstandingly difficult for him, of all people, to accept. And that has complicated his recovery from the very start."

Mycroft shifted his teacup further away so that he could lean his elbows on the table and clasp his hands thoughtfully together under his chin. John pulled out a chair and slumped into it, gaze steadily fixed on the older Holmes.

Mycroft hummed, looking thoughtful. "Initially, he appeared indefatigably motivated for rehabilitation. He expected just to bounce back and return to his old life regardless of how doctors, nursing staff and therapists did their fumbling best to prepare him mentally to accept what had happened. Eventually, of course, the other shoe dropped."

He sighed as he glanced towards the window, clearly more an attempt to relieve himself of John's attention than to look at something specific. The sudden reluctance in him was a novelty: all the times John had spoken with the man before, he had been very business-like, very matter-of-fact and practical regarding Sherlock. Now, as he continued to speak, a haunted look took over.
"In a word, he disengaged. He's always been stubborn, always the emotional one. He seemed to decide that, if the decisive victory of complete recovery was not in the offing, the only sensible decision was to give up. Completely," Mycroft added pointedly.

Something in that word, in the way he said it, made the shadows in the corners of the room thicken, and the silence that followed was dense.

"Not much point in residing in arguably the best inpatient neurological rehabilitation in England, is there, if one refuses to even get out of bed?" Mycroft's question was rhetorical. "At the start of that stay, just after his initial discharged from hospital, he was still trying, and it was a sight to behold. Channeled productively, his stubborn resilience can move mountains, but unfortunately not repair a partially dissected spinal cord at the C7 level with an additional area of damage just below. I assume that you have familiarised yourself with his medical records by now, and know that emergency surgery was required to stabilise the spinal column and to remove bone shards ground into it at the T1 level by the crushing force of a second impact against what was likely a concrete roadblock?"

John knew of the level of the injury but hearing it all put so plainly — recounted like a traffic report — jolted him, made him feel wrong-footed. He had been meaning to arm himself with as much information as he could but reading Sherlock's records had made him feel deeply uneasy. Even though he'd received the man's permission to do so, something about it felt off. He wasn't Sherlock's doctor; he'd have preferred to hear the facts from the man himself. I guess Mycroft is a passable alternative.

John prompted with his raised brow that the man should continue.

Mycroft studied his expression for a moment, then leaned back in his chair with a resigned look.

"The plain facts I have just relayed have visibly affected you, which tells me that your somewhat lily-livered loyalty caused you to abort studying his medical records. Very well." He drew a breath, looking like one of John's medical school professors gathering momentum for a lecture. "Sherlock's injury resulted in what was described as mild impairment of respiratory function. When healthy, he functions fine and requires no respiratory support, not even at night. But anything that causes an increased work demand for his respiratory muscles can be life-threatening — such as the pneumonia he developed at the rehabilitation unit. It landed him back in intensive care and practically sent him back to the start with regaining muscle strength and motor control in his upper limbs."

John's mind flashed back to his own rehab: the endless hours of pulling on rubber bands and squeezing tennis balls and icing his shoulder after physio sessions which had flared up the nerve pain. If he hadn't seen any progress, or if what little he had managed to regain had suddenly been taken away, it would have been crushing. And he had only suffered a very limited injury compared to Sherlock.

Mycroft refilled his teacup, gesturing to John to partake in the offerings on the table. John shook his head, too unsettled to be hungry.

"After the pneumonia, Sherlock did agree to the psychiatric medications; it appeared his approach was to numb his senses with as many drugs affecting the central nervous system as he could get his hands on. He would no longer engage with any physical rehabilitation, and he firmly rejected all suggestions of talk therapy. Eventually the decision was made to bring him here, to create a home that would accommodate any level of infirmity."

"Made by whom?"
"The family. He was in no state to make sensible long-term decisions. The Baker Street flat he was letting in London was never going to be suitable for living alone in his state, yet he refused to consider any other options. Perhaps with round-the-clock nursing care, something could have been made of that flat, and the landlady was very accommodating, but Sherlock's cooperation or lack thereof would have derailed any attempts at planning such a return."

"How can you know that? What did he actually say to you?" Having witnessed what he had this morning, John still suspected that the kinds of discussions Mycroft was referring to never actually took place. If anything, they'd probably been arguments after big brother tried to make all the decisions. John understood why he had taken the reins, but a lot of time had passed from those days. *Sherlock is doing at least a little bit better, isn't he?*

Mycroft's arms descended to rest on the table, and his face was expressionless as he answered. "He told me he wanted people just to leave him alone so he could go home to Baker Street to die."

Whatever words John had been preparing stuck in his throat.

"Your campaign for his advocacy is admirable, John, but you were not there in the early days. You were not there when protective measures had to be taken to ensure his safety and well-being. Natalia has worked for us since Sherlock first moved into the annexe and has learned to recognise the warning signs when things are taking a turn for the worse. After the suicide attempt, Sherlock only narrowly escaped being sectioned; I falsely assured the on-call psychiatrist that his therapy needs were being met and that he would be on his prescribed medications, the intake of which would be supervised. Sherlock would not have done well in an institutionalised environment."

"Do you really think there's that big a difference between this place and an institutionalised environment?" John argued, having found his voice. "Maybe you're all so deep in this and so used to nothing getting better that you don't see how taking all the decision-making away from him is just making everything worse!"

John leaned forward in his chair, nervous sweat making him press his palms against his trouser-covered knees. "It's just… he doesn't even get to decide what he eats," John pleaded. "You're looking after him, but you're also suffocating him."

He was aware of how frankly and boldly he was accusing a man like Mycroft Holmes, but what did he have to lose? What did *Sherlock* have to lose, if John said a few select words on his behalf? *Nothing!* He felt an intense urge to plead, to compel, to beg his employer not to bulldoze all over Sherlock, to refuse to participate in such a thing; things were better, they were talking, they'd had a good evening and their time at the pool in Frimley hadn't been *all* bad! He was trying, Sherlock was trying, they had Tallie—

"The definition of a compromise is that it leaves neither party completely satisfied," Mycroft replied sharply. "The compromises I have established have kept Sherlock alive, so I will not apologise for enforcing them."

"He agreed to the PT. He can be reasoned with, if only he had someone who kept trying, someone willing to listen," John insisted.

Mycroft rose from his chair, his dismissal evident. "I appreciate your concern and dedication, Doctor Watson. Do continue encouraging him — you may have already had more success than you would be inclined to believe. Your role is of utmost importance, I assure you."

John tipped up his chin, staring the man down. "I won't be a part of lying to him. In fact, I'll tell him what you're doing if you keep pushing the meds without his consent," he threatened. "Never
mind the past — this can't be how it works for the next forty years. Just... just let me try? Let us try, Tallie and me, and you, of course, together." The steeley intensity of the conviction in John's tone surprised even himself.

Something in Mycroft's eyes softened a fraction. "You are quite right, Doctor Watson. This will not be how things work for the next forty years."

There was something about the way he said it that raised the hairs at the back of John's neck similarly to when he had first met the man, and he had announced that John's job interview was a 'matter of life and death'. He must have been referring to the suicide attempt, but who the hell opened a conversation with something like that?

John shook his head. *This is a madhouse.*

"The Zoloft will be put on hold, but this conversation will be revisited in a week," Mycroft declared coolly from the doorway.

"Yeah, absolutely. It will be revisited, and Sherlock will be a part of it," John announced and triumphantly grabbed a croissant.

More resolute than ever, John made it a habit to be in the annexe early each morning — well before Sherlock was even up for the day. Under the guise of wanting to take on more responsibility as a caregiver, he took charge of making breakfast for the three of them. What he was really doing, of course, was ensuring that his and Mycroft's agreement on the meds was being honoured. He didn't mention his conversation with Holmes the elder to Tallie because she didn't want to put her on the spot or make her feel like they weren't on the same side. He didn't begrudge her motives for obeying her employer's instructions, just the way in which she seemed to buy into Mycroft's belief that the best they could do for Sherlock was to preserve him like a jar of jam tucked away at Musgrave Court.

This morning, John was pleased to see that Sherlock had on the blue silk dressing gown over his pyjamas instead of having changed to day clothes for breakfast. The sight of it, combined with Sherlock's messy bedhead, made something warm settle in the pit of his stomach. He turned his back so that Sherlock wouldn't glare at his grin. It was John's day off, but he very much preferred to have his breakfast with Sherlock over feeling like he was sitting in a museum making small talk with Mycroft over tea and toast.

Tallie had stepped out to speak with someone on the phone about having the dishwasher's door hinge repaired, so John covered her plate of waffles with an empty plate to keep them warm.

He grabbed two jars of jam that he'd picked out at Tesco and held them up for Sherlock's perusal. "Blueberry… or strawberry?"

Sherlock tipped his head towards the strawberry, his eyes morning-soft in the glow of the ceiling lamp above the kitchen island. John nodded and twisted off the lid to the chosen condiment, placing it in front of Sherlock along with a jam spoon, a knife and a small plate with two pieces of toast. He'd taken up trying to involve Sherlock in chores in any small way he could possibly come up with.
"Since there are waffles as well, courtesy of Sophie, I think we can do with one slice each. Strawberry for me, too, please." John turned back to pour the tea, watching Sherlock out of the corner of his eye as he clumsily shoved the spoon into the glass jar. His eyes were screwed up in concentration, and his lips pursed. Leo had been by yesterday, and he'd told John he was pleased with Sherlock's progress and encouraged him to do as much as possible using his hands and fingers to continue to work on his grip strength. 'Looks like he's ready to do the work again,' Leo had remarked.

John stirred sugar into one of the mugs of tea, a bit vigorously; the spoon clinked against the ceramic side. He carried the three mugs of tea and the newspaper over to the table, nestling one of them in the cupholder of Sherlock's chair and arranging himself in the seat adjacent with a snap of the paper. It all felt very domestic, and John could admit to himself that he was enjoying every moment.

Tallie came back in, settling herself at the table. "Repairman says he can make it tomorrow. What's on the agenda, gentlemen? The weather report said it's supposed to be a beautiful day."

John glanced at Sherlock, who was still focussing hard on spreading the jam. John reached over and snagged a finished piece of toast, taking a large bite and using the time it took to chew to sort out his thoughts.

"I dunno, really. Might pop out to the garden. Sherlock? Big plans?"

Sherlock gave a noncommittal hum, going nearly cross-eyed as he concentrated on painstakingly coating his own piece of toast with a heavy dollop of jam.

John stood, brushing the crumbs off of his lap and bringing his plate to the sink. He left Sherlock with Tallie to finish his breakfast and headed for his room, intent on a shower and a shave since he'd just thrown on yesterday's clothes and hurried to the annexe. Maybe he'd even wear a bit of aftershave which had appeared in the bathroom together with a new bar of soap.

He only made it to the main corridor before he was stopped by Mycroft who seemed to materialise out of thin air.

"Christ, Mycroft. Give a bloke some warning, would you?" John shook his head and blew out a breath. "Should know better than to sneak up on an ex-soldier…"

"Apologies, Doctor Watson." The words sounded haphazard and prim as if Mycroft was distracted. "I understand that it is your day off, but Sherlock has a..." the older Holmes turned so his back was to the annexe and hunched his shoulders. He cleared his throat and glanced over his shoulder before continuing, "...visitor arriving this morning. One might say it's a surprise one; I thought it best not to allow Sherlock to get worked up in advance about the occasion. I was wondering if you would..."

His employer was usually so carefully composed; John was surprised to see Mycroft looking nervous.

John nodded and coughed, hiding his smile with his hand. "Serve tea, then make myself scarce?" He offered.

Relief washed over the elder Holmes' features. "Yes. Good. That'd be good. Tea. She likes tea. Biscuits would also be welcome; perhaps an offer of coffee for variety. And... not too scarce." His words came out in short bursts, his attention drawn to the front gate outside, where the rumble of tyres over gravel could now be heard.
Craning his neck to see out of the narrow window, John could see a gleaming bonnet, the bumper reflecting the weak sunlight peeking through the clouds.

Mycroft spun on his heel and marched resolutely toward the rest of the house, muttering, "Into battle."

With a quizzical look spared for his employer's odd behaviour, John continued to his room. He wondered who would be visiting Sherlock that would send Mycroft into such a tizzy. He was certainly curious to find out.
Chapter Notes

If you've read our tags or are familiar with *Me Before You*, you probably knew it was coming: this chapter (and the rest of the story) carries a warning for frank discussions of assisted suicide.

After a shower and shave, during which he found himself taking a bit more care than he normally did, John pulled on jeans and his least worn light blue Oxford shirt and made his way back to the annexe. He stopped halfway across the kitchen at the sound of a female voice, loud and jarring in the peaceful morning stillness; it was coming from the sitting room. John glanced at the clock — he hadn't taken long to get ready, and sure enough, it hadn't even gone eleven yet. Had the guest gone to see Sherlock in the annexe so soon after arriving?

With a shrug, John set about taking out what he would need to make tea and coffee, but before he had even turned on the taps to fill the kettle, his curiosity got the better of him. From the voices behind the door, he could recognise Mycroft and Sherlock, but who was the woman in the sitting room? Sister? Mother? Aunt? New employee? Hardly an ex-girlfriend, is it, since she sounds like she's much older than the brothers? Besides, Sherlock had said that girlfriends were *not his area*.

With a decisive nod, John straightened his shoulders and marched to the sitting room door, tugging his cuffs into submission before opening it and making sure the shirt was tucked in neatly. Feeling uncomfortably like a butler, he would simply introduce himself and then return to tea-making just as Mycroft had requested: *not too scarce*. No sense in lingering around and making an awkward nuisance of himself.

He palmed the door button and slipped in, not wishing to interrupt a conversation. But, he needn't have worried, because three pairs of eyes went immediately to him as he entered.

John hesitated, giving an awkward nod. "Er, hello."

"John, do stop darkening the doorway and come in."

Sherlock's voice was dry, though John thought he detected an undercurrent of something else in his sharply articulated words. John wondered if it was relief as he took in the sight of his friend: Sherlock was wearing a black suit with slim-leg trousers and a fitted, two-button jacket left open to reveal a white dress shirt. A woollen, dark blue-and-green tartan throw was artfully draped to hang from his chair just so that it hid his catheter bag from view. Tallie seemed to have an eye for such details, and John could easily believe that the man in the chair would appreciate that kind of thinking.

"Sherlock, I don't think Doctor Watson—" Mycroft began, but was silenced by a swat on the arm from the woman standing right beside him.

Her silvery hair was swept back from her face with a simple, black barrette, and everything about her spoke of a woman accustomed to what John saw as the faux modesty and sophistication of the upper-classes. Small pearl earrings were hanging off of her earlobes, her fingernails looked French-
manicured, and her feet were in low-heeled, patent leather slip-ons with ornamental buckles resembling the ones the Queen always wore. Her make-up was subtle and tasteful down to the light-coloured lipstick — nothing like the garish face paints of some of the decidedly not upper-class girls John had dated. John was also struck by the sense that this was no trophy wife or an idle lady-of-the-house. No, this was clearly the Holmes matriarch, her gaze sharp and observant, her presence commanding. Plus, the resemblance was striking: she had Mycroft's nose and Sherlock's eyes, complete with flecked heterochromia of the iris clearly visible in the natural light streaming in from the large windows.

"Nonsense, Mikey. Of course, he's welcome to join us," she chirped, extending her hand delicately to John.

He had the distinct feeling he should kiss it, or perhaps bow. It was surprisingly large in relation to her otherwise dainty form, and John’s thoughts immediately went to Sherlock’s hands: large but delicate, fingers long and pale and lithe. Perhaps lither now than ever since limited mobility and lack of nerve input often meant that muscle mass was lost.

John returned her handshake, arranging his features to look less unbearably curious.

"Isobel Holmes. A pleasure to meet you, Doctor. I imagine you will be a valuable addition to our discussion about the next steps in Sherlock's treatment. May I ask—" she inquired, her tone rising in pitch, "—what manner of doctor you would be?"

John cleared his throat, mind whirring to formulate an answer that wouldn't unduly excite her.
"Consultant in trauma and orthopaedic surgery. Not currently practising, though, having just concluded my army medical service."

"How splendid! A doctor and an ex-soldier!" Isobel announced. "With you overseeing Sherlock's recovery, I'm sure we can get back on track."

John's brows knitted together. *Overseeing*...? Suddenly he had so many questions, but a glance in Sherlock direction indicated that none of them would be welcomed. In fact, he wasn't even sure *he* was welcome, judging by the warning looks Mycroft was now giving him. This seemed like a fairly private conversation he had just rudely intruded upon, but why then had Mycroft specifically asked him to join the group in the annexe? Earlier, he had seemed to want backup.

*Perhaps I should make that tea, after all.* He turned to return to the kitchen, but a familiar baritone stopped him in his tracks by calling out his name.

"John. Stop vacillating and have a seat. You might be here awhile; I'm sure Mummy has done her research — *again,*" Sherlock added with exasperation. His tone lacked the anger he directed at his brother and John was not surprised; Isobel did not seem like a person a son argued with, let alone won. Unnerved, as always, by Sherlock's ability to read his mind, John wavered, halfway between sitting and standing.

"I think… actually, I'll just go and put the kettle on." His leg complained as he straightened to his full height.

"Wonderful idea, Doctor Watson." Mycroft beamed, shark-like. He then turned to his brother.

"Though I know how much you value John's company, Sherlock, I'm not sure you want him privy to all of this. This is a family matter." 

John was even more confused, now, at Mycroft's insistence that he remove himself from the room.
It's as if the older Holmes was suddenly afraid of… what?

Somehow, John could sense that it was connected to Sherlock's sharp, downright triumphant demeanour.

"All the more reason to have at least one rational person present," Sherlock announced.

Mycroft covertly shook his head at his brother while their mother had a look out the window. "Don't tell her," he warned Sherlock quietly, leaning in close.

Isobel was likely out of earshot, but John wasn't.

"This is not the time nor the place," Mycroft hissed to Sherlock and weathered the angry glare he received from his brother with ease. "I can't fathom why you would want to tell her before—"

John cleared his throat, brows raised where he had slowed his steps halfway out of the door. Mycroft gave him a wary glance and snapped his mouth shut.

This fortified John's decision that, if he were to stay, the tension in the room was definitely enough to warrant a calming cuppa. He gave Sherlock a hopefully reassuring smile before slipping out and closing the door behind him.

John dawdled in the kitchen, collecting and rearranging a tray with tea and biscuits pulled from Tallie's stash, fattened with their Tesco loot. After making sure the teacups were free from chips and spaced evenly apart on the tray, he made his way back to the sitting room, opening the door with his elbow.

Isobel was speaking again, this time to Mycroft. Sherlock was picking idly at his trousers, breathing heavily through his nose, frustration evident on his features. John went directly to him, setting the tray on the side table nearest him just to have an excuse to lean close.

"Alright?" His voice was barely a whisper, just words formed on a breath.

Sherlock nodded without looking directly at John. Instead of triumphant, John thought he now looked discouraged and angry.

John frowned briefly but didn't pry further. He poured tea into one of the fancy cups he'd fished out of the kitchen cupboard, habitually setting it in the holder of Sherlock's chair and angling it. Sherlock no longer needed a straw if what he was drinking was in a mug he could easily hold onto with both hands, but for this occasion, John had picked the one set of nicer china in the annexe. He grabbed a straw from a bowl that always sat on the coffee table and unceremoniously plopped it into Sherlock's tea.

Sherlock scowled at it, and John doubted that he would drink a single drop, but couldn't decide if it would have been worse not to give him any at all. He quickly filled the other cups with the eyes of the room on him as he turned and settled onto the furthest half of the sofa from where Isobel and Mycroft were standing.

Isobel was frowning slightly, her eyes intensely focussed on Sherlock. "You still need those?" she criticised, nodding towards the bowl of straws. Her disapproval was obvious.

Without waiting for a reply, she then launched into a lecture. "I was reading just yesterday about a T9 in Poland that regained movement and feeling in their legs by having an operation done in which they implanted olfactory ensheathing cells into the damaged areas of the spine. There's a
neurosurgeon in New York that's specialising in it. They should have a programme up and running within the year."

"Sounds pretty experimental. Wouldn't that make it risky?" John wondered aloud.

"Risky? Things can hardly get any worse, can they?" Sherlock said bitterly. His mouth was then compressed into a straight line as his mother continued.

"There's also the tendon transfer surgery you keep putting off. I cannot for the life of me fathom why," she chastised her younger son. "We need you to pull your weight on this, Sherlock; we're all struggling to keep things afloat."

"Yes," Sherlock confirmed venomously. "I'm sure you're suffering every single minute."

Mycroft gave him one more brief warning glare.

"There's much we have to talk about," Isobel informed Sherlock. "I spoke on the phone only yesterday with this wonderful neurologist in Ontario; they're doing splendid things with their intense inpatient program at the private clinic he runs. We should discuss that for after the tendon surgery."

"That would be a waste of brea—" Sherlock started, but Mycroft stepped between mother and son with the rehearsed smile of someone accustomed to defusing arguments.

"How was your flight, Mummy?" He asked courteously.

"Long. Is my room ready? We can continue this discussion at dinner."

"The master bedroom is ready, yes, just the way you and Father left it." Mycroft's tone had an edge to it now, too, and John could tell that there was an accusation hidden in his words.

"You know as well as I do that the world cannot stop spinning or the family business left unattended just because you're failing to motivate your brother in his recovery. There's always the option of moving him to live with us in Boston," Isobel declared.

"As much as you'd like to just pack him up like an old sofa, this is still his home. Our home," Mycroft emphasised, and John admired the way he'd managed to school both his tone and his expression back to polite.

"Seeing as I'm not needed in any conversation regarding my life, I'll leave you to it," Sherlock snarled and made for his bedroom.

John was certain he would have slammed the door if he could. He was surprised that Sherlock didn't stick around to protest more. Even in his worst moods, he never failed to make his views known when he wanted to say no to something. Now, he acted as though whatever his family may or may not have been plotting had no relevance.

The garden door opened and Tallie walked into the kitchen. She was very early for her afternoon visit, which made John both sigh in relief and wonder if and why Mycroft had asked her to be present for Isobel's visit. She leant against the sitting room doorframe as she peered in, clearly looking for her patient.

"Miss Mullan," Isobel greeted her joylessly.

"Hello, Mrs Holmes," Tallie replied and offered her hand for shaking, though she was already
glancing over her own shoulder into the kitchen again.

"Is Sherlock…?" she nodded towards the bedroom.

"Yeah," John confirmed with a nod. He stood, crossing the room to follow her out, muttering for her ears only, "I hope you brought your boxing gloves."

Tallie chuckled. "Nothing I've not seen before, I'm sure."

"We are grateful for your loyalty," Mrs Holmes told her. "A person of a less sturdy emotional build would have given up on him." She glanced pointedly at Mycroft. "I'm sure you have greatly helped in keeping him in good cheer, Miss Mullan."

John rolled his eyes and didn't care that Mycroft saw it. Good cheer?!

The conversation seemed to be over, especially now that Sherlock had made a tactical retreat and Tallie had arrived. Not wanting to intrude more and wanting to avoid further small talk with Isobel and Mycroft, John slipped out of the sitting room, shutting the door behind him. He wanted to go to Sherlock, to ask him about his strange behaviour, to press him for more information about his mother, but he could hear Tallie’s cheerful voice from behind his bedroom door and the deep pitch of his in response. Though John couldn’t make out the words, he could tell the tone was not one that would invite open conversation. Best to leave them to it for now.

Perhaps he’d head back to his own room for a nap. He needed to check in with Harry to confirm their lunch location for this week; she had wanted to try a new restaurant, but his — John grit his teeth, uncomfortable with even thinking the word — flashback in Tesco had made him nervous about new places. Lost in thought, he rounded the corner to his bedroom and realised he'd left his mobile in the annexe kitchen. With a sigh, he turned around and made his way back down the corridor, thinking how much more even his gait was than when he’d first arrived at Musgrave.

With a self-deprecating smirk, he pulled open the door to the annexe and was startled to hear loud voices carrying clearly from the sitting room, the door left open. A glance around told him that Sherlock and Tallie had retreated to the garden, possibly to avoid getting caught in the crosshairs of what was clearly an argument. John scooped up his mobile but couldn’t make himself leave the kitchen just yet, aware that he was eavesdropping. It seemed that the atmosphere in the annexe had not lost any of its tension since he’d departed.

"What on earth do you mean, 'he's received a letter'?" Isobel demanded.

"I told you about his application to Zurich."

"And I told you to put an end to that nonsense."

John remembered Tallie's words: 'I helped him write the letter.' How could he have forgot about that? Was Sherlock applying for some risky experimental treatment like his mother wanted? Was the family opposed to it, even though Isobel seemed to be trying to push Sherlock to do precisely that?

"Clearly, he's not in his right mind. It just goes to show how unethical that whole business is that they would even consider him," she announced. "What is going on, Mikey? Have they changed his medications?"

"It's only been two months since he heard back from Switzerland and he's honouring his promise that he'd wait for six. I have a plan if you’d just listen —"
John’s brow furrowed. *Wait six months for what, exactly? Why such a timeline? And unethical? Experimental, certainly, but unethical?*

Isobel scoffed. “What plan? The army doctor? *Is that* your plan? I think we'd have better luck with Miss Mullan who Sherlock has, miraculously enough, still not managed to chase away. Didn't you say she very recently raised the subject of his medications? Is he not taking them? Has he been attending his appointments? Mikey, the only reason we agreed to this arrangement was that you promised —"

Mycroft cut her off, his voice sounding strangled. "Yes, he attends them, but only to appease me. You don't know what it's been like —"

"Clearly, he needs better neurologists and psychiatrists.” Isobel quipped. “You have argued countless times that Sherlock staying in England meant that you had every kind of therapist and expert available as though the US didn't have such things or even better ones. Why are you not using these mythical resources, then, hm? Why is Sherlock still spouting this nonsense?"

Mycroft was silent for a moment, as though gathering himself. "The letter he received contained a date. He has an *appointment* at Dignitas now, Mother, and I cannot stop him from going."

*Dignitas?* John had heard the name before. He drummed his fingertips on the worktop as he racked his brain.

Tallie's words echoed once more: *'His life is hard, and he's in constant pain. I helped him write the letter.'*

*Dignitas, Dignitas, Dignitas…?*

Suddenly, he remembered in what context he'd heard the name, and his breath hitched.

*God, no. I must have heard wrong.*

He'd heard wrong, and this was some misunderstanding or some ploy by Sherlock who was just being his typical self, riling people up and testing them and being mean when he got bored of a conversation and wanted out of it.

John must have heard wrong, and this was just a joke or an idle threat at best to get Mrs Holmes off his back. *It has to be. Sherlock says stupid things all the time, things he doesn't mean, things he just uses to keep other people away.*

"No!" Isobel's voice was now as commanding as it was hysterical. "Not acceptable! Mycroft, we trusted you to work these things out, to look after him—"

"I have!" Mycroft's tone was pleading, and as he continued, it broke as he said, "That's *all I have done*!"

*Six-month contract, John realised just as fear began to tighten its vice around his heart. I'm an idiot. All those cryptic statements by Mycroft, Tallie's words about the letter… all of that he had ignored, side-stepped. *Ignorance is fucking bliss, eh?***

Whatever purpose John had thought he had at Musgrave Court had just been wiped out. What he had believed to be rehabilitation turned out to be palliative care. Instead of spending six months trying to help someone regain control of their life, he had been hired to be the court jester of a dying man.
This was the last laugh before a poison injection. Something to bide Sherlock's time before wheeling himself willingly up to the gallows.

And now Mycroft, of all people, was saying not even he could stop this, but that wasn't true, was it? Of course, he could stop it! *Mycroft could lock the doors, take away Sherlock's phone—*

John shook his head in disbelief, Tallie's words were now the only soundtrack to his wildly beating heart: *'There was an incident.'*

Sherlock had tried to end his life once before. Now, he'd simply found a legal way to get someone else to do it.

"*Sherlock—*" John whispered into the empty air of the kitchen. His hands were shaking, and he coiled his fingers into fists. The sun streaming in form the windows taunted him with its cheeriness.

In his shock, he had completely tuned out the conversation happening in the next room; Mycroft and Isobel were now in a full-on shouting match.

“I'm his mother! His life began with me, so I should have a say in when it ends, and that's not going to happen before my time comes and especially not like this! What they do in Switzerland, it's no better than murder, Mycroft! If you get mixed up in that, you will risk your career — This *will* not happen! We CAN'T LET IT!"

"Mother..." Mycroft sighed. He sounded exasperated and exhausted. He sounded like a man who was tired of having conversations like this. He'd probably been having many of them with Sherlock.

Which meant that he really *had* tried and failed. And if Mycroft, who was Sherlock's flesh and blood, knew him so well and clearly loved him, had failed, what the hell kind of a chance had John ever had to make any fucking difference? Even Tallie had seen fit to keep him in the dark. Tallie, whom John thought was on the same side in wanting to help Sherlock instead of just being a pall-bearer.

Ignoring the tear that trickled out of the corner of his left eye as he stumbled forward, towards the open sitting room door, John stepped across the threshold, fearlessly facing the two Holmeses.

"You *lied* to me right from the start!"

Mycroft opened his mouth, but John lifted a finger to warn him, to make him stop. *"You— not a fucking word!"*

Mycroft Holmes had allowed him to grow close to Sherlock, knowing that in six months it would all be for nought. That it would all come tumbling down and break into pieces. That John would then go back to the start — go back to sitting in some dingy bedsit, alone and useless and, on top of it all, mourning.

“*He's a grown man, and it's his decision.*" Mycroft's tone was quiet and resigned. Final.

Breathing heavily as he desperately tried to contain the rage that was now melding with shock and sadness like metal being melted in a forge into a lump that seemed to have lodged in his throat, John spun around, sweeping tears from his eyes with the side of his palm.

Tallie was just walking into the kitchen, and she looked up as John entered and grabbed his phone. "John, what's—?"
"Fuck the lot of you."

His voice was strangled and hoarse, and now he also wished he could have slammed a door or two as he hurried back to his bedroom. The hallways were empty and silent as a crypt.

John dropped down to sit on the bed, and his shoulder throbbed to the rhythm of the tense pounding in his temples. Prickly tears squeezed out from under his tightly closed lids, and his fingers curled into the bedcovers. God, how he felt sick to his stomach as he thought of the brilliant man inside the broken body Mycroft had let him get to know, thought of the hope that bloomed from the soft smiles he now sometimes managed to coax out of Sherlock.

He thought of long fingers clumsily gripping his sleeve at Tesco. He thought of an epitaph chipped into a gravestone alongside the date in the letter that sealed Sherlock's fate. He thought of Mycroft Holmes, coming home to an empty house, the annexe sealed away like a tomb.

And he thought of himself, in the midst of grieving for the best and brightest man he'd possibly — no, definitely — ever known, thought of being forced to move back to a life of loneliness and desolation. Only it would be worse, now, because he'd had a taste of what life could be like with someone who interested him, with whom he enjoyed spending all of his time, who made him laugh and kept the darkness of his thoughts just a little bit further away. He thought and thought until the thoughts threatened to squeeze the breath out of his lungs, to choke him as he lost his battle against the disconsolate tears. He tried to push all of it away, but the thoughts kept taking over and shrouding him in such an overwhelming sense of helplessness that he was forced to growl in pain and frustration as he dug the heels of his hands into his eyes.

A knock on the door jolted him out of his head.

Defeated, John dragged himself to answer it, standing in front of the closed door for some time as he struggled to compose himself. He expected the visitor to be Tallie or perhaps Sophie, and he wanted to speak to neither.

But when he finally opened the door, the one he came face to face was Mycroft Holmes. He was wearing a worn wax coat and a flat tweed cap, and he was extending an arm to offer John his coat.

"Walk with me. I think we both need some air."
A Matter of Life And Death

Chapter Notes

Unsurprisingly, chapter 14 hit many readers quite hard, and your pleas of a fast continuation have been heard. Here is chapter 15 in which John tries to cope with the revelations of Sherlock's plan and Mycroft's deception. He now has some big decisions to make.

There was a heaviness in Mycroft Holmes' steps as they left the main house behind and headed along a meandering footpath through an area of statues and sculpted trees. The biting chill in the wind fit John's mood perfectly; not even the fresh air seemed to puncture through the weight of the truth he'd been delivered like a blow to the head.

By an old, ornate stone fountain which hadn't yet been filled for spring, Mycroft paused.

"My brother has the mind of a scientist or a philosopher, yet he elected to be a detective. What might we deduce about his heart?" He asked, looking down and away, hands tucked into his coat pockets.

"I don't know."

John wasn't in the mood for grandiose riddles. His hands were clasped behind his back, and he kept his eyes fixed straight ahead, staring without seeing across the sparse meadows beyond the gardens.

"Initially, he wanted to be a pirate," Mycroft mused, pulling one hand out of his pocket to shield his eyes from the sun. The light of the half-overcast day seemed cold, distant, providing no warmth for the two men seeking to escape the oppressive air of their home.

"Sherlock always needed people but didn't quite know what to do with them or how to function in their presence. His current predicament provides the pièce de résistance to the negative attention he has always received from others. I suppose it has affected him more than the physical reality of his disabled form. Before, he was alone in a crowd. Now, he must feel as though he is standing in the middle of it — all the attention on him — and without anyone at his side because he has pushed others away. He was always very private, difficult to get close to. That fortress seemed impenetrable, and breaching it was the first thing that needed to happen if there was any hope that he might re-join the world."

Needed. Past tense. John bit his lip; was Mycroft somehow trying to flatter him, to convince him he'd made a difference?

He sniffed with his mouth parted, temper still churning. "You lied to me," he reminded his employer. "Even if it was a lie of omission. Tallie nearly spilt the beans, and I should have pressed her harder. Six-month contract," he spat out, shaking his head. "Sherlock would be the first to tell me I'm an idiot."

Had Mycroft really thought that he would just walk away with his paycheck at the end of it and be
none the wiser? That he wouldn’t find out about Dignitas at some point? That he’d be someone’s friend and then just shrug and leave when they suddenly disappeared off to die?

Maybe Mycroft Holmes understood even less about people than Sherlock.

"Cross your heart and hope to die, Doctor Watson: would you have treated him the same if you had known from the start?"

"I know now," John said roughly. "No use playing what-if, is there?"

They continued their stroll, turning towards a small lake which glittered grey in the weak spring light. On the opposite shore of the small body of water sat what John knew was known as a folly; the empty structure constructed just for decorative purposes was made to look like a Roman temple. The grounds beyond it looked desolate and unused, and John thought it all rather fitting: an illusion of grandeur but only as a facade to cover up a reality of death and decay.

"As you know, Musgrave Court is our ancestral seat. Sherlock loved roaming the grounds as a boy, searching for animal bones, spiders, snakes. A vivacious child, a handful for the nannies. He had private tutors until he was old enough for Winchester College, which is where all the men in the family have gone; Sherlock's social difficulties made the local schools an unfeasible option."

"I bet you were more the bookish type," John said conversationally.

He had little current interest in the brothers’ educational history, but something in Mycroft’s gilded tone told him that this sudden bout of sentimentality was more introspective than for John's benefit.

"He was such an emotional child. Change was always hard on him, adulthood a trial he is still attempting to conquer. The accident was… I should have known he would be exceptionally unequipped to inure to the aftermath."

"So, how does it work then? He wants to die and you just… let him?"

Mycroft stopped by a bench, took a seat. For a long while, he said nothing at all. "I never intended — I thought I could—" He shook his head, trying to regain his composure. "He just sat there, staring at walls or into the darkness all night in his HDU room after the pneumonia. That's when he first raised the issue. I dismissed it loudly."

The slight smile Mycroft forced onto his features was tight-lipped as it battled the sadness in his eyes. "I should have known it would come to this, but I hardly wanted to believe it. When they first woke him up at the intensive care unit after the accident and told him… He had a tracheostomy at first; he'd broken several ribs and ruptured his diaphragm as well as his spleen. Even without such additional injuries prolonging the need for respirator treatment, they couldn't have been sure that his breathing function was intact enough with the cervical injury to not need a long-term tracheostomy. It all meant that, after the emergency surgery was done and his condition was stable, he couldn't speak, couldn't move. I… I threatened to sue if they didn't re-establish sedation. It was quite…"

John still couldn't decide how much sympathy he could muster for someone who was willing to take their brother to Switzerland to die, but his anger dissipated as he watched the older Holmes struggle under the weight of the painful memories. The usually verbose and quick-witted man seemed at a loss for the right words to describe the horror he'd witnessed.

"They told me it was common for intensive care and sedation and major injuries to interfere with short-term memory," Mycroft explained. "Six times, he was brought out of sedation, and six times
they had to — we had to break the news to him. Though it seemed he couldn't remember what he'd been told before, each time the devastation somehow seemed worse."

John's mouth was dry. "It's not possible to predict at that stage who recovers well. Every patient experiences the initial shock differently, but they all go through it and then move on." It was a stage in which John had been involved many times as a surgeon — telling patients and their family members what had happened and what the damage was after emergency surgery was done.

To John's surprise, Mycroft dug out a packet of filterless cigarettes from his coat pocket and lit one, taking a long drag from it before speaking again.

"Of course, being Sherlock, he clung to denial for some time, but the pneumonia served as a reality check, robbing him completely of any last shred of hope. You said that patients live through the shock phase and then move on but answer me this: has he moved on? Will he move on? It's been thirteen months. How long is long enough to judge that he cannot put his life back together, or scrape into shape a new one from the remains of the old? Whose right is it to define what is good enough for him?"

John had no answers for the stricken man in front of him. "What about… them?" John nodded towards the house. "Your parents. How'd you end up as his guardian?"

"Our father has advanced, early-onset Parkinson's complete with dementia; he cannot travel or participate in decision-making. They live in Boston because that is where Mother needs to look after a family business she inherited; the money helps keep the Court afloat. I have been telling them for years to sell the property to the National Trust; my work requires me to live in London, to be available around the clock and while I reside here with Sherlock, my career stagnates and deteriorates as I am forced to neglect it. However, I have no regrets about that. Needs must; this is family."

He drew another drag from the cigarette. "If I could change his mind, I would have already done so. He doesn't want to live like this, and he has refused my help in exploring the possibilities of adapting his former life to fit his limitations."

"What am I doing here, then? Since you chose to keep the Dignitas plan from me, I assume you wanted me to try to help him move on, even if I didn't know the stakes I was up against."

"Your past tense is duly noted, and I understand if you wish to terminate your contract prematurely. This is not how I wanted you to find out, and I doubt Sherlock would think it ideal, either."

How did you want me to find out, then? John wondered. As an afterthought in the event that Sherlock changed his mind? Or just drop the bomb on me Sherlock isn't home today because he's popped off to Zurich to—

"My unfortunate oversight was that I didn't realise Sherlock assumed you already knew. I wanted to give the two of you time to get to know each other, to give you an opportunity to meet him on even ground before explaining the situation. I wanted you to help him see a future, not acquiesce to his terminal care plan. I had attempted rational dialogue concerning Dignitas enough times to know it wouldn't work. I hoped that having spent some time with him, your response to the news would be tempered."

"How the hell could you think that waiting would have made it easier for me!? You're deluded if you think there's an easy way to tell a person that someone they've worked so hard to get to know is going to— going to—” He couldn't say the word. He wouldn't.
It abruptly made a startling amount of sense: Sherlock's reluctance in leaving the house, his lack-lustre self-care, yet his agreeing to antibiotics and hospital visits. These were the actions of a man who believed they had nothing to lose and nothing to gain, but who was fulfilling a promise with a timeline.

"You made a deal with him, didn't you?" John demanded. "That's why it's six months unless Dignitas has even worse queues than the NHS," he suggested bitterly.

"He promised me six months to prepare our parents for the inevitable. Six months to convince me that nothing would ever change — his words, not mine. I would have given him six years, sixteen, sixty."

The wind was pricking their limbs through their clothing, so they stood up and walked further down the footpath into the shelter of a copse.

There, Mycroft ground the cigarette under his foot and turned to face John. "Just as our mother pointed out, all the best medical care, psychological support and rehabilitation have been available for him; I left no stone unturned in that regard. Sherlock rejected it all, convinced that no one understood what he was going through. I certainly never pretended to. When the letter came, I knew I had to start looking at less obvious possibilities."

John frowned. "You called me. I never even had the chance to ring the number that was on the job ad. How did you know…?"

Mycroft's posture straightened as he clasped his hands behind his back and slowed his pace. "Doctor Stamford's wife moves in the same charity circles. She mentioned off-hand that her husband had met an old friend and colleague who was looking for a temporary assignment after being invalided home from the armed forces."

"And you thought… what?"

"That I needed an extraordinary approach to an extraordinary problem. Your medical training was an added benefit, not the main attraction, but it was also a potential complication if Sherlock stuck to his decision. I assumed you would oppose assisted suicide based on the official stance of your profession in Britain. The reason I chose to contact you was that I needed someone who would react to Sherlock from the backdrop of their own experiences instead of just hiding behind professional detachment. It had to be someone who would not be easily frightened off by Sherlock's brand of politeness, someone with experience of having their life irrevocably, traumatically and drastically changed. Someone with an intelligence hardly to match, but at least to keep up with Sherlock's."

"Thanks," John said, angry sarcasm widening his eyes as he pursed his lips. "So you thought you'd recruit someone to be the other half of a pair of crocks."

"Neither of you is the kind to make friends easily. Yet that is precisely what appears to have transpired."

"I can't watch him die."

Getting the word out threatened to make John's composure crumble. His self-pity over the idea of losing Sherlock, losing the chance to get to know him better, to spend more time with him — losing this new life John now had — felt petty, but it was there. He wanted Sherlock to live for both their sakes.
Mycroft stopped and fixed him in place with his gaze, now openly pleading. "Then help me stop it. Help me with the task you have had right from the start, even if you were not fully aware of its context."

"A matter of life and death!" John quoted. "I thought you were just being… a Holmes."

"Your therapist thinks that a post-traumatic stress disorder explains your issues, but she is only partly right in thinking that memories of your military service haunt you. No, you also miss it, just as Sherlock misses the thrill of his cases. Even if the scales of your losses do not compare, the nature of them does. You have brought life into this house, John, and I chose to conceal the truth because I did not want death to colour your interactions with him. I did not employ you for a wake — I hired you so that he may live. So that he might want to live."

"I don't know how to change that! I don't know what to do at all! I couldn't even..." ...help myself. In a way, it had been Sherlock who had made John feel like there was life left yet in him, that he had something to give even when he was probably no longer a surgeon.

I was so alone, and I already owe him so much.

"Will you stay, John?" Mycroft asked. "Please stay, and help me change his mind?"

John licked his lips. He felt exhausted and confused. Looking over his shoulder, he saw the looming shape of Musgrave Court and his first instinct was to run.

"I... I need some time to think."

"Of course," Mycroft replied politely. But despite his courteous words, John could read the disappointment in the tension in his shoulders.

"I think I need some time... away from here," he avowed.

"At your sister's?"

"I don't know."

"I have a residence in London. Perhaps a few days there might offer perspective?"

John didn't argue or express gratitude, just nodded. Mycroft had got him into this mess, so it seemed fair that he would arrange a chance for John to try to find a perspective he could live with. To make up his mind on whether he still wanted the role he'd been given.

Anthea escorted him to the townhouse in Kensington that evening. They spoke little in the car; she spent the drive on her phone, presumably working. John spent the car ride mostly looking out the window which gained him a crick in his neck.

The apartment was large — just what he had expected. Gilded taps and marble in the bathrooms, luxurious bedding, a large-screen TV in the library and even a film projector in a smaller rec room. Despite the poshness, the place felt somehow less formal than Musgrave Court. That wasn't to say that it felt like anyone's home — what was missing, for John, were the people. Or, at least one particular man now tucked miles away into the solitude of the annexe.
He spent the next two days strolling in parks, eating alone in restaurants, feeling like he was surrounded by an invisible cloud of grey which kept others at bay. He felt isolated, abandoned. The phone didn't ring — people never called him, anyway, except for Harry, and he didn't want to explain this to her.

He thought a lot about Sherlock; their physical distance did nothing to help John detach himself. If anything, it grew in him an urgency to return, to not waste a single minute if there truly was a clock ticking away the time he could spend with his new best friend.

Yes, best friend.

There was no hesitation in him to use those words. He had always had a small handful of people in his life to grab a pint with, rugby teammates, army buddies, but rare was the friend he allowed to see the less favourable things about himself, things he was embarrassed about. Things that made him feel weak and unsure. Mycroft had seen that, and Sherlock had appeared to see through him right from the start, to see past what he wanted to project into the things he wanted to hide. Sherlock never seemed the least bit of put off by them — just like John saw in him so much more than just a disabled, depressed man in a wheelchair.

How had Sherlock drifted down so deep that he saw no future at all? Why couldn't he see all the things he still had? They shouldn't go to waste, shouldn't be buried in a casket six feet under. They should be fought for, and Mycroft, who had done so for a long time, was convinced the battle had been lost. But that didn't mean losing the whole war, didn't it? Maybe it simply needed new troops.

It was suddenly clear: that was why Mycroft Holmes had hired him. John, even with his own problems and his own complicated recovery, still had fight left in him. Yes, he was very loyal very quickly, because he liked Sherlock's honesty and straight-forwardness when the man wasn't using them to conceal his own emotions. Sherlock was abrasive and raw, too much, too intense, and John loved every bit of him, every minute they spent together because Sherlock was real and honest and not some poser more occupied with empty niceties and pretending to have the perfect life on social media like some of John's medical school acquaintances. There was a huge heart down there in that scarred chest of Sherlock's — an intensely beating one — trapped in partly self-imposed imprisonment because Sherlock thought it could not withstand any further disappointment. Sherlock could be funny both deliberately and inadvertently, and he could trust people when he so chose.

Clearly, he trusted Tallie, and every time John had asked for that same trust, it had been given, wholly and absolutely. He knew he would need every bit of that trust for any plan he could concoct, and he also realised that he couldn't let Sherlock believe he was only doing this to avoid a funeral. Slowly, he began to understand the reasons why Mycroft had kept Switzerland from him for so long. But it was good that he knew everything, now — knew how high the stakes were.

Yes, John missed the war but in this fight for Sherlock’s life, he had discovered a new battlefield.

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Mycroft called John after two days of solitude, just as he was surveying the window of a shop of curiosities near the British Museum, thinking that Sherlock would probably enjoy rummaging around the quirky little establishment. He wondered how Sherlock would have decorated the annexe if he’d been motivated to give input. Would it have been so simplistic, so empty? John had a hard time believing it would.
"Shall I tell Sherlock that your family emergency will keep you a further forty-eight hours?" the older Holmes inquired after they'd exchanged cordial greetings.

John pushed his chest out though no one was there to see it. "No. I'm coming home tonight. And I'm staying. You have me, but we do this my way. Don't tell him I just found out; I don't want Sherlock to think I'm doing this because… I don't even know how to say it."

"As a last favour. As an attempt to make his final days memorable."

"We do this my way," John reiterated, mostly to convince himself that he could manage going back to Musgrave Court with a Damocles' sword hanging over him.

He had no bloody idea what his way even was, but he had to try.

For his own sake and Sherlock's.

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As the black car drove through the gates, the sense of déjà vu John had expected never materialised. Unlike the first time he had been driven to Musgrave Court, he was now armed with so much more knowledge, a very different sort of determination, and a novel and much more daunting task.

*How do I help someone who thinks they're beyond help?*

His encounter with Isobel and Mycroft that day had given him more than just the key revelation of Sherlock's plan — the events of that day had revealed how drained, hopeless and tired his older brother was. How little fight there was left in *either* of them. It was obvious that Mycroft had spent these thirteen months in a crossfire of their mother's misguidedly optimistic demands, the emotional toll of looking after Sherlock and trying to keep his career afloat. Tallie had done what she could, but after being so involved in Sherlock's care from the start, her guilt over letting the suicide attempt happen and her professional detachment lacked the out-of-the-box thinking that trying to get through to someone like Sherlock demanded.

John felt very alone.

Walking into the main hall at Musgrave Court, he felt the old walls close in, the stagnant air stall in his lungs. It took most of the determination he had summoned in London to keep his faith from crumbling. There were things he could do. Things they would try.

The hard part would be doing it so stealthily that Sherlock wouldn't catch on to his motive — a motive he had to be certain was the only acceptable one: keep Sherlock Holmes alive. Keep him alive by helping him *want* to survive. It couldn't be because John begged him not to go through with the plan for his sake or for Mycroft's — it wouldn't be right. It would even be manipulative. Sherlock also had to be kept from the truth of John having found out about Switzerland like this — otherwise, he would believe he was humouring John or perhaps biding his time or having a last go at doing certain things.

A swan song. A goodbye.

Even if Sherlock suspected that he had been told straight-off at the start of his contract why it
would end at six months, John couldn’t approach the subject with him; otherwise, all his efforts would seem blatantly obvious.

John poured himself a whisky in the drawing room and sunk into the armchair Mycroft usually frequented. It was pleasantly close to the fireplace, and the embers still glowing there gave off a comforting warmth. Mycroft must have sat there earlier. Anthea, who had collected John from London, had informed him that Isobel Holmes had left for the States; she could not stay away from the family business or from overseeing her husband's care any longer. Anthea was reserved and polite in her words, but John gathered from her account of the events that Isobel's departure had been accompanied by stern commands to her eldest about preventing Sherlock from 'executing any frivolous plans'.

It was the first time John had heard suicide being described in such terms. As a doctor, he was not rattled by the notion, nor did he feel uncomfortable discussing it. It wasn't something the patients under his care as a consultant took up with him since he tended only to be involved in their care at such an early stage. As a trainee doctor, he had, of course, encountered suicidal patients but had dealt with them without much trouble. It was only after he had been forced to face similar thoughts during his recovery that he'd realised the complexity of the topic, the greyness of the area between a person's right to decline treatment and a person's right to choose death. The GMC's stance was clear: a doctor even providing information which might help someone end their life was a criminal offence. Even those accompanying a loved one abroad to a country where they obtained a legal assisted suicide could lead to legal ramifications back in the UK. Isobel's worries about Mycroft's career were not unfounded. John was impressed — if not in agreement — with Mycroft's willingness to risk so much to grant his little brother's dying wish.

That left one question: what would John do if Sherlock never changed his mind? If even John became convinced that his decision was not borne out of lack of data, from a treatable mental illness, or from something else fixable and reversible, how would he deal with the inevitable? Would he ever believe that his friend was better off dead, or that the world was better off without him?

Never.

He wouldn't be so presumptuous as to think he knew what Sherlock's life was like. John knew what private things he had to delegate to others and to endure every day. He had learned to read the dishearteningly frequent signs of physical discomfort and pain on Sherlock's features. He saw the joylessness, the lethargy, the lack of initiative. He knew the waking nightmares, the anxiety and the panic that could be brought forth by so little. He had seen how difficult it was for Sherlock to face the rest of the world and the people in it, especially since, according to Mycroft, it had not been easy for him even before the accident.

No, if John was honest with himself, he couldn't know what he would think, how he would feel if their roles were reversed. His injury had been milder, yet he'd fallen into a proverbial black hole, too, after rehab. He found himself now a bit embarrassed about those memories; self-pity and stubbornness had admittedly played a role in his scepticism in thinking his life was over, that there was nothing that could turn the tide. He had lost so much less than Sherlock. Once, the thought of death as an option had consoled John. How much would it take to get Sherlock to stop leaning on that emotional crutch?

What could he do, then, to give Sherlock back his life, or at least enough bits and pieces of the puzzle that he could see the big picture of it again? How many missing pieces would be tolerable? How many could his life lack and yet retain a sense of self and purpose? Could there be new things, good things there, things he hadn't had before at all?
What did Sherlock like about his life before?

Sloshing the amber-coloured, peaty nectar in his glass before taking a throat-biting swill, John listed what he knew about his friend’s favourite things. The Work. Knowledge. The violin. His… were there friends in his life? Good clothes. London. His independence.

John made a mental note to ask Mycroft about more things which might have been to Sherlock’s liking. He had clearly been an adventurous person, judging by the old newspaper articles. Perhaps he liked to travel? That could be arranged, couldn’t it? Surely people even in power wheelchairs went places? Are there any specialised travel agents I could talk to?

Yet, travel should take back seat to the more important stuff. Was there truly no way for Sherlock to live in his old flat? John decided he needed to see it. The best thing would be to get Sherlock to go there, to reconnect with the place, to talk to the landlord.

Next item on the list: being independent. Sherlock was already progressing with the physio he’d restarted. Surely the fact that he was doing it was a good sign, a sign that he might be persuaded to reconsider Switzerland? Then again, Sherlock's motives were difficult to decipher on a good day. If John could get him to consider exploring some more assistive devices, that could… it would be useful, definitely.

Clothes. Not a problem. He can still wear whatever he wants, as long as there’s somewhere to hide his catheter bag.

London. They could go to London, stay at a hotel. Sherlock could show him his favourite places, and hopefully, a reassuring number of them would be wheelchair-accessible. Then again, judging by Sherlock’s esoteric interests, there might be disappointment brewing there. There was his old flat and the Met. Which lead to The Work.

There's nothing wrong with his brain. Depression could cause memory issues, but John had never seen such things manifest in Sherlock. Even if he couldn't chase suspects or personally enter every dilapidated hovel with a murder victim in it, there were plenty of options to provide him with data from crime scenes. Someone wearing a GoPro? John would feel idiotic doing that, and the police probably wouldn't even let him in, but he'd do it. He'd do it for Sherlock's sake. He just had to find out how to get in touch with whoever had been Sherlock's contact person. There were also his private cases. Mycroft had mentioned that he got a lot of them through his email, which he hadn't checked in a year. Maybe John could encourage him to take a peek and then his pick?

The violin. John shook his head. Just… no. Best leave that be.

Final but far from the least important item on the agenda: friends. It was obvious Sherlock was lonely, and his social circle had, for some time now, consisted solely of his brother, his mother and Tallie — none of whom he had voluntarily chosen to live amidst or to interact with daily. He'd lived alone before, but surely there were some people in his life who had cared about him, who still might care about him. People who could show him that he wouldn't be treated so differently, people who would see the same Sherlock they'd known.

There was also the fact that John really liked spending time with him. He was the most interesting person John had ever met, even if his real self still seemed to be mostly buried under the baggage of trauma and depression. He had a sense of humour, just the dark sort John enjoyed when he wasn't the topic, he was clever and unpredictable and well-read. He was simply so… captivating. In all senses of the word. When he was in the room, John had no interest in anyone else. Surely Sherlock returned this feeling even to some extent; didn’t he enjoy John's company at least a little bit? Why would he bother to pretend if he didn't? Sherlock was the most honest person John had
ever met. As much as he tried to build walls to keep other people away, he seemed to hide his heart in plain sight.

John saw so much more than just an invalided detective in a wheelchair, and he was desperate for Sherlock to realise that — to see himself through John's eyes. And what John saw was someone he had realised he didn't want to live without.

The next morning, John felt both relief and trepidation as he walked into the annexe precisely at the time when Tallie was due to leave for her lectures. He didn't want to discuss the events of the last few days with her; anger still simmered over the fact that she had knowingly concealed Sherlock's plan from him even if she thought that was what Mycroft would have wanted her to do. Despite his sympathy for Mycroft, John didn't quite feel like they were standing at the front line together. No, if Mycroft Holmes was anything, he was a deserter. What did that make Tallie, then?

John gave her a tight-lipped smile as they passed each other in the kitchen. Tallie returned it, but hers had gained a knowing, grievously conspiratory tint. It was the sort of smile that distant relatives gave each other at funerals, and John hated it.

"Glad you're back. The last few days have been… tetchy," Tallie told him as she slipped into her shoes. "How was your… is everything alright?"

"No," John answered curtly. "But it will be." He had to believe in that. Somebody had to believe in that. Mycroft had told John that Sherlock was unaware of John overhearing the conversation regarding Switzerland; as far as Sherlock was concerned, John had been serenely aware of the plan from the start.

Tallie put on her coat and went to her car, perhaps sensing that he wasn't in the mood to talk. That deduction was only partly right; John didn't want to talk to her, but there was someone else who he was keen to see.

The quiet, familiar whirr of the chair, followed by the activation of the electric mechanism on the bedroom door alerted John to Sherlock's arrival. The moment he saw John, unadulterated delight flooded his features.

Somehow, it made John breathe easier. "Hi."

"Morning." Sherlock quickly schooled his features down to a more restrained smile.

God, John loved that baritone. "Isobel gone, then?"

"Yes." Sherlock went to the kitchen island, picked an apple from the fruit bowl, carefully lifted it with both hands and took a bite. John hadn't seen him do that before.

"Pity she couldn't stay longer."

"Your politeness is both unwarranted and unnecessary. Her departure is a relief."

"For Mycroft, definitely," John pointed out.
"I meant for her," Sherlock said plainly.

Clearly, mother and sons did not see eye to eye on the severity of Sherlock's problems or whether he wanted to seek all those experimental treatments, but the statement still tugged at John's heartstrings. "She's your mum; of course she wants you to get better."

"She wants me to cease disrupting her life, yes. And Mycroft's."

"You do know he cares about you a lot?" Enough to give you anything you want, anything you ask for, no matter how much it hurts him.

Sherlock kept his eyes locked on the apple, now half-eaten.

The way he was holding it gingerly in his both palms suddenly reminded John of fairy tales, stories of bad apples and poison and death. Don't go there. John decided, then and there, that never again would he keep from challenging Sherlock's self-deprecation, self-hatred or assumptions of nobody caring about him. When he voiced those things, was he not challenging John to contest them? Wasn't there the tiniest bit of doubt there, a seeking of either confirmation or debunking?

"How was Harry?" Sherlock asked.

"Disaster averted. Wasn't as bad as I'd thought. Sobriety is hard." John quickly busied himself emptying the dishwasher; he didn't want Sherlock studying him too closely lest the man picked up on the lies he hated telling.

"Indeed," Sherlock said cryptically. "You're still worried about her, though," he added. "Since I can easily spot the signs that you didn't sleep much last night, and I doubt a flare-up of your PTSD would have suddenly—"

John had noticed that when Sherlock deduced things, a slightly mischievous undertone flirting with triumph always glazed his voice. "Yeah, 'course," he cut in, trying to sound amicable. "Of course, I worry about people I care about," he added pointedly, turning to look at Sherlock. "Any plans for today?"

"You're usually the one to make proposals."

John leaned a hip against the kitchen island, held a hand out for the core of Sherlock now-finished apple. Carefully, he dropped it on John's palm. Reaching his hand out like that made it shake a little with exertion. John turned to toss the core in the bin. "Physio this afternoon?"

Sherlock rolled his eyes. "Unfortunately, yes. The drill sergeant promised to arrive at three."

It was their private joke; John had once compared their shared PT to some of the people who had overseen his basic training at Sandhurst and joked that the place had no one to rival the slavedriver that was Leo Brinley. It had been the first time he'd talked about being in the service with Sherlock. Sherlock had gone a bit wide-eyed and spent several minutes asking John lots of questions, including some about Afghanistan, but quickly retreated when John's answers became more circumspect and evasive. His final question had been whether John had kept any of his uniforms after medical discharge.

"You've got better at a lot of things," John pointed out, grabbing another apple from the fruit bowl and tossing it at Sherlock in a high, slow trajectory.

Sherlock caught it in both hands with a minimal amount of fumbling. "Such progress is very relative to the big picture." He steered closer to the kitchen island and put the apple down on the
"I know, but a nice thing is a nice thing, even if it's a small thing."

"What an asinine argument."

"My proposal is this: Leo will get here soon, but afterwards we could finish that box set of Forensic Files, maybe get some Chinese from that nicer place in town to eat in front of the telly? Could even go pick it up together?"

"Tallie can bring it."

"You always complain that they get something wrong in the order. If you came with me, you could check that everything's as it should be it at the restaurant."

"I do hate having dumplings without the dipping sauce."

John took this statement as a yes to Sherlock accompanying him. "Quick walk outside before your appointment as a bit of a warm-up?" He suggested, and after a nod from Sherlock, he went to get their coats. In the last week, they had begun roaming the wider Court grounds instead of just sticking to the back garden.

John stopped by the door. "In all the photos… before, you always had that long coat with the red buttonholes." He wasn’t sure how to phrase the question. The coats Sherlock wore nowadays tended to be short for the sake of convenience; longer ones would bunch up behind his back, or he had to be lifted from his chair to pull them underneath his bottom.

Sherlock looked thoughtful; he must have instantly realised what John was referring to. "A Belstaff. It was a very good coat but would be highly impractical now."

After John helped him into his short black woollen jacket, Sherlock began buttoning it up. The work was slow, but John refrained from leaning in to help. The buttons were large, and there were only three. Sherlock could manage.

"Have you still got it, or…?"

"It’s gone, now," Sherlock said simply, opened the door and steered out.

Mycroft entered the annexe at seven in the evening, presumably to enforce watching the news on his brother. John quite enjoyed the spectacle; invariably, they would get caught in some argument regarding trivia connected to some news story or politics if Sherlock was in a particularly provocative mood. John couldn't help but laugh at how effortlessly the two brothers pushed each other's buttons, and how these petty arguments between them eventually degenerated to a rather juvenile level. There was an undercurrent of sport there, of good days long past, of childhood and a comfortable familiarity which mostly seemed absent in their other interactions.

Since the first times John had joined the two Holmeses for the evening news, Sherlock had begun engaging a lot more in conversation. Occasionally he still just endured it, even tuned out.
"I do hope this won't be a regular occurrence," Mycroft remarked, surveying the scene of the kitchen island heaving under a sea of takeaway cartons.

"You mean palatable food?" Sherlock quipped back.

"You do know it's not good for you to instigate sudden changes in your diet, especially if those changes jeopardise your intake of fibre and other important nutrients."

"If he's not having a steady intake of anything because he hates what's on offer and refuses to eat, I'd say that jeopardises things even worse," John said.

Mycroft gave him a venomous glare he ignored with a grin.

"You heard John. Don't insult deep-fried duck or you won't be allowed any," Sherlock snarked at his brother. "You'd probably have snuck courgettes into my tea to achieve some requisite five veg a day if John wasn't here to interfere with such insanity. If fibre is so damned important, then feel free to go apply a steady intake of it up your—"

John shook his head and, in passing, shoved a fortune cookie into Sherlock's mouth to keep the peace.

Sherlock let the cookie drop onto his lap, then carefully picked it up and clumsily cracked it in half. "A big nose will habitually insert itself into your life", he pretended to read. He raised a droll brow at Mycroft. "Now who could that be?"

Mycroft looked like he'd sucked on a lemon and dropped it on his foot.

John gave Mycroft a pair of chopsticks he reluctantly accepted; two pairs had been delivered with their meal. Sherlock wouldn't use his so John would give him a fork. He had considered the matter and decided that the day would come, anyway, when Sherlock would have to face the fact that other people around him might be using different utensils. Best start out easy right here at home.

Mycroft was staring at the chopsticks he had just cracked apart, and the same question which John had wondered about must have now occurred to him: would Sherlock allow the presence of his brother when eating? It was still a rarity, and during all of the time John had lived at Musgrave Court, Sherlock had never agreed on a full meal with Mycroft. The only things he'd eaten in the man's presence were things he could manage relatively well without help.

This is what John should have taken into account at Frimley: it had been the attention at tea that had nearly wrecked the whole day for Sherlock. He should have realised it and planned things better to prevent putting Sherlock on the spot with what seemed to be among the things he most hated about his life now: other people seeing him struggle with fulfilling even his most basic needs.

The annoyance had drained from Mycroft Holmes. Instead, he was now looking at his brother with hope and hesitation.

Sherlock's features mirrored that apprehension.

Mycroft cleared his throat. "Well, since I'm here and it appears that Doctor Watson has ordered enough food to feed an entire regiment, I might as well… If that's alright?"

*Say yes, say yes…* John was holding his breath.

"Suit yourself," Sherlock said. "As you said, there's plenty."
The estate that has served as inspiration for Musgrave Court is Dorney Court, one of England's finest Tudor houses. Follies are as explained: silly non-residential buildings designed to be decorative.

Here is a folly from Stourhead, a very fine National Trust destination in the south of England, as photographed by VisitWiltshire:
There was a phone vibrating on the kitchen island, and John recognised it as Sherlock's. It was time for his afternoon routines with Tallie, so he must have left it behind. He never locked it; John suspected it was for safety reasons connected to his lacking dexterity.

He never remembered anyone calling Sherlock but now, the black iPhone was undeniably ringing, and the caller was recognised by the address book. John was somewhat surprised to see it belonged to a female by the name of Molly Hooper.

On a whim, he answered with a hello.

"Sherlock?" asked the voice, hesitant from surprise, at the other end of the line.

"No, I'm afraid he's occupied. This is John Watson answering his phone."

"John Watson?"

"Yeah. I'm Sherlock's…" He trailed out. Since his friend guarded his privacy so fiercely, John didn't want to disclose his role before he knew more. "You're… Molly?"

"Yes. I used to work with Sherlock."

"I thought he worked alone."

"Yes, well, I never saw anyone with him," she explained a bit fussily. "He was alone, well, not alone but with the police, and we often worked on the same cases." She seemed nervous, and not just because she was speaking to someone she hadn't expected.

"Look, Molly, it's clear he knew you since your number's programmed into his phone, but he's never talked about—"

"I'm a forensic pathologist at Barts," she blurted out as though it explained everything. "Sherlock sometimes used our labs — he was allowed after calling on some favour he'd done for the Dean of the medical college — and I consulted on lots of cases he worked on with Lestrade." Molly’s voice carried a bit of wistfulness. “Has Sherlock talked about him at least; Greg Lestrade?"

"No, he hasn’t." Sherlock had never even mentioned anyone by the name Lestrade, just like he'd never spoken of any Molly. John was now holding the phone with both hands, keen to the point of antsy to learn more.

"No, I suppose Sherlock wouldn't... It’s just that I wanted…” Molly sounded even more flustered, "It's been a while since I last tried to talk to him. He wouldn't accept visitors at the hospital or when he was in rehab, and he never answers his phone, and his email just gives an error that his inbox is full. I thought he just didn't want to talk about… I was stunned when someone answered."

"So, what can I do for you, Molly?" John asked, not quite sure how to respond to her awkward
outburst. She must be a consultant-grade, subspecialty-trained pathologist to work with the Met regularly, but she sounded much younger than she could be. John wondered what she looked like.

"I just want to know if he's alright. I can't stop thinking about him — oh, I don 't mean like that," she breathed out. "I haven't heard from him after I tried to go see him at the hospital and that was a year ago. I don't have a number for his brother, and I think Sherlock kind of hates him and probably wouldn't want me speaking with him. Why are you answering his phone?"

"I work for the family," John replied, having had time during her rambling explanation to work out what to say. "Sherlock needs help with some stuff every day, and that's what I'm here for. I guess I'm his assistant."

"Oh. Is he… is he still in a wheelchair?"

"Yeah. That's not going to change."

"But he was so… Must be terrible." Molly sounded genuinely shocked. "Maybe that's why he doesn't want to see anyone. I tried, but you can only actually help someone who wants to be helped," she concluded dejectedly.

"Yeah, he's really not keen on being helped," John confirmed, chuckling drearily.

He felt sorry for this woman who clearly cared about Sherlock. The fact that finding out that Sherlock still needed a wheelchair still upset her could signal that they'd actually been quite close before, but John found that hard to believe since Sherlock had never mentioned her. Maybe they had been friends, and pushing her away was simply a part of Sherlock's modus operandi when it came to his injury: out of sight, out of mind? Can't have been a girlfriend, John reasoned. 'Not my area' and all that.

"Look, I can't really tell you much about Sherlock's injury; I don't know how much he'd want me to say. If he hasn't answered your calls…” John didn't want to break Molly Hooper's heart more than it had already been broken, but his duty was to Sherlock, and he didn't want to be like Mycroft in having no regard for the man's privacy. "I promise I will tell him you rang," John promised.

"Please do. We all miss him; it's so different with the Met without him there. I know Lestrade hasn't been able to reach him, and neither he nor I really understand why he'd abandon all of his work just like that. His brother said at the hospital that it was a spinal injury and no brain injury. So his mind still works, doesn't it?"

"Yes," John replied plainly, "His brain works perfectly well." When its gears aren't being jammed by depression.

"Then why?"

"I don't know, just like I don't know why Sherlock does or doesn't do any other things most of the time. Listen, maybe… What if Sherlock might be willing to talk to this Lestrade guy? Has he tried to get in touch lately?"

"I don't know. I could ask. I'm expecting him over later to have a look at some case-related stuff."

John wondered if he was grasping at straws, but this sudden connection to the Sherlock of before felt important. It felt like the opening gambit he'd been waiting for. "Maybe I could sound things out with Sherlock once I know more about his work."

"That'd be great!"
"Have you got this Lestrade guy's number?"

Molly was apologetic. "I can't really give it to anyone; you'll have to go through the switchboard."

"Alright. Sherlock might have it on this phone."

Just as he was about to ring off, she spoke up again. "John?"

He hummed.

"Sherlock… Is he… Is he alright?"

"It's complicated. I don't think I should say more than that."

"Yes, of course, of course not. Thank you, John."

*For what? Disappointing you? *"It's fine."

John managed to thumb through the address book just before Sherlock emerged from the bedroom. There was no Lestrade programmed into it, nor was there anyone called Greg. The closest John could find was a "Graham".

Switchboard it was, then. But first, John had a more pressing issue to explore when it came to the *Sherlock of before.*

"Ah, John. Sophie told me you would be joining us for dinner tonight."

Mycroft was standing by a large window in the drawing room, a glass of whisky in hand. "Aperitif?"

John waved the offer off. "No, thanks. Sophie promised bangers and mash tonight, so how could I resist?"

"Very… quaint of her," Mycroft replied. "But yes, the local butcher does an excellent deer and duck sausage with hints of rosemary, and Sophie does wonders with Maris Pipers when it comes to mash. Personally, I prefer them to King Edwards."

John wasn't very much a fan of royalty, didn't know what a Maris Piper was, nor did he care.

As if on cue, Sophie walked in carrying a tray and the two men took their seats. Even on an ordinary Tuesday evening, Musgrave Hall apparently couldn't function without pristinely white linen napkins.

"Why hasn't Sherlock returned to work?" John asked after they had indulged on possibly too many tiny bruschetta slices with fresh heirloom tomatoes and large capers on top.

Mycroft frowned. "The legwork required is no longer possible. He would be a sitting target for the unsavoury types who commit the sorts of crimes he'd be interested in."

"But he could still do it, couldn't he? The brainwork part?"

Mycroft's brows rose. "Sherlock and that Detective Inspector he worked with would likely be much
better at answering that question. I assumed that, if it were still possible, Sherlock would have made it happen. Or, if he still wanted to do it, he would have made an effort."

"What if he just doesn't see the possibility? He's a pretty all-or-nothing person, you said so yourself: he'll always think the glass is almost empty."

"As I said, I am not familiar enough with what it was he actually did in that self-insert role of his with the police."

"Well, even if he won't go back to that he's still clever, and Tallie said he studied chemistry. There must be plenty of things he could be doing," John argued, "He's still got that… that… deduction thing."

"'Deduction thing'?" Mycroft asked snidely, leaning back against his chair. "John. You must already know as well as I do that Sherlock could certainly have employed his sizable intellect to inventing himself a dozen new professions befitting his current state. But being able to do is hardly the same as having the motivation."

"Yeah, at some point he clearly gave up on a lot of stuff, and if others did, too, then that just confirmed his suspicions. The depression has been eating away at that, which is why he can't just be expected to work everything out by himself."

The conversation lulled while Sophie served their mains. John almost asked Mycroft why he didn't invite Tallie and Sophie to dine with them — why the older Holmes insisted on such an irritably upstairs-downstairs way of running things. Then again, maybe Sophie would have declined out of the same sense of what was appropriate. Stuffy bloody upper classes, John cursed inwardly and bit into his sausage. It was splendid; regardless of whatever annoying traits Mycroft Holmes had, the man certainly made sure the Court served good food.

"I don't think a claret would be wasted on this," Mycroft told Sophie. "Perhaps something modest, something not too oak-heavy. Chateau Pontensac, if you will, Sophie."

He then turned his head back to look at John. "You will like it. It's an exquisite, spry Bordeaux. Regrettably, Sherlock is not keen on wine. He is as picky in his beverages as he is with food."

John flashed an unenthusiastic smile. "I've been trying to talk Sherlock into coming to dinner here. Can't say he's warming up to the idea, but I think Sophie could help persuade him with the right menu."

Something light up in Mycroft's expression. "That would be wonderful."

John mopped up some gravy with a piece of bread. "Does Sherlock still have his old flat? I think you mentioned Baker Street."

Mycroft took a sip of water to rinse down a mouthful of chives-flavoured mash. "He never owned it, but as far as I know it's not been leased to anyone else since; the landlady has not requested that it be emptied. She was very accommodating, but it simply wouldn't have been safe or practical for Sherlock to reside there alone — not even if significant alterations such as renovations to the bathroom and instalment of a wheelchair lift had been executed."

"Did he like living there? Is it a nice place?"

"It is hard to gauge Sherlock's enjoyment of practical things. He never made much of an effort to keep it in any humanly habitable state, if that means anything. Active substance users are not big on hoovering or putting things back where they belong."
The undemonstrative manner in which Mycroft mentioned the drug use was startling. John knew about the drug-seeking behaviour after the accident, but it was a whole different thing to consider Sherlock's habits before the accident. "He used… what?"

Mycroft drew in a breath, looking dispirited. "Heroin and cocaine in various ratios. When he was working, he preferred stimulants for, I quote, 'enhancing thoughts processes'. Heroin he used to disengage from the world. When funds were depleted, he used anything he could afford."

The usual discomfort of talking about Sherlock's health when he wasn't present was setting in, so John wanted to steer the conversation back to the flat. "So, the flat is in the state he last left it in?"

"The words used by the Detective Inspector he worked with to describe the average state of the place were, I quote, 'scuzz dump'. A more polite person might have called it bohemian and eclectic."

'Bohemian and eclectic' didn't sound anything like the exhibition of light and sleek Scandinavian design that characterised Sherlock's current living space. "So, he wasn't the one to design the annexe, was he?"

"Certainly not. The project was planned and overseen by a Swiss interior designer specialising in disability."

"I know his clothes were brought here from the flat, but what about the rest of his stuff? Why not bring it all here?"

"Sherlock never requested it. In fact, when I asked, he told me to 'throw in a match and be done with it'. Before you protest: while I do recognise that was his depression speaking, what was I to do? I could not import all his knick-knacks here against his wishes, could I? He still wants no reminder of who he used to be. Furnishing this into a mausoleum of a non-tetraplegic Sherlock would serve no purpose."

So, instead, he gets hermetically sealed inside an Ikea showroom. Bloody hell, John thought. "Can I go see the flat?"

"Why ever would you want to do that?"

"Curiosity? I want to get to know him, and he's not going to tell me about non-tetraplegic Sherlock, is he?"

"Very well. I can't see the harm. I will give you the key and provide transport; the precise address is two hundred and twenty-one B Baker Street."

After he was dropped off by Anthea next to a sandwich shop called Speedy's, John was delighted to discover that only a few steps to the left a black door sported the number 221. The location was impressive — in central London with excellent public transport nearby, lots of shops and restaurants, but the area still had a residential feel, and there were parks close by for a nice stroll.

John fitted the key in the lock of the satisfyingly heavy door with an ornate knocker, and stepped into the narrow foyer. The door to flat A, which was at ground level, was closed, and John could hear a radio or the telly inside. He took his time negotiating the two sets of stairs up but finally, he stood in front of the door of flat B.
It was unlocked. Inside, dust danced in the sunlight streaming in from between heavy, old curtains and the air was stale. John closed the door after himself, the hinges creaking as though it had been slammed a few times too many.

He barely got two steps forward from the door, when a door opened and closed downstairs, and light, cautious footsteps began sounding on the stairs.

Suddenly, the door slammed open, and a seventy-something woman appeared, holding a gun pointed at John.

"Explain yourself!" she demanded. Despite her twee size, mint green cardigan and floral skirt, she looked fierce. *Landlady?*

John raised his hands in surrender. "Mycroft Holmes gave me the keys; I'm Sherlock's… assistant," he finally settled on.

The names seemed to do the trick: the muzzle was lowered, and a bright hope lit on the woman's features. "Sherlock?! Is he coming home?"

"No, I'm afraid not… yet," John added quickly, "But I'm here to see if there's anything left behind that he might want, something that could be, I don't know, useful."

"I've just been borrowing this," the woman said, walking over to the mantlepiece and placing the revolver there. "There's all sorts in these parts now that Sherlock's been gone. Some unsavoury types breaking in, trying to find his, well..." She grimaced.

"His, well' what?" John wondered, but before he could give words to the question, she continued.

"He wasn't my first smackhead, nor was he the hardest to manage," she explained nonchalantly. "I'm Mrs Hudson."

She offered her dainty hand for shaking. As seemed to be the theme, John was surprised by her strength when she gripped his hand and gave him a long, thorough once-over before letting go.

"John Watson," he offered, then cleared his throat. "Doctor John Watson."

"Is that so? Tea?" Mrs Hudson asked, already on her way to the kitchen. "Mind you, I'm not his housekeeper, regardless of what he's told you. That boy is the worst at keeping things in order, but he's a good one so never you mind the mess. Heart of gold he's got, I tell you, if he only used that mind of his to sort himself out."

John thought that the statement made a lot of sense as he took in the sight of the kitchen. Likely courtesy of Mrs Hudson, no dirty dishes inhabited the sink, but there were the randomest of more or less morbid knick-knacks scattered everywhere. What looked like rather professional chemistry equipment was spread out on the small kitchen table, accompanied by a microscope and a selection of scattered slides. Piles of books and papers were placed on a side table and on the floor next to a bookcase.

Mrs Hudson dug out a kettle, blew the dust off of it and went to work preparing tea with the practised movements of someone who'd performed this duty many times in this very kitchen. "Assistant, you said?" She called out when John wandered through the kitchen into a short corridor which lead into a bedroom.

"He never let me tidy up in there," Mrs Hudson lamented just as John had stopped to hover at the bedroom threshold. "As though I didn't know what he was up to. Oh, the state of him sometimes
when the work had dried up."

Humming in acknowledgement, John walked to the bedroom window and pushed a set of dusty, heavy old drapes to the side. Through the water-streaked glass, sunlight now poured in, revealing a bed with wrinkled, twisted sheets and the same sort of clutter that was spread all over the sitting room and kitchen. Books and scientific journals were strewn all over the bedding. *How could anyone fit in there to sleep?*

The bedroom, in particular, had the feel of a mausoleum — dust everywhere, a heaviness of abandonment in the air. On the other hand, it was also akin to a shrine in that no one had cleared away the signs of life of one Sherlock Holmes. It was as though he'd only taken a long trip, expected to return at any minute to flounce onto the sofa and demand tea.

The most alarming thing in the room was the assortment of syringes sticking out of a teacup on the bedside cabinet. There was a faint residue of some white powder on its wooden surface, and John's chest ached.

A click from the kitchen signalled that the water was boiled. It was ignored by Mrs Hudson who now stood by the door, watching John with a stricken expression. "I didn’t have the heart to come up here much after his accident. He didn’t have a lot going for him. The detective work was all he had. But that was before. Now… where is he, John? With that brother of his?"

"Yeah. There's a family country pile in High Wycombe."

"Never liked that brother of his much. A bit of a reptile, if you ask me. Always trying to meddle; he meant well, but you know the type — better at ordering than negotiating."

John nodded. He picked up a book left from the bed: 'Manual of Forensic Taphonomy' by Pokines and Symes. John liked to think he had a strong stomach after years as a physician, but the pictures in the book made his guts churn a bit. He dropped it back on the pillow.

Mrs Hudson pivoted on her foot and strode back to the kitchen. "Tea's nearly made, and I could rummage around downstairs for a Wagon Wheel, I think. You take your time, see if there's anything you want to take back to him."

After deciding there was nothing more that he wanted to examine in the bedroom, John made his way upstairs, feeling the pressure to be quick about looking around. There was a second bedroom there and a small toilet, no bathroom. The closet was full of strange outfits ranging from a policeman to a vicar, and there were even more papers and books scattered about in complete disarray.

That part of the flat wouldn't be very practical for Sherlock as he was now, but John couldn't help wondering if a lift in the main staircase, a ramp up to the front door and some rearranging of things downstairs in the flat couldn't make it habitable even for someone in a wheelchair. The renovations wouldn't be cheap, but that would hardly a problem for the Holmeses. He made a mental note to take the subject up with Mycroft.

When he returned downstairs, Mrs Hudson had found more than just a packet of biscuits: there was what looked like half a quiche on the table and even scones with clotted cream and jam with a hand-written label.

"Sit, sit," she prompted. "You must tell me how he's doing. I've not heard a peep since that brother came over three months after his accident to collect the rest of his clothes."
"Did you see Sherlock in the hospital?"

She went a bit pale. "Yes, yes, I did. Sherlock had put me down as his emergency contact, you see, but that brother… He had my name removed. Said Sherlock didn't want any visitors, not until he was better."

"This is a fantastic flat," John praised, purposely steering the conversation to less emotional ground — the elderly woman was looking a bit wobbly-lipped. "Detective business must have been booming if he could afford such a place in central London."

Mrs Hudson spread a handsome amount of jam on top of her clotted cream-covered scone, her eyes shining as she set the scone down to tap her nose. "Sherlock and I had a deal. He helped me with something; I gave him a good rate on the rent." Her expression then turned conspiratorial; "My husband was about to be executed in Florida. It was a big mess. Sherlock made sure everything went well."

"Saved him, you mean? From getting the death penalty?" John asked after finishing spreading jam on his scone halves.

"Oh no, dear. He ensured it."

John's lips gathered into a silent O, after which he sipped his tea. "Mycroft said that you would have allowed this place to be renovated so that it could be alright for a wheelchair?"

"Of course," Mrs Hudson said, her tone ever so slightly offended. "Whatever was needed, we could have done. But he just disappeared. Sherlock, I mean."

John let his gaze sweep around the sitting room adjoined to the kitchen. He suddenly realised that the heaviness he felt was from the fact that this wasn't just a place left behind — it was as though the very house was waiting for Sherlock to return, to march in and occupy the place which now practically screamed his absence.

"How is he, John?" Mrs Hudson asked quietly.

With anyone else, John would have hesitated to divulge anything, but something about the way the older woman spoke about Sherlock told of an exceptional connection between them. She spoke about him like a son, not a tenant, and something about Mrs Hudson put John very much at ease. Maybe Sherlock had felt the same.

"I don't know how to manage a quick explanation. He's… well, stable, he's been that for some time, but he doesn't do much. Doesn't want to do much. As I said, he lives in High Wycombe with his brother."

"But how could he do anything, if he's not at home? Sherlock loves London, really does, knows all the streets practically by heart. He used to come and go at all hours of the days — always restless, always busy when he wasn't having one of his episodes. You must know about those if you spend a lot of time with him."

John did know. Sherlock's latest episode had probably started after the accident, and it continued still.

"Oh, I do hope he's not using," Mrs Hudson fretted. "That's one thing his brother wouldn't tolerate one bit."

"No, he's clean." John refrained from saying that Sherlock hardly had the dexterity to shoot up
whatever it was that he'd been using before. "He's just having a hard time… adjusting."

"Oh, I don't doubt that. I've just got a hip, but it's a constant reminder that we all get old and anything could happen."

The way she said this didn't make it sound belittling at all. John could tell the landlady had been through a lot and kept her head on straight.

"He was always so emotional compared to that brother and wore it all on his sleeve: unsolved case, shoot the wall! Unmade breakfast, karate the fridge. An unanswered question, a problem he couldn't solve… Stab things, then ignore them. I always hoped he'd find someone who'd motivate him to look after himself a bit better," she mused, cutting John a bit of the quiche without asking, but he didn't protest. "Always alone, that one. And living with that brother..." She shook her head, "...hardly Sherlock's first choice, is it?" The question was rhetorical.

"Listen, um…" John started, firmly stomping down the hesitation which attempted to take over and the thought of Mycroft Holmes' potential disapproval, "…Maybe you could come with me to visit him? I'm sure we can arrange transport back to London later."

He expected the landlady to decline based on such a spur-of-the-moment idea, assumed that someone like her would have routines, things to do they wouldn't want to interrupt at a moment's notice. But, as he should have probably deduced from the revolver and the confident talk of drug use and… everything else, really, Mrs Hudson was not one to fit any stereotypes of old ladies.

"Oh, John— it was John, wasn't it? — that'd be so wonderful! Of course, I'll come; oh dear, I should have something to bring him, he used to love my lemon drizzle cake, oh heavens me, do I even have any biscuits?"

"Don't worry about it," John laughed, "I'm sure the housekeeper, Sophie, has plenty."

"Are you sure Mycroft Holmes won't object?"

"Why would he object? All he wants is for Sherlock to start putting his life back together." John could come up with various reasons why Mycroft might mind a surprise visitor, but he didn't care a whit right now. "I'll deal with Mycroft."

John would send a text from the car and listen to no objections. He'd been hired by the man himself to provide care and companionship, wasn't he? And here was someone who clearly cared for Sherlock a great deal. What could be the harm when the benefits could be so great?

"I'll just see that he's ready for a visit," John told Mrs Hudson who was still wrapped up in her burgundy peacoat as they stood in front of the door connecting the main house to the annexe.

She nodded, no nervousness evident on her features. She looked determined, her back straight. On the cab ride to Musgrave Court, she had told John stories about Sherlock, about the way he'd been before. The picture she painted was almost the polar opposite of the man John had met months ago: generous, caring, quicksilver in temper but boundless in his gleeful enthusiasm for work.

There were undercurrents of what John had seen, such as what sounded like depression when work was scarce; it was hard to tell whether the drugs had been an attempt at self-medication or something else. The quick, sharp wit, exceptional intelligence and a morbid sense of humour Sherlock had in her stories were familiar, but nowadays only seemed to be presented in very small
"His idea of fun was a serial killer on the loose. It was hardly decent, but I liked seeing him happy. Sherlock never cared much for decent, anyway," she tutted fondly just as they had driven in through the main gates into the park surrounding Musgrave Court.

Now, she stood waiting in the open doorway as John walked into the kitchen, calling out Sherlock's name. There was classical music playing quietly in the sitting room, and soon Sherlock appeared at the junction between it and the kitchen, his tablet firmly clipped into its wheelchair attachment. He was wearing one of his dress shirts — a very form-fitting, aubergine one — and black trousers, and the moment the wheelchair stopped moving his eyes shifted back to the tablet screen. "I thought your London outing would take longer."

John hadn't told him where he was going, not wanting to get ahead of himself if his visit to Baker Street yielded little in terms of useful stuff in helping Sherlock. "I found what I went looking for faster than I thought," he said with a smirk.

Sherlock steered himself to the waste-paper basket by the fridge and dropped a rolled-up tissue into it.

"There's someone to see you," John told him, keeping his tone reserved despite the excitement he felt.

Sherlock looked up at him, followed John's line of sight to the door, and then… stared. And stared, eyes wide.

Thankfully, Mrs Hudson, who had joined John at the doorway to the sitting room, was having no such trouble.

"Oh, Sherlock!" Without hesitation, she hurried to the wheelchair with her arms outstretched; upon reaching him, she wrapped them tightly around Sherlock's neck.

John was delighted and surprised when Sherlock hastily recovered from the shock and wrapped his own around the petite woman's waist. John couldn't help grinning like a madman as he stood at parade rest at the door, mighty pleased with himself. Instead of angry or dismissive, Sherlock looked positively amazed at the appearance of who must have been a friend under the guise of a landlady.

They pulled back from their embrace, and Mrs Hudson gave Sherlock a thorough appraisal; John noted how she refrained from commenting out loud. The way she remembered the man must have been the way he looked in all those newspaper articles; the comparison couldn't have been favourable.

"The place is not the same without you," she said firmly, "I have been considering about going back to Florida, but I couldn't quite bring myself to do it because I didn't know if… if you were coming back."

Sherlock was now grinning, but the edges of his mouth were tight with something concealed behind that expression. "Mrs Hudson leave Baker Street? England would fall!"

Her eyes shifted past him across the kitchen and the sitting room to a large window. "What a lovely view you've got. It's so calm and peaceful here," she complimented.

Sherlock rolled his eyes. "Hateful, isn't it?" he pronounced the words through clenched teeth, deep disapproval evident.
"I'll give you two some privacy," John said.

So focused was Sherlock on the sight of Mrs Hudson that he didn't even glance at John but simply flapped his hand distractedly and dismissively towards him.

John got as far as the main corridor when his mobile rang. **Mycroft**.

"Good afternoon, John. I see the visitor has arrived."

He'd texted the older Holmes from the cab, simply stating that Sherlock had a guest who needed transport back to London later that evening. John had only received the word **affirmative** as a reply, which didn't put him at ease at all. He knew enough about the older Holmes to have a bloody good guess that there would be words later.

"Yeah, about… Hm… Let's say, twelve months late." John didn't attempt to soften the bite in his tone.

"I can't see what benefit there would have been to parade his proprietress around just when he was attempting to start his recovery."

"Clearly, they're friends."

"Sherlock doesn't have 'friends'," Mycroft announced. "Enemies, yes, people he knows, certainly, but friends… neither of us has really gone in for that sort of thing. Perhaps Sherlock, in his infinite naivete, might have once been tempted by the idea, but only until we met other children."

Mycroft's tone was so snide that John was gritting his teeth. "So, with everything else you walked all over him but with this — with pushing away everyone who was a part of his life before the accident — you chose to respect his wishes, even if it should have been obvious that letting him cut all ties — to keep away anyone who could have supported him — was not such a grand fucking idea?"

"I have done my utmost best to provide him with the care he needs," Mycroft said.

A lesser man would have been quivering in their boots from his tone but not John. Not now. This was too important, and he wasn't afraid of Mycroft Holmes. "No, he's really not a people person, but maybe that makes the people who do like him all the more important."

There was a sigh from the other end of the line. "I simply wished to spare him from further mortification. That mousy forensic pathologist attempted to visit him in the hospital once and left in tears because of the way he treated her. Should I have exposed more people to that? I think not."

"That was a year ago! Things have changed."

"No, they really have not."

"And you think that's a reason to give up, hm?" John slammed closed the door to his bedroom.

"As long as he is still with us, I cannot give up caring about him and looking after him. Sherlock is the one who has abandoned hope as an exercise in futility."

"Which is why I think we have to have enough of it for him and to pick our battles."

"Pray tell, which front have you then decided we should be on, now?"

"It's probably premature to think about whether he could live at Baker Street."
"Very astute." Mycroft's tone dripped with sarcasm.

"But I think we should be looking at how he could go back to work."

"I'm sure Sherlock has considered all of the options. The fact that he's made no initiatives towards returning to that invented job of his, I assumed he concluded that the plan was not feasible."

"We agreed that he's still got it, that he's as smart as ever. I'm sure lots of things can be adapted."

"I believe Sherlock particularly enjoyed a very hands-on approach. I doubt the police would look favourably on their consulting detective contaminating a murder scene with his wheelchair. Why would they make concessions for someone who is not even an official part of the Metropolitan police?"

"That's for him and whoever he worked with before to decide, not us. I don't think he's explored all the options. Did he talk to them after rehab?"

"As I've explained, his stay at an inpatient rehabilitation unit yielded little progress in any areas of his life. While I would not describe him as very shallow or vain, the embarrassment of his state and the wheelchair proved to be quite the repellents for public appearances and socialising with people who knew him in his prior state."

"I know, but it's high bloody time we challenged that. If he never goes anywhere, how will he get used to people's attention?"

"I urge you to exercise caution. May I remind you what happened after you sought to desensitise him to those things by taking him to Macdonald Frimley Hall?"

"We've done other stuff, since, and I didn't know enough about his situation to plan that thing properly," John freely admitted. If he was going to get Mycroft Holmes to see how the man should change tack, John suspected he would have to show a good example in learning from one's own mistakes. "We went to Tesco, and it was fine."

There was a superior huff from the other end. "Buying milk is hardly the same as parading around in a wheelchair at a crime scene filled with the Metropolitan police's finest."

"Which is why we have to start slow and easy. We just need something to whet his appetite." John recalled how Mrs Hudson had described Sherlock's child-at-Christmas like excitement over a case of serial suicides in London. It had been right before his accident and broken a long dry spell in work.

"Whet his appetite for what?"

"Murder," John announced gleefully.

Chapter End Notes

Yup, the book by Pokines and Symes is real. Taphonomy is the study of how organisms decay and become fossilized. The forensic branch deals with the decay of human (and in some cases animal) remains.
J. Bailllier thanks 7PercentSolution for a vital scone etiquette consultation.
"Metropolitan Police, how may I direct your inquiry?"

"Morning. Um, I'm looking to speak to an officer, please. The name 's—" John checked the notecard on which he'd scribbled. "Gregory Lestrade. Detective Inspector."

"Do you have the officer's shoulder or warrant number and the unit?"

"No number, but he's with SCD1, leads Murder Investigation Team Eight." John sent a silent thanks to Mycroft, who had told him that such information would be necessary to ensure the switchboard operator’s willingness to put him through.

"Is this about a specific investigation? Do you have a reference number or the location of the incident?"

"No, this is… This is a personal matter." John gritted his teeth, wondering if this would discourage the dispatcher.

There was a pause, then: "Very well. Please hold."

John rapped his fingertips on the small desk in the corner of his bedroom as he waited. It was lunchtime, and his stomach was churning with hunger, but he'd wanted to do this first.

To his disappointment, it was the dispatcher who returned instead of getting connected further. "I'm afraid DI Lestrade is currently unavailable. Is there a message I could convey?"

"Yeah. Tell him it's about Sherlock Holmes."

It took only six minutes for John's phone to ring after he'd hung up. Hastily swallowing down the bite of roast beef sandwich Sophie had served him in the drawing room, he answered the call which was coming from a withheld number.

"Hello?"

"Who is this?" The male voice at the other end sounded hurried and sceptical.

"John Watson. I work with the Holmes family. I'm calling about Sherlock."
There were some footsteps, a click and some rustling at the other end, which made John suspect his conversation partner had closed a door and sat down. "God, it's not— He's not dead, is he?"

John swallowed. "No, no, he's, he's fine. That's the reason I'm calling." John glanced around even though no one was within earshot, and he trusted that Sophie wouldn't tell Sherlock who he was talking to.

"John Watson, was it? And you work with him? Where is he?" The DI demanded insistently, and John could now pick up on a slight Estuary accent.

"I don't know how much you know about… everything." John inhaled. Certainly, he wouldn’t be sharing everything, but he tried to reassure himself that giving a cursory summary of Sherlock's situation should be fine. "I recently spoke to Molly Hooper, and she said you have both tried to contact him. I know Sherlock's not been keen on visitors or being in touch with old friends but was wondering if I could get your help in changing that."

"It's been a bloody year; I thought he was gone for good! I was the first to reach him when it happened, you know," the DI explained, "We were in Whitechapel; he was chasing a suspect when he got hit. I rode with him in the ambulance to Royal London — thank fuck it was so close, he was in so much pain; except for, well, he couldn't feel—" the DI trailed out, clearing his throat hesitantly.

John thoughts went to Sherlock's splenectomy scar, the broken ribs and the arm fracture the medical records delivered by Mycroft had detailed. Even if the spinal injury had spared Sherlock some pain, he would undoubtedly have been in agonising pain from his other injuries before the emergency services arrived. John's heart ached thinking about how terrified Sherlock must've been.

The DI's chair creaked. "It was really touch-and-go, and they took him straight in for surgery. I know what happened, I was there, but he wouldn't see me after they moved him out of intensive care. I know he went to rehab, but then… nothing. Not a word." The DI's rapid-fire explanation had a haunted undertone.

"It's been a hard year on him," John offered circumspectly. "He should be the one to fill you in," he added, painfully aware once again how he was discussing Sherlock's personal matters behind his back. Divulging medical details would be the cherry on top if Sherlock decided to get angry about it afterwards.

Just bite the bullet, Watson. He's not going to do this on his own, is he? "It's been difficult for him, and it gets harder and harder to get back on track the more time passes from the accident."

"Yeah, I'll bet." The DI blew out a breath for emphasis. "So, what can I do for you, John? Or for him, as it happens?"

"A lot, I think, but first I need to know more about what it was that he used to do for the Met."

"You got it." Lestrade then gave a chortle. "You want to know about that mad berk? I'll tell you — though you won't probably even believe most of it. I know I wouldn't if I hadn't been there and seen it all for myself."
"Thought I'd take the car and pop down to London today," John said nonchalantly a week later, talking more to his tea than Sherlock before taking a careful sip. It was still too hot to drink, so he set the mug down, reaching for his toast instead as he snuck a glance at Sherlock. "Care to join?"

Sherlock’s eyes narrowed slightly as he looked up from the contents of the folder spread before him. For the last few days, he’d been huddled over a stack of cold case files that had been couriered from the Met shortly after John's conversation with the Detective Inspector. The first two days after the box arrived, Sherlock had merely glared at it each time he passed the kitchen table as though it had personally offended him, but curiosity must have won out in the end. John had come in the next morning to find one of the yellow folders it had contained placed on the table with SOLVED scrawled in very shaky handwriting over two post-its. The next day the pile had grown to four solved cases, then ten. John leant on his elbows to pick up his tea again and stretched to peek inside the box; it looked like only a handful of folders remained unsolved.

"London. Why?"

"I have some errands to run, thought we could maybe sightsee a bit as well. I rarely ever go, which is practically a crime. Could use a navigator; I have it on good authority that you could beat any map software."

"What authority?"

John ignored the question. "You done with those? Want to call the DI who sent them and tell him?" He suggested half-heartedly, not really expecting a yes.

"I've dictated notes; the printouts can be included when I courier those back. It's just a favour to an old…"

"Friend?" John suggested. "There's probably plenty more where those came from."

Sherlock gave him a discouragingly icy glare and changed the subject: "Did you say sightsee?"

The words were dripping with apparent disdain.

John just smiled sunnily back, brushing the crumbs off of his hands as he stood. "Yeah. I've never lived in central London, only went there with Mum and on school trips, and I did most of my postgrad training in rural hospitals."

"Where did you go to medical school?"

"Leeds."

"Ah." It was hard to read from Sherlock's tone how unimpressed he was.

*Probably at least a bit, John thought. Cambridge and posh boarding schools and all.*

"Someone really does need to come along to spare you from falling into London's worst tourist traps, then," Sherlock then said.

"Thank god I know someone. I'll go start the car."

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Sherlock kept up his show of wary disdain once they were settled in the car, but John wasn’t deterred. The sun was shining, lots of birds were fluttering into flight from roadside bushes and leaves were sprouting on trees; it was a perfect spring day. John cracked the car window open, inhaling deeply and trying to ground himself in the moment firmly.

As they neared the outskirts of London, Sherlock seemed to perk up. He pointed out various landmarks and interjected bits of fascinating history; it was evident that he had collected a vast amount of knowledge about the city.

After parking the van in a lot near the British Museum, they spent the morning wandering the streets, occasionally stopping to peer through a shop window, their movements unhurried. Out of the van, Sherlock was quieter, but it was the quiet of a man learning the rhythm of a beloved city again as one would reacquaint with an old friend. They stopped for lunch at a fish and chips shop, licking the salt off their fingers as they listened to the bells of a nearby church toll the noon hour. Hesitantly at first, Sherlock recounted the story of a murderer he had once caught; his voice rising in excitement as the details became more and more grisly. The man had been sneaking bits of his victims into the crypt of the Saint Marylebone Church. They made a short detour past the church, and John used the excuse of needing the loo to briefly disappear from sight into the summer café in the crypt to fire off a very important text message. A confirmation reply came instantly, eliciting a thrill of nervous energy in John's gut.

"That case sounded so exciting," he commented after re-joining Sherlock on the pavement. Taking the lead, he adjusted their route towards their now-confirmed destination. "How’d you catch the killer?" he asked, turning his head to glance at Sherlock to make sure he was following.

"It was quite pedestrian, really. The bits found at the crypt featured very unusual pollen which didn't match any of the trees in the neighbourhood. Very few places in Greater London feature both Bald cypresses and Montpelier maples in large enough numbers for the concentrations found on a kneecap. Once we found where he dumped the rest of the bodies, there was plenty of forensic evidence to connect the killer to the victims. He had assumed no one would find the shallow, messy grave he'd made. On top of it all, a landscaper gave us a description of a vehicle which had repeatedly visited the site. The idiot hadn't even bothered to cover the name of the firm he worked for. It was painted on the side of the van! At first, the suspect refused to talk, but when we told him we'd only prosecute for one of the murders he got angry and cracked; it offended him that only two victims wouldn't class him as what he thought would be a proper serial killer."

John chuckled. Shouldn't be funny but it... is. Sherlock was grinning as well.

His smile vanished, however, as John determinedly steered them around a corner and it became obvious that they were not headed back towards the British Museum. John skidded to a halt when he realised that he could no longer hear the familiar electric whirr behind him.

Sherlock was stopped on the pavement, staring apprehensively down the street — he must have deduced their destination.

John motioned him on with a shrug, trying to telegraph a false sense of spontaneity and relaxation. "Thought we’d pay Mrs Hudson a visit, while we’re in the neighbourhood."

The mention of the landlady seemed to melt Sherlock's scowl instantly. He began to follow John again without a word. His eyes narrowed suspiciously once again as John turned the final corner onto Baker Street.

John was hoping with every ounce of his being that he wasn’t crossing a forbidden line. Again.
He swallowed, striding towards the nondescript black door with the brass numbers that Sherlock had once called home. He was pleased to see that a black-painted ramp had been constructed to bridge the steps up to the door. He hurried up the steps and opened the door, which couldn't be done when someone in a wheelchair was already up on the landing. Mrs Hudson had mentioned on the phone that she would have a remote-controlled electric system installed, but the electrician had bailed on her that week because of some family emergency.

Upon seeing the new construction, Sherlock scoffed but went up the ramp.

There was a note taped to the back of the door. Sherlock tore it off, frowning as he read. John crowded behind him, reading over his shoulder.

"Looks like she had to step out. Want to show me around until she returns?" John hoped his voice sounded casual enough to conceal his nervousness and desperation that this would work. He had selected his words carefully to request that Mrs Hudson not be present for this; John didn't want to overwhelm Sherlock with too many people fussing about. The reunion with Mrs Hudson had gone splendidly, so now it was time for the next step in reconnecting to Sherlock's old life.

At Sherlock’s shrug, John made his way deeper into the foyer, grinning when he saw the wheelchair lift constructed into the staircase.

Mrs Hudson had called John a week earlier, sounding sheepish when she mentioned that she'd had it installed and was planning even more changes to be done to make the flat more accessible. It was clearly heavy-duty, with a steel frame bolted into the middle of the stairwell to support a thick metal plane. The system even curved around the corner to circumnavigate the small landing in the middle.

'You can tell him it's mostly for me, if you need to — he knows I've got a hip,' Mrs Hudson had fussily explained to John on the phone, 'Can’t quite manage all those stairs all the time, and I thought I should fix the place up to maybe let it out again... Sherlock will have to have a look at his things, won't he, even if he doesn't move back in?' The landlady had sounded delightfully sceptical of the notion that Sherlock wouldn't return.

Behind him, John could hear Sherlock exhale as he saw the lift. He rolled forward, allowing John to lock him into place on the metal plane. John then climbed the stairs as quickly as he could manage, waiting for Sherlock at the top — they wouldn't both fit in the stairs at the same time.

The man seemed to take his time working out the controls. Once he had arrived upstairs, John helped him unlatch himself and stepped back.

"Well? Aren't you going to invite me in?" He asked with a smile, tipping his head toward the door and trying not to sound too keen.

Sherlock set his jaw, reaching out to open the unlocked door. John hovered at the door as Sherlock made a slow circuit around the sitting room, pausing occasionally but not touching anything. The landlady had obviously been thorough with a hoover and a duster, but the eccentric oddities still littered every surface.

"You've been here before," Sherlock announced. "You knew that the flat was upstairs and not the one to the right of the front door, and it was likeliest that you had met Mrs Hudson here. Her visit to Musgrave Court was obvious a spur-of-the-moment thing, so your initial encounter with her here was likely not planned, either. Mycroft wasn't with you that day," he rattled off his deductions.

It was hard to interpret from his tone whether he was angry at John for becoming such a covert
Continuing his round of the sitting room, Sherlock stopped in front of the black leather chair that was placed in the centre. Its seat was well-worn, and it was angled so that the occupant could see into the kitchen and the hallway landing and still enjoy the warmth from the fire. The backrest had a divot in the middle as though someone had habitually perched on it.

John knew instinctively that it must’ve been Sherlock’s favourite spot. He held his breath as he watched Sherlock reach out a finger hesitantly, drawing it along the arm of the chair.

"Would you like to sit in it?" John asked quietly.

Sherlock didn’t answer, and John wished for the millionth time that he could peek inside that brilliant mind and make sense of all the turning cogs and tangled thoughts. He took a step into the room, but Sherlock stopped him with his palm lifted up.

"No, I…” He turned abruptly away from the chair, letting his eyes settle on a human skull perched on the mantle instead.

John swallowed, wanting desperately to clear the tension from the room. "Friend of yours?” He asked lightly.

"John." Sherlock spoke through gritted teeth. "What are you doing?"

"Proving a point." John came around to the front of the wheelchair and squatted so he could look Sherlock in the eyes.

Their eyes were locked in an unspoken battle of wills until John glanced at his watch, hoping desperately that their visitor would be on time.

"Which is?” Sherlock raised one eyebrow, his nostrils flaring.

John could now hear faint footsteps coming up the stairs, and his heart began banging against his ribcage as adrenaline took over. Please let this not be a disaster.

"That all is not lost, that not everything has changed. That up here," John reached his hand out, then thought better of it and simply pointed at Sherlock’s temple. "You’ve still got it."

Sherlock scoffed, averting his eyes to stare at his lap. "Says who?"

John could hear the hurt behind the haughty tone, and it made his chest ache. "Says the man at the door," he announced with more conviction than he really possessed.

Perfectly on cue, a series of three raps echoed through the flat. John gave Sherlock a tiny smile, and stepped backwards, motioning with his hand toward the stairwell.

With a long look, Sherlock moved forward, pulling open the door just as John climbed back to his feet and hurried closer.

A tall man in a long, black woollen coat, with his salt-and-pepper hair parted on the side, and a nervous and anticipatory smile on his features stood on the landing, shifting his weight uneasily.

"No." Sherlock was already slamming the door closed, but John managed to wedge a foot in between.

He was thankful for his shoes — could have fractured a toe. He flashed an apologetic smile at Detective Inspector Lestrade. "Give us a moment?" he apologised, closing the door before waiting
for an answer. He then turned to face Sherlock, who had sought refuge by the kitchen table.

John dropped his voice. "I think you’ll be interested in what he’s got to say."

Sherlock pointed a finger at the door. "So this is what you've been scheming about? It's pointless, John, and frankly quite insulting that you'd go behind my back like a— a—" He waved his hand around in frustration. John didn’t think he'd ever heard him leave a sentence unfinished.

"Not a scheme, Sherlock. A deduction. He sent you those cold case files. You used to team up with him all the time, didn't you, and he recruited you to work with the Met? Yet you never mention him. Mycroft says you never accept any visitors. I spoke to someone named Molly Hooper and —"

"So, it's four against one, now, isn't it?" Sherlock's eyes blazed with fury.

"Just talk to him! He really wants to see you."

"I don't want to see anyone."

"What's the harm, Sherlock? Could seeing him make anything worse? When we do stuff for others, when we help them feel better, that makes us feel better."

"How nice it is that the purpose of my crushed spine is to cheer other people up."

"Stop twisting my words! You can't shut the rest of the world out, Sherlock, it'll still be there, and it's not going to stop bothering you just because you refuse to answer the phone or let people see you."

"I assumed that is precisely what that course of action would achieve!" Sherlock's tone was angry, but the nervous glances he was giving the closed flat door told another story. This is what John had worried about: that the anxiety would prove too much.

John turned and cracked the door open just an inch. "Sorry, mate. Give us a minute more, yeah?"

The DI's expression was puzzled and slightly alarmed, but he didn't turn to leave. John shut the door again and expected Sherlock to look relieved. Instead, the tension remained, and John had an impulse to reach out, to somehow console his friend.

"He's gone? You told him to leave?" Sherlock asked warily.

"Still there. You can kick him out later, but he's here now, and I would like to meet him," John said simply. "You can shut yourself in the bedroom if you… need to, but I'm letting him in."

Sherlock was fingering the edge of his jacket, breathing a bit fast. "If you must," he finally said, averting his gaze from John. He didn't shift his right hand to the chair controls.

John opened the door.

As soon as he spotted Sherlock again, DI Greg Lestrade's entire demeanour changed — his shoulders practically sagged with relief and he surged forward, clasping Sherlock gently by the shoulders, then pulling him into a tight hug against his torso.

"You bastard. Where the hell have you been?"

The DI's voice was shaky with emotion, and he sniffed, squeezing hard a second time before straightening his back and swiping at his eyes.
John snuck a glance at Sherlock’s face as Lestrade composed himself and was surprised to see him fighting a smile, though he was feigning exasperation.

"Oh, honestly, Gerard. Pull yourself together."

Gerard? John was confused. Mycroft had told him it was Gregory.

And Gregory now had questions. "So how— how are you?? What have you been up to? Do you still live here? John said—"

"John pokes his nose into a great many issues which have nothing to do with him. No, I don't live here anymore. As for what I've been up to, not much, funnily enough."

"The physio and stuff, the… rehab? That's helping, isn't it? Any improvement?"

"Not chasing any suspects down dark alleys anytime soon, I'm afraid," Sherlock replied primly. He sounded business-like and detached in a way John had heard before. Still, the sudden shift from the profound skittishness he'd just witnessed surprised him.

This is Sherlock's game face, John realised, designed to protect him from really addressing reality or how he feels. Must be exhausting to keep up.

"Work's been awfully busy," Lestrade says. "It's not the same without you."

"No, I imagine London's criminal classes now have the perk of not getting caught."

"Ha bloody ha. Oh, I never got to tell you: we had a… well… I guess you could say imposter. Pretended to be a crime-solving genius like you, had a fake name — Jim something, don't know what surname he gave since Dimmock worked with him, not me. He really was a clever bloke but turns out he wasn't really interested in the cases, just digging out stuff about you. Disappeared right the fuck off when it became obvious that you weren't… that you were going to be away for a long time. Must have been some groupie of yours, one of those nutters who read about you in the papers and then want to impress you. This berk was getting a bit famous," Lestrade told John, nudging Sherlock's shoulder with his knuckles and cocking his head towards him. "Got all those criminal classes quivering in their boots."

Lestrade then let out a huff of air at that which was half-laugh and half a disbelieving huff and scrubbed his hands through his hair. "It's so good to see you," he reiterated, beaming at Sherlock.

John worried his lip, eyes darting over the man in the wheelchair, watching the taut line of his shoulders where he sat, upright and tense in his chair, despite the carefully constructed, polite smile. Lestrade didn’t seem to notice the nervous energy radiating from the detective. Either that, or he knew Sherlock well enough not to comment.

Clearing his throat, Lestrade rocked back on his heels, extracting a manila file folder from the folds of his coat. Sherlock opened his mouth to protest, but Lestrade held up a hand.

"Okay, so John says you've still got it, and for the record, I never doubted that for a second; your cold case notes have now led to seven arrests. Could use your help today, but for some reason, John here thinks you need some convincing. Just hear me out? Jefferson Henry, age seventy-two, was found stabbed to death in his home this morning by his at-home nurse. All the doors and windows were locked when she arrived, and she’s the only one with a key."

Sherlock stared at Lestrade, his expression unreadable.
After a moment of silence, John cleared his throat, hoping to ease the sudden awkwardness.

"Well, that's obvious, isn't it?" He said, chuckling to hide his disappointment. The case seemed pretty open-and-close and would probably embarrass Sherlock; it felt like crumbs from the table.

"Right?" he added when the DI didn't seem relieved but dismayed.

Sherlock turned his chair slowly to look at John, his eyes glittering. "John? You've deduced it? Have you a secret history of crime-solving you forgot to mention?"

John chuckled again, self-consciously. "Er… no, but I mean, it seems... it was the nurse of course, yeah? Occam's razor?" Sherlock had repeatedly quoted the old scientific principle that the simplest, most natural and logical explanation — the one which required the least amount of speculation — was usually the truth.

Sherlock studied him carefully before turning his chair back to Lestrade, who was watching both of them.

"Lestrade? Surely you've already questioned this nurse?" Sherlock asked.

The DI nodded. "Yeah. Rock-solid alibi. Moonlights as a stripper, tons of people saw her last night, and she spent the night afterwards at her boyfriend's flat. Not just the boyfriend confirms it but also the doorman."

Sherlock hummed non-committedly, pressing the tips of his steepled fingers into his lips.

"Will you come?" Lestrade was still watching him carefully, as though afraid to seem too desperate or enthusiastic. John felt a twinge of sympathy for the man; he was plenty familiar with that balancing act himself. To John, getting too giddy over something small had felt so pathetic at rehab, even though he had every right to be happy about small steps forward.

Sherlock looked up at the DI, then glanced at John. "Yes, but not... We'll follow you."

Lestrade grinned and clapped him on the back. It made Sherlock flinch, and John took a reflexive step forward but swallowed down the rest of his protective urges; the DI couldn't have known about Sherlock's pain and sensitivity issues that had been acting up a bit in the past few days.

Lestrade then turned to head down the stairs. John considered following him, thanking him for coming by, for bringing an enticing case, but the idea seemed condescending to Sherlock — as though they were simply running him to keep him busy.

Instead, he flashed a smile at Sherlock. "Ready?"

Sherlock drew in a deep breath, letting his eyes drift closed for a moment before snapping them open again. He pushed his joystick and made a beeline for the stairs and the lift.

"Yes."

Jefferson Henry's home was at the end of a long dirt drive, tucked far enough behind a copse of trees to make it nearly invisible from the main road. The drive was flanked with patches of scraggly grasses and overgrown brambles, leaving the entire area appearing neglected.
John was slightly out of breath by the time they reached the house. Calling the ramshackle structure that rose up from its bed of tangled weeds a house was being generous; from the front, it didn't appear to be any larger than a single room. It had once been painted white, but only a few chips of paint were left clinging desperately to the exterior walls, the wood beneath grey and rotting. The single window was streaked so completely with dirt and grime that John couldn't see much through it. The air was still and damp, heavy with the stench of decay.

John watched Sherlock out of the corner of his eye as they approached the front door. Sherlock's breathing was normal, but there was tension around his nose and mouth — subtle indications which John had learned to interpret as discomfort. The walk to the house had been bumpy and full of holes and Sherlock had had to meander a lot to avoid such obstacles. The opening in the garden wall had been too narrow for their van to fit through; Greg had offered to drive them in the police cruiser, but unsurprisingly, Sherlock had declined, not stating outright the reason why, though John knew. *The transfer. He’d rather die than be seen picked up and arranged like a rag doll.*

Sherlock had taken off down the road at a clip, making John and the rest of the team jog after him. Now, his eyes were trained on the meagre dwelling, skimming across it as though reading all the secrets of its dilapidation. He was fussed, but John noticed his lips pressed firmly together. John wasn't sure if this was an indication of something being amiss, or if this was his normal deducing mode; he decided just to wait and let Sherlock take the lead, but he vowed to keep a weather eye on him. He could hardly start fussing and mollycoddling him now when Sherlock was probably desperate not to remind the DI of all the things that were now so difficult that they might threaten his ability to do his job.

Sherlock disappeared around the side of the house, and John hurried to catch up with him, cursing as brambles clawed at his trouser legs. Sherlock came to a grunting halt after only a moment, and John nearly walked into the back of his chair, craning his neck to see what had stopped his progress.

There was a large stick wedged in front of one of the wheelchair tyres. John kicked at it to dislodge it, sending it flying into the nearby grass. If he hadn’t been bent at the waist, he might’ve missed the quiet *thanks*.

They continued their circuit, occasionally pausing for Sherlock to peer at something on the ground or on the exterior wall. John trailed along behind, feeling more than a bit useless. He didn't want it to seem like he was only there to keep an eye on Sherlock, but he wasn't sure if he would be allowed to do anything else.

Sherlock stayed quiet, not sharing aloud any of his observations, though John kept stealing glances at him as they came around to the front of the house. When Sherlock suddenly stopped, staring at the ground, John took a step backwards. He was startled when Sherlock said something in a low voice, barely loud enough to hear.

"What was that?"

"Evidence bags. I always had some on hand, but…” Sherlock trailed off, still looking down.

John followed his gaze; there were a handful of cigarette butts tossed along the foundation of the house. Many of them were waterlogged and disintegrating from the recent rain but a few others — the ones on the top of the pile — looked recently used, still mostly white and dry.

John glanced around: the area was free of officers, though he could see a female plainclothes officer standing next to the police cruiser halfway down the drive. She was speaking into a walkie-talkie, looking harried and annoyed.
John pointed at the cigarette remains. "For those? I’ll hunt down some bags while you continue with the perimeter."

Sherlock nodded, glancing up at John with something akin to relief flashing across his features before he cleared his throat sharply, moving around the fourth corner of the house as he barked out in a loud voice, "Yes. Good. I have work to do; hopefully, they can handle collecting a few pieces of DNA evidence without completely botching it."

John stopped one of the technicians bustling about and received a pair of latex gloves, a wad of white zip lock bags and a quizzical look. Sherlock waited at the front door of the house while John bagged the butts. After delivering his loot to the technician, he returned to his friend.

The front door had been left slightly ajar by the officers inside. Sherlock held up his hand, stopping John as he reached for the doorknob.

"What…? Are you—" John bit his lip to cut off the question that was begging to be asked: *are you alright?*

Sherlock nodded once, a sharp jerk of his chin, and his eyes cut briefly to John before narrowing, fixed on the abraded metal handle once more. He tilted his head back and forth, studying the doorknob from every angle with the focus of a bird of prey. After a few moments, he gave another nod and backed up without a word.

"Don’t touch the handle."

John pushed the door open, careful to avoid the handle, holding it out of the way as Sherlock navigated the thankfully low threshold. John wondered if there were adjustable, portable ramps Sherlock could use on such occasions where they weren't that lucky.

The small room was crowded with officers, stuffy and cramped. John glanced around as Sherlock moved past him and into the middle of the cottage, which consisted of only two adjoining rooms. They were in the combined bedroom and living room, and straight ahead, John could see a kitchen with a small table and one chair.

One officer and a crime scene tech, both in white coveralls, were sitting at the table, a pile of empty evidence bags spread out before them. John realised with a jolt that it would be pointless for Sherlock to try to wear such protective gear since his chair could hardly be wrapped in one. Mycroft’s words threatened to come to mind about crime scene contamination, but John firmly refused to let them discourage him.

Another tech was perched near the bed, photographing the gory scene laid out there. The victim, Jefferson Henry, was on his back, his eyes staring lifelessly at the ceiling. There were multiple slashes across his neck and chest and blood over the entire bed and even on the nearby walls, spelling out a tale of horrific violence.

John suppressed a shudder. It never exactly got easy, no matter how many times he had come face to face with human brutality in his medical career. *Worry only if it stops affecting you*, is what one of his traumatology mentors had told him.

He moved closer to Sherlock, who was sitting perfectly still in his chair with his hands folded primly in his lap. His eyes were sweeping the room, and John hoped his stillness indicated that he was already observing the details the others had missed, instead of being too nervous about working again.
One of the officers at the table stood up, and John stepped out of the way to let her squeeze through to the door. John wondered if he was meant to be doing something, assuming he was even wanted here; it had seemed implied when Sherlock had said "we will come", but now John felt a bit foolish and in the way. Since Sherlock had worked alone before the accident, having someone around to assist him would be a massive adjustment and a constant reminder of how things were now different.

"John?" Sherlock’s deep baritone was quiet, but it cut through the noisy room as easily as if he’d shouted directly in John’s ear. The detective had moved to the foot of the bed and now waved his hand in the direction of the corpse.

John raised his eyebrows. "What do you need?"

"How fresh, would you say—" Sherlock started.

A voice from near the sink interrupted him, and John turned to see an SCD technician with a pointy nose, and greasy, dull hair. He wore white coveralls as well.

"You have got to be kidding me!" The man exclaimed in a nasal, whiny voice, "I don't know or care how you blackmailed Lestrade into this but mark my words, Holmes, this is a crime scene, not a daycare for former… police groupies!" The man spat out, stepping closer to loom over Sherlock, who looked entirely unfazed by this ostentatious display.

"How delighted I am, Anderson, to find that you are still here, making sure forensic science within the Met shall never move past the medieval age." Sherlock's voice dripped with triumphant venom.

"You can't be here! This is not some charity we're running; I don’t care if you're—"

Lestrade stepped between the two and silenced the man with a stern look before he could finish his sentence. "Anderson. Shut UP."

The man stepped back, crossing his arms and glaring at Sherlock with his lips pursed.

John edged closer to the body on the bed, casting a look over his shoulder at Lestrade for permission. The detective inspector waved him on with a fondly exasperated look in Sherlock’s direction.

"Go on then, as he says. Christ knows we need his help," Lestrade said pointedly, and John hoped it wouldn't sound to Sherlock as though he was exaggerating. "The rest of you, out!"

Lestrade turned to shoo the forensics team and the other officer out of the cottage. "You have fifteen minutes, Sherlock."

Sherlock flicked his wrist with a distracted scowl, and John almost smiled as the door clicked shut behind the crowd. Now that it was just the two of them in the room, he felt he could breathe a bit easier and hoped the same was true for his companion. Sherlock hadn’t seemed that hesitant or embarrassed even when the rest of the team was still in the room. All in all, he appeared to be settling back into his former role, the snark and wit Lestrade had described returning like muscle memory. John could hardly contain his excitement; he was finally seeing the man featured in all those newspaper articles.

Now that he had more room for his chair, Sherlock was moving freely around the room, his eyes scanning rapidly across the corpse, the rest of the bed and the detritus scattered about.
John cleared his throat and bent over to peer at the body. "Stab wounds to the neck, face and chest are deep, done with force pre-mortem — the entry wound edges are uneven, and they've bled."

Sherlock hummed in acknowledgement. "Crime of some passion, then. Romantic or otherwise."

John snatched a pair of gloves from a packet left on the kitchen table, pulled them on and picked up Mr Henry's hand, bending the fingers and the larger joints of the extremity before laying the limb gently back down on the duvet. He wasn't a crime scene investigator; surely the men and women that had been shoved unceremoniously outside were more adequately trained for this, plus there would be a proper post-mortem done later.

John stole a glance at Sherlock, who appeared to be occupied rifling through a stack of mail on the small desk opposite the bed. John returned to Jefferson Henry's bloody corpse, busying himself with examining it so that he could appear useful, prodding gently at the man's abdomen and lifting his eyelids, trying to quell the nervous pounding in his own chest.

Sherlock's shout broke the silence a few moments later, making John jump. Sherlock was thrumming his fingertips excitedly on his knees, and the sight made John's skin hum with electricity and his heart punch his ribcage.

"John!" Sherlock barked again, clearly annoyed at having to repeat himself. "What day is it?"

Knocked off balance by the question, John stuttered for a moment. "Uh. Wednesday? Yeah. Wednesday."

He tore off his gloves and placed them on the table next to the packet of fresh ones, recovering quickly. "Henry probably died quickly after the jugular was severed, but several of these stab wounds outside the neck and chest appear to have happened after that. The nurse didn't find him until this morning, but rigor mortis has already had time to set in and recede in all but the largest muscle groups. It's warm in here, so that isn't uncommon but moves the time of death to…" John drew in a shaky breath "…sometime late last night. After midnight, I'd say."

John's knowledge of such things was rusty but not completely unused since medical school — army medical officers commissioned abroad were occasionally asked to assist in forensic work.

The cottage settled into silence once more. John resisted the urge to glance expectantly at Sherlock until another shout rang out.

"Wednesday!" Sherlock repeated loudly, scowling at John's raised eyebrows.

Lestrade came striding back into the cottage, presumably because of the yelling. "Well? Out with it. You've been in here nearly ten minutes. You really are out of practice," the DI quipped.

John flinched at his words — shocked at how callous they sounded — and stole a sideways glance at Sherlock.

Instead of looking dismayed and insulted, the detective's eyes were gleaming where they were visible over the tips of his fingers. He had his hands pressed together in front of his mouth again and slowly lowered them to turn his chair and address the room at large, even though Lestrade and John were still the only other ones in it.

"Ohhh, I love the angry ones. They always make a mistake!" Sherlock triumphantly raised his palms upwards, and John turned to marvel at his sparkling eyes and the predatory grin creeping across his handsome features.
Lestrade leant close to John; they were both standing by the door, and though the room wasn't large, Lestrade seemed to think they were out of Sherlock's earshot. "He really does seem to love it. Used to hear that a lot from him: 'I love the angry ones', 'I love the clever ones'." He snorted. "Yeah, they do all make the mistake of murdering people in a town where Sherlock's working. Was working," he then corrected quietly.

Sherlock's eyes narrowed. "I'm right here."

"Sorry," the DI muttered.

This seemed to satisfy the no-longer-former detective, who waved a newspaper he had placed on his lap.

"If it's Wednesday, then where is today's newspaper? You said the nurse found him this morning when she arrived, but if she didn't know anything was amiss, she would have brought the newspaper in with her from the front stoop, as she did every morning. Anderson's always nattering on about Locard's principle, but what if the object of interest, the truly incriminating puzzle piece never was at the crime scene to start with?" He looked expectant, then disappointed, as he skimmed what must have been matching blank expressions on John and Lestrade's faces. "Dear God, what's it like in your funny little brains? It must be so boring."

An eye roll completed the insult, followed by Sherlock slamming the newspaper on the table. "The top paper in the pile here is from yesterday. She didn't bother to collect today's issue because she knew he was already dead. Whoever killed him snuck back in last night, stabbed him while he was sleeping and left, locking the door behind them, which means they must have the key. If you match the partial bloody print on the underside of the doorknob…"

A soft curse sounded from the doorway where Anderson and the rest of the forensic team were now huddled, listening.

Sherlock rolled his eyes. "The print everyone missed, of course… The blood will match Mr Henry, and the print will match…" He turned to face the now crowded doorway with a flourish that shouldn't have been possible for someone in a power wheelchair.

"…The killer!"

Chapter End Notes

The detail about a confession brought forth by the vanity of a killer who worried that they wouldn't be classed as a proper serial killer if they were charged with less than five murders is based on the case of British serial killer Colin Ireland. It's also true that forensic pollen analysis has been used to identify at least one body dump site in the UK. A summary of Locard's principle is that every suspect always both removes something and leaves something at a crime scene.
The Stakes of The Game

"...The killer!" Sherlock declared, his tone glazed with unadulterated glee and his piercing eyes sparkling with barely contained excitement.

John stared with his mouth open. "That was incredible," he breathed, not even caring if he sounded utterly besotted.

He was. By god, he was.

Fuck.

Sherlock’s eyes found his, and his eyebrows lifted as if to say you really think so? He looked genuinely apprehensive — as though convinced he'd heard wrong. John’s heart did a funny little flutter at that, but he swallowed harshly and folded his arms across his chest.

He dipped his head in a sharp nod. "Amazing." He let his gaze sweep the Met team members listening in, warning them off from saying anything contradictory.

Sherlock was still breathing hard from his rapid-fire deduction, and a hint of colour flushed his pale cheeks. He turned his head away, but not before John caught the way the corner of his lip curled up. "That's not what people usually—" he muttered but was interrupted by the man John now knew was called Anderson.

"We ran the print already. No match from the database." The crime scene tech stood with his arms crossed, sneering.

John watched Sherlock, willing him to have a rebuttal for this, willing him to get the last word in, to wipe the smugness right off of Anderson's smarmy face.

"Oh? Well, that's it, then. We cannot possibly solve a crime if the database says no," Sherlock cooed. "Somehow, not all murderers walked free even before computers and DNA were invented. Be glad you weren't born in such an age; solving crimes back then required actual brainwork."

With a patrician, sly lift of a brow, Sherlock turned the back of his wheelchair on the now spluttering Anderson. He went to address the female officer John had seen talking to Lestrade before. She didn't look keen at all to interact with Sherlock, either.

Sherlock bit his lip, looking hesitant, but only for the briefest of moments before he tipped his chin up haughtily. "Process the evidence around the doorknob, bag the cigarette butts from the back and fetch the nurse."

"I don't take orders from—" the female officer started, but Lestrade strode in at that moment.

"Donovan? Can you go make sure all the new evidence gets processed? I think we might want to go have another crack at the nurse, yeah?" he suggested to Sherlock, who nodded.

"Once certain aspects are further explored, yes. We'll meet you at the station. Come along, John," he commanded.

It was an order the grinning army doctor gladly obeyed.
Four hours later, however, John's mood had waned way below cheery. He pressed his fingers on his closed lids, willing the dull throb behind them to lessen. He stood, stretching his arms overhead and relishing the pop of the joints.

He had been in this conference room for over three hours, drinking numerous cups of tea and trying to make sense of what Sherlock was doing. Piles of papers, old newspapers, photographs, empty Styrofoam cups, and photographs of classes from a primary school in the eighties that Sherlock had insisted someone track down were all scattered across the table.

Once at the Met, Sherlock had made a phone call to Hillary Randolph’s second place of employment: Platinum Lace. After John had punched in the phone number, he’d handed the mobile to Sherlock who immediately put it on speaker, motioning that John should take notes. John nodded, pen poised, but was disappointed a moment later when his notes only consisted of one figure, repeated by Sherlock with his eyebrows raised significantly. The significance of seventy-eight pounds was lost on John, but he nodded anyway, circling the number twice on the paper.

After ending the call, Sherlock pressed his joined hands against his mouth, humming low in his throat. His eyes opened, and John momentarily lost his breath as they locked with his own. The aversive lethargy was just… gone, and Sherlock was practically vibrating with determination.

“Go tell Lestrade to send someone to Platinum Lace and find out where the employees smoke. It rained yesterday but stopped by mid-afternoon. Any cigarette butts on the ground there which are dry will be from last night. They need to be collected to check if any of the DNA matches the ones from the cottage. A pack-a-day smoker such as Hillary would certainly have indulged in at least a few smoke breaks during a six-hour shift at the club.”

John had hurried off to repeat the directions to the DI.

The evening progressed in much the same way; Sherlock going off on seemingly random tangents, dictating notes to John occasionally before lapsing into long stretches of silence in which his eyes shut firmly, and he seemed to be far away. This was different than when he just closed in on himself, because from these self-induced trances he always seemed to snap back to reality with a renewed sense of purpose, often shouting random words that John meticulously wrote down. We make a good team, John thought, as he effortlessly caught a pen Sherlock launched in his direction across the surface of the conference table.

At half-past seven in the evening, after being summoned by Sherlock, Lestrade appeared in the doorway with a knock and an expectant expression. "Hillary Randolph is here for questioning. You have ten minutes."

Sherlock flashed a crooked smile at John and made for the door. John noticed him pressing his knuckles into his leg, the muscles bunching beneath his trousers.

Neither of them had rested, drank anything, or eaten in too many hours to count. Sherlock would be due for his anti-spasm meds soon but, then again, what he took in the evening was chosen with sleeping in mind. He’d missed his afternoon meds; not even John had remembered them because he’d been so caught up in the excitement.
"Are they bad? Need something?" John tipped his head down with a raised eyebrow in the direction of Sherlock’s legs. They did have a small selection of meds with them, including an anti-spasm one.

Sherlock shook his head. “Tolerable. Can't take anything now, might slow me down.” He pushed open the door. “But I’ll let you know if it gets worse.”

The promise sounded half-hearted, and John wondered if Sherlock was saying it just to appease him. The man was never very forthcoming about these things, and now that he was clearly keen to be working again, it was hardly surprising that he was reluctant to stop to rest and regroup.

Even if he worried, John didn't want to hold him back. Not now. He vowed to keep a closer eye on the spasms and become insistent if necessary.

Hillary Randolph was in her late twenties, with short hair cut in a lopsided angle that enhanced her sharp features. She lifted her chin as Sherlock moved into the room, her dark brown eyes tracking his movements. She didn't try very hard to conceal her surprise at the sight of the wheelchair.

John followed behind Sherlock, pushing the wooden chair across the table from Hillary to the side and taking a seat so that Sherlock could have the centre stage.

Her gaze remained steady, though her thumb tapped a syncopated rhythm against the metal table.

“Evening.” Sherlock's voice was gentle, and John glanced at him out of the corner of his eye. He didn’t think that was how this was going to go at all. In every crime show he'd watched, the suspects always seemed to be shouted at.

Hillary blinked, but she didn’t respond.

“What happened to your neck?” Sherlock continued conversationally. There was a fresh plaster just above her collarbone.

Hillary swallowed, making the plaster jump. “Cat.”

"Mm.” Sherlock hummed sympathetically. "It's not infected, is it? Looks a bit red. My colleague could have a look if you'd like. He's a doctor," Sherlock added, leaning conspiratorially forward by gripping the wheelchair's armrests.

She shook her head quickly, her hand reaching up to touch her neck.

“No. Doesn’t bother me none.”

John squinted. There wasn’t any redness visible around the plaster at all. Not for the first time, John wondered if the Holmes brothers really did possess magical powers.

“Very well.” Sherlock smiled. “Tell me about Michael.” His tone continued to be conversational, but John could hear the edge of warning creeping in.

The effect was instantaneous. Her face crumpled, and she ducked her head, pulling her hands off of the table and into her lap.
Sherlock leant forward.

“Did you fight for him that day? Or did you let Henry just take him? You were always a bit jealous, weren’t you, of the way he stole away your sister’s attention? But that guilt ate away at you when Michael was murdered. You never meant for that to happen, so when Hillary came to you with her plan, you were more than willing to go along with it. It seemed easy enough; take your clothes off, make a few quid, fall asleep with a doubly clear conscience that night. And Hillary sent you today to be questioned, hoping your actual innocence would help you behave in a way that would prove hers. I bet she didn’t even tell you the plan, did she? She’s just like that, isn’t she? Always leaving you in the dark, expecting you to follow along?”

What? John scrambled to keep up. So this wasn’t Hillary Randolph he was looking at? And who the hell was Michael?

“How…?” He didn’t mean to voice the question out loud, but it didn’t matter; Sherlock didn’t appear to be listening anyway. He had moved around the table and was now planted between it and the woman, who was still resolutely staring at her lap and the door to the adjacent room, where John knew Lestrade was watching and listening to all the proceedings.

Sherlock turned to John. “This is Helen Randolph, Hillary’s twin sister,” he explained, then returned his attention to her. “Obvious, really, if you know where to look.” Sherlock’s finger jabbed in the direction of her collarbone.

Hillary — Helen, John corrected mentally— flinched.

Sherlock’s continued explanation was directed at the mirror John knew to be a one-way window: "She has a faint scar under that bandage, acquired somewhere between grade 4 and 5, which is the only discernible physical difference between them. She may be telling the truth about the cat, but the plaster was stuck on to avoid anyone catching on to their little plot." Sherlock’s face twitched in amusement. “You thought you could have got away with it…” The amusement vanished just as quickly as it had come and he leaned closer, his eyes narrowing. "…And if it were down to the average intelligence of the police, you would have done."

He leaned back, steering as close to her chair as he could, and John could see that he was pressing the heel of his palm into his left thigh again; pulled by a spasm, his foot had slipped off its support on that side.

John brought his chair closer. Using his own foot, he gently lifted Sherlock's back where it belonged, eyes fixed on the woman across the table who seemed oblivious to his problem-solving.

Sherlock didn't visibly react at all to John's assistance apart from removing his hand from his thigh and placing it on the table. "Tell us where to find her, Helen, and you can console yourself with the notion that justice will be served."

John saw her decision a split second after she made it and he was on his feet as she launched herself out of her chair and bolted for the door. But Sherlock was quicker, reversing his chair until she froze, her foot caught millimetres from his back tyre.

“Move another muscle, and I’ll crush your toes." Sherlock's voice was low and dangerous. "I loathe repetition. Tell me: where is your sister?"

With a sniff, Helen Randolph tipped her chin up and recited an address, then slumped back down into the chair. John moved to the other side of the table, situating himself directly behind her to make sure she wouldn't take another lunge for the door when it was opened.
Lestrade and the female detective from the crime scene walked in and John could hear their radios crackling to life.

Donovan — John could read the name sewn into her uniform now and was reminded that Lestrade had mentioned it at the Henry house — spoke into hers as she shut the door, repeating the address Helen had just given.

Lestrade cocked an eyebrow at Sherlock. "Go on. I know this is your favourite part. Tell us."

Sherlock’s mouth twitched and his eyes flicked to John’s as he circled back around the table again, tapping his fingers against his knee. John saw his leg jerk twice, his foot slipping off of the footrest again; the spasms seemed to be worsening.

John raised his eyebrows, but Sherlock’s eyes had shifted away, focussed unseeingly on the opposite wall.

Sherlock drew in a breath. "In 1989, ten-year-old Michael Handley was kidnapped on his way to school. His two best friends were with him and valiantly fought the attacker but were obviously no match for a grown man. Michael’s body was found a week later, and Robert Jefferson Henry, then known by his first name, was sentenced to a twenty-five-year term in prison. He was released on parole last year after serving only sixteen of those twenty-five years. The case was a public affair in Snowdonia. Unsurprisingly, Mister Henry thought it best to relocate from his old haunts after his release and switch to his middle name. Hillary Randolph spent her entire life feeling guilty since she thought she'd allowed her best friend to get abducted and murdered and vowed to get revenge somehow. When she learned about Henry's early release, she worked out where he was living — not a difficult task thanks to the internet since the man's full name had been publicised and it's not much of a logical leap that someone might be sentimental enough about their given name that they'd simply use parts of it as an alias. She inserted herself into his life as his sole healthcare provider, perhaps even pretended to be his friend. Robert had no living family, and so he became dependent on her as his health steadily declined. For months, she proved herself trustworthy, even as his paranoia increased. But all the while, she was secretly planning her revenge. She almost got away with it too, if she had been able to give up her smoking habit — worsened, of course, by the stress of plotting and executing a murder. Because you see, the other person that was there with Michael and Hillary that day is not a smoker. Helen is Hillary’s identical twin sister and had everyone fooled when she posed as Hillary for the evening so Hillary could carry out her nefarious plan. Having witnessed the effect Michael's death had had on her sister, she was willing to be recruited as an accomplice. Sadly, it didn't occur to Helen to fake a nicotine addiction. The lack of cigarettes with her DNA outside the club as well as the absence of any yellowing in her fingernails or teeth were the final nail in her sister’s coffin."

He turned to Hillary, who was staring at him with a mix of awe and fear.

“You're not the liar your sister is, and you’re a rubbish exotic dancer. Only seventy-eight pounds in a six-hour shift? Pathetic.” Sherlock rolled his eyes, but his tone lacked the usual bite that John had heard countless times when he got snarky. “You tried to tell them you had indigestion which affected your performance, but when I suggested to the owner that someone had been posing as Hillary that night, he had little trouble believing me."

Lestrade snorted. “Bloody hell, I’m glad to have you back.”

Sherlock didn't reply. He'd turned away, distracted and suddenly uninterested in the other people in the room. The case was blown right open, so there was little for him to do now, was there? The police can take over from here, John reasoned.
He glanced down at Helen, who was now crying, her hands twisting in her lap. He reached out and grabbed the box of tissues from the table, pulling out a few and dropping them on top of her hands. She looked up, surprised, but John's attention had shifted away, his eyes skimming over Sherlock before bending down to replace his foot on the footrest. Sherlock's hand was curled into a fist where he'd tucked it between his thighs. He had gone a bit pale, and John realised he must be exhausted.

“Need us for anything else, Detective Inspector?” John asked.

“No, we’ll take it from here. Thanks to both of you.”

John shook the hand Lestrade offered, then made his way to the door with the familiar hum of Sherlock’s wheelchair close behind. They took the lift down and then moved out the back door towards the parking lot where John had been instructed to park the van. The night was warm, though a cool breeze picked up as they exited the NSY building, making gooseflesh prickle to life on John’s bare arms. He tipped his head back and inhaled, surprised to see several stars well visible overhead despite London’s heavy light pollution.

Pulling up beside him, he could sense Sherlock doing the same.

"Brilliant,” John breathed, not wanting to break the spell of the moment, of the evening, of the entire day. It had been wonderful, watching Sherlock come into himself like that, fitting all of those pieces together, noticing all the tiny details that everyone else missed. John's blood was pumping with the adrenaline of the day, and he was reluctant to have it end. Shifting his eyes sideways as he stood in the parking lot, stargazing, he thought that Sherlock might agree. At least he seemed so lost in thought that the events of the day must have been replaying in his head.

"An old friend, then, that Lestrade?” John asked.

Sherlock was waiting for him right by the car. "We should get going."

John unlocked the door and waited for Sherlock to manoeuvre himself in. He was shivering slightly despite looking a bit flushed and sweaty.

John turned up the thermostat once he’d climbed into the front seat.

"Don't," Sherlock protested.

"Want me to help button up your coat?"

"I'm not cold."

"Well, you looked that way."

"Just drive," Sherlock said, but he softened the bite of his words with an attempt at a smile.

John called home to talk to Sophie about whether they should stop somewhere for food. She had been just about to leave but promised to put something in the annexe fridge for them. He’d also texted Mycroft earlier to tell they’d be staying late in London.

Once they cleared the traffic of the inner city, John still felt too keyed up to just focus on the road. He recalled how Sherlock had acted like a proud tour guide on their drive into the city just that morning. It made John wonder how much he may have missed 221B and living in the capital but didn't want to raise the issue lest that sour his friend's mood.
"Amazing that someone could hold onto that much hatred for so long," he said to make conversation with the silent figure behind him.

Sherlock didn't reply but gave him an odd look in the rear-view mirror.

By the time they reached the town of Fulmer in the M40, John had given up on trying to liven up some conversation in the car and turned on the radio to a classical channel, stealing occasional glances towards the back seat. A couple of times, he heard Sherlock sniffle, making him worry that he may have caught something, but there was no coughing. Instead of looking exhausted and ill Sherlock appeared antsy, instead; his fingers were drumming against his knee, and he kept scanning every road sign they passed as though seeking signals that they were getting close to home. John thought it was probably just leftover nerves from the case and hid his smile as he turned to watch the road once more.

It was when they made the turn towards Wycombe that he noticed that the slight sheen of sweat across Sherlock's pale forehead that he'd spotted as they were leaving the Met was still there, clearly visible in the low light of the street lamps they were passing.

"You okay back there?" John asked.

Sherlock fluttered open his pinch-closed eyes, frowning before answering. "Yes."

"We're not far, now. Tallie's obviously not in any more, so it's going to be me for your bedtime stuff. Sophie's made us some sandwiches."

Sherlock hummed noncommittally, turning his head to look out the window.

Ten minutes later, he seemed impatient to get out of the car, but instead of heading right for the annexe door after being freed from the lift, he lingered in the frigid air, eyes closed, face and neck flushed despite the cold. His nose was running.

Suddenly, John put two and two together.

He quickly reversed the car to its spot in the open garage and joined Sherlock by the rose-trellised back wall of the annexe. The cold rain, which had begun as they'd approached High Wycombe, was already making him shiver, and he needed to get both of them inside. There was a button for the garden-side annexe door which Sherlock could have used after unlocking it with his remote-controlled key, but instead, he had stopped close by, breathing hard. His pupils were dilated even in the relatively bright light under a lantern.

John grabbed his wrist; Sherlock tried to pull it away, but he was no match for John's strength. Sherlock's pulse was racing and made irregular by extra beats. The veins on his neck and on his forehead were visibly distended.

"Are you having AD?" John asked sternly. "Honesty, please."

The risk of autonomic dysreflexia should have occurred to him, but he'd never seen Sherlock have an episode of it so clearly, it wasn't an issue that bothered him very often. Then again, when was the last time Sherlock had had such an intense day with his routines broken so thoroughly? *He must be prone to it since his injury is well above the T6 level.* This had to be dealt with quickly — autonomic dysreflexia could be dangerous if left unchecked. An imbalance of sympathetic and parasympathetic neural signals, it could raise the blood pressure so high that retinal bleeds, pulmonary oedema, heart muscle infarction or a brain bleed could happen.

"Sherlock?" John pressed. "AD or not?"
His friend sighed resignedly. "Symptoms are indicative."

"When did this start?"

"In the car. I had some… slight signs earlier, but they abated."

"You didn't think to say something?" John had a hard time concealing his worried anger.

"I did think to say something, but it wouldn't have got us here any faster."

"There's nifedipine in your day pack; we could have stopped at a service station, or I could have given you some at the Met headquarters."

John wasted no time in digging the blister packet out of the bag clipped onto the back of Sherlock's chair. Thankfully, there was also an unopened bottle of still water there at the bottom. He brought tablet to Sherlock's lips, then helped him tilt back the bottle to wash down the drug.

"We should get you inside," John said. "Cold can cause AD."

"It's not the cold," Sherlock insisted. "I was fine before when we were outside. Besides, it feels better to be out of the car."

"Still. I need to check your BP. We can turn down the thermostat if you want."

Sherlock rolled his eyes but with less vigour than usual and sniffled.

Guilt began to eat away at John — the case had derailed all of Sherlock's routines entirely, and this should have occurred to him as a potential consequence. *It's all in the damned kitchen folder,* he cursed to himself. He should have memorised the contents more carefully, should have researched this better. He knew what to do but felt less at ease with being the one in charge then he would have with just another patient. He reminded himself that Sherlock likely knew what to do even better than he did. *I'm not alone in this, nor is he.*

He opened the door and followed Sherlock into the kitchen. Sitting was the best position when hit by AD, so there was no need to transfer him to a bed. John fetched the BP cuff and the machine from the medicine cabinet. He helped Sherlock out of his coat and jacket and wrapped the cuff around his arm. It shouldn't matter if it went over his dress shirt sleeve.

"You have any idea what's brought this on?" Did we eat and drink enough? He should have rested more. Is it his bladder? His bowels? An infection? A pressure sore?

"You're the doctor," Sherlock replied.

After both men soberly noted the alarming blood pressure reading — 234/130 even after John did a repeat measurement — they agreed on a sublingual nitro-glycerine tablet from the medication cabinet.

John leaned down to inspect Sherlock’s catheter. They had emptied the bag twice during the day, and the output had appeared been steady — until now. A quick check trailing his finger up the tube revealed a potential cause for the AD — the catheter was kinked and pressed nearly flat where it passed between the seat cushion and the hand rest. He wasted no time in liberating it. "Let's hope that does it. How do you feel?"

"Headache. Want to lie down."
"Sorry, no. Don't want all of that pressure to hit your massive intellect, do you? We'll have to wait until it dips down. If it doesn't, it's off to A&E."

"Absolutely not! I haven't had to go there for this in seven months."

"When did you last have it?"

"What does that matter?"

"Just taking a history. Doctor, remember?"

Sherlock flicked a disinterested wrist. "A few weeks before you arrived. It was mild."

John made sure none of Sherlock's clothes were too tight or too warm and removed his shoes and socks, inspecting what he could to make sure nothing had abraded or otherwise chafed the skin.

"When did Tallie sort your bowel routine last?" He asked next, aware that constipation could also cause AD. He hated having to venture into these areas as though he were Sherlock's physician. None of it bothered him, but it made him unsure about his role, and it certainly wasn't anything that friends discussed casually.

"Yesterday. It's four times a week. I'm fine, John," Sherlock said through gritted teeth.

"I'll reserve judgement on that." John took another reading, and the blood pressure was now a much more reassuring 156/98. Still much higher than Sherlock's baseline, but no longer threatening to burst a cerebral artery. There was also now much more urine in the catheter bag than just minutes ago.

"You really can't feel it if your bladder can't drain?" John asked, taking their coats to the rack.

"No. Sorry to be such a disappointment," Sherlock snapped.

John pinched the bridge of his nose, not wanting to verbalise what was going through his head: we can't do this if you won't look after yourself. Mycroft's view of Sherlock's self-care even before the accident had not been flattering at all, and for reasons which were understandable but frustrating to those around him, the situation had since deteriorated.

Sherlock placed his palms on the kitchen island to take another sip from the straw in the glass of water John had given him. John watched him from the doorway between the kitchen and the foyer, wondering if it had been too optimistic to encourage Sherlock getting involved in The Work again beyond giving his academic opinion. Had they got too careless? Then again, to get a person like Sherlock back on track with his life, was it even possible to avoid a bit of recklessness?

"I didn't mean it that way. I'm not angry at you," John explained tiredly.

He slumped down into a chair by the kitchen island and reached for Sherlock’s wrist again. He didn't really need to check his pulse but felt a sudden need for the physical connection. Sherlock still looked a bit pale and sweaty but not as ashen and anxious as before, which pointed to John's theory about the catheter being correct. Still, the thought wasn't consoling. Anything, even minor things, could trigger AD, so it would probably happen again. If Sherlock didn't tell John about such symptoms, wasn't there was a risk that he would get so carried away with a case that he'd suffer some catastrophic complication? Was this a part of why he hadn't even tried to get back to working and why Mycroft hadn't encouraged him to do so? Sherlock would probably deny it fervently if he asked, but maybe he worried about trying to manage on his own. Sherlock seemed stubborn enough to think that, if he couldn't do things like before, there was no point in doing them at all.
That could explain why it had just felt easier to turn away, to give up.

It seemed quite clear from that day's events that Sherlock probably did need someone to accompany him on cases. Could it really work out with the Met if Sherlock had someone there who could look after him and he agreed to try not to be too careless…?

"I never asked you to get involved in any of this," Sherlock told him, pulling his arm back from John's hold. His eyes shifted past John to stare idly at a wall. "Nobody asked you to start any of this bloody… doctoring or to start digging around the past. The very definition of the past, John, is that it is gone."

"So, if I weren't here right now, you'd just… what? Ignore the AD and keel over?"

Sherlock slowly turned his head to look at him, eyes narrowed to furious slits. "I wouldn't be having AD if you hadn't started meddling with… everything. Why does everyone insist on prolonging the inevitable?"

John couldn't understand the 180-degree attitude change. Just minutes ago, Sherlock had been reluctantly but cooperatively answering his questions, and now the walls were slamming back up. "I can see it on your face, plain as day," Sherlock snarled. "You think today was a bad idea, and you're going to tell Mycroft that I shouldn't be allowed to work."

"No, that's not—" John's protest was feeble because it was half a lie. "I'm not telling him anything. We had a nice day, didn't we? A good day, a really good one?"

"And now it has been entirely soured by what you see as my shortcomings. Yes, one good day, in a sea of a thousand dreadful ones. So by all means, pat yourself on the back for giving the cripple a nice day out; now that it's over and done with and everyone has escaped mostly unscathed, let's never ever do it again because you don't like worrying about me. Because you think you are somehow responsible for me, just like Mycroft."

"Oi!" John stood, planting his hands on his hips. "I'm on your side! I want nothing more than for you to be the one to decide what to do with yourself!"

"Yet your overprotective streak easily overpowers that noble pursuit."

"Is it really so fucking hard to accept a bit of reality without getting so bloody pessimistic right away?!" John exclaimed. "Do you ever listen to yourself? You're making it sound like you'd rather die than accept even the tiniest bit of bloody help!"

"You didn't seem to find accepting help all that easy, either, Captain Watson, former army surgeon, invalided home from Afghanistan!"

"That's a pretty fucking low blow."

"No, the definition of a low blow would be getting hit by a cab when you're trying to catch a serial killer!"

They remained there, suspended in their individual bubbles of rage. John, standing in front of the fridge, fingers twitching where his hands hung against his thighs. Sherlock, parked next to the kitchen island, looking like he'd just ran a marathon and collapsed across the finish line.

"For what it's worth—" John started, forcing his tone to sound calmer than he felt, "I am so, so sorry for what happened to you. You, of all people. I'm so sorry that I'd give anything to change it.
But I'm even more sorry that you'd waste what you've still got, that you'd just give up. I don't want that. I don't want you to get hurt or ill, and I hate worrying, but I also can't help it. I don't do it out of some physician's obligation or because I get paid. I do it because today was the best day I've had in a long time, and it's because I got to see you at Work, got to see how much you love it. I'm worried because there's so much we still have to work out, and I'm afraid you'll give up too easily," he said, and he wasn't just talking about the detective work; his words were weighted by the sudden pain of a loss that hadn't even happened yet. "I've only just met you, and I'm not going to pretend to know you well enough to tell you what to do with your life. But just sitting here, doing nothing, just like you said to Greg, is just... Today was fun. No, it was great, and it was great because of you, and you're the reason I don't want to go back to what my life was after rehab. I want you to be well, and happier than you've been, not just for you but for Mycroft and me, too. Because seeing that makes me feel better about... everything, really."

In John's ears, it all sounded a bit selfish, now, and he was mincing his words, but he hoped Sherlock would catch the sentiment behind them. That John liked spending time with him. That John liked him.

Sherlock's eyes softened, and he took a moment to consider John's words before responding. "I'm sorry, too. That you couldn't stay in the army. Clearly, that's what you wanted."

"Thanks," John said. Hearing Sherlock — never an ardent enthusiast in empathy — say such a thing was as strange as it felt good. They were just words, but clearly, Sherlock meant them.

"You were so brilliant today," John said. He shouldn't let himself forget the good things about today just because the day had ended in such a worrying manner. "Absolute genius."

"The solution was quite obvious," Sherlock said, but John didn't miss how his lip curled into a slight, wicked smile. "Not to lesser minds, of course."

John suddenly recalled a moment when Anderson had dropped an evidence bag under a table at Mr Henry's place and had to crawl on all fours to find it. The bag had been right next to Sherlock's wheel, which couldn't have escaped the detective's notice, but he'd not said a peep, letting the crime scene tech take his time on the grimy floor. John couldn't help but grin at the memory.

"We shouldn't have giggled at Anderson, though. It was still a crime scene," he pointed out and poured a laughing Sherlock another glass of water.
Contingency Plan

John made his way from the annexe to his bedroom, switching off lights in the quiet rooms that separated him from Sherlock each night. The echo of an antique longcase clock chiming midnight followed him through the foyer.

He felt guilty for having been rather distracted while helping Sherlock get ready for bed. After the disaster of Frimley, John had explicitly offered such help for whenever Sherlock wanted to stay up late, but until today, Sherlock had not made use of the possibility, seeming to prefer the ease and familiarity of Tallie’s professionalism. But since that evening, if Sherlock ever lingered in the sitting room after Tallie had left for the night, it was always with teeth brushed, catheter bag emptied and pyjamas already on, leaving John only with the task of transferring him from chair to bed. It seemed logical that Sherlock probably preferred Tallie since she was more efficient and they had a good routine going, but a strange feeling which John could only identify as mild jealousy over the hours she and Sherlock spent together behind closed doors had raised its head tonight as John lifted him onto the bed and arranged his pillows.

He wanted to do all of it. After the kind of day they'd had together, it seemed natural that they'd conclude it together. The change had been gradual enough to be hard to notice, but when John thought back to his first days at the Court, it was hard even to believe he was thinking of the same Sherlock.

But was it enough? Will it be enough? He occasionally smiles, now, for fuck's sake. That's got to account for something. And he didn't whip up a massive fuss when he needed help today.

Weeks ago, when he'd made the initial offer to Sherlock that he wouldn't always have to retire to bed before Tallie left the house, John had received a thorough debrief from Tallie on how to assist Sherlock in the evenings. She'd told John she gave Sherlock a once-over for pressure sores and other potential skin issues, worked together with him on changing clothes, washing his face and brushing teeth. 'Best get his shirt off before all that, unless it's going in the wash, anyway.' she had instructed. A few days prior, Tallie had mentioned that Sherlock had wanted to add some new features to his bedtime routine: a spritz and a swipe of some hair products to make sure the pillow didn't rub his now much better-maintained curls into a mess as well, and some facial products. Tonight, however, Sherlock had asked for no such novel things, complaining that he was too tired for anything but the essentials. John had opened his mouth to argue, to insist that it was all fine and he was keen to learn, then thought better of it. Sherlock clearly wanted to inconvenience him as little as possible, so they'd have to settle for this simple first time. John had been relieved that, instead of zoning out in the bathroom, Sherlock had been a right chatterbox, rambling on about this and that. It seemed that the energy level reinvigorated by the case had only dipped momentarily because of the flare-up of autonomic dysreflexia. Mostly Sherlock spoke of the Henry case, but there was the occasional mention of how things had been before.

"I always used to… crash after a big case ended. Ate a big meal, slept for Lord knows how long," Sherlock mused as John helped him out of his dress shirt in the bathroom. His skin was still flushed and warm from the AD, which was satisfactorily subsiding.

John wondered what warranted a big case. Probably one of the ones Lestrade had told him about on the phone; investigations Sherlock had consulted on could last weeks.

"And during cases?" John asked. "Hardly good for anyone, staying awake and not eating for days on end."
This was met with silence.

John knew he should have said something about the future — that if Sherlock really went back to being a detective, they'd have to work together to make sure nothing unsafe like the AD flare-up would happen. Sherlock couldn't forgo sleep and meals and care routines just because of a case. *He can hardly solve anything if he lands himself at A&E.* John had thought as he fished out the tube of toothpaste from the above-sink cabinet.

Since he had done it several times before, moving Sherlock from the chair into bed didn’t feel alien at all to John. Tonight, however, it had felt intimate in a way none of the other times had been. *Should've learned all this earlier,* John had thought as he placed Sherlock’s feet on the carpet next to the bed. *Could have given Tallie more nights off.*

All in all, John had felt good — calm, happy, relieved that all symptoms of the autonomic dysreflexia had subsided and were unlikely to return now that the catheter issue was resolved — until he’d closed Sherlock's bedroom door behind him. It was as if a switch had been flipped, and he realised how on edge he’d been, how he'd spent the entire day in high alert to jump in at any moment to cushion the way. As much as he'd enjoyed his day with Sherlock, he couldn't push away the thought of how brutal the contrast was between the man who had verbally cracked a suspect's impressive façade and solved a complicated murder by looking at a newspaper and a doorknob, and the man who rolled his eyes as John accidentally squeezed too much toothpaste on his brush because he couldn't do it for himself and had just been forced to admit it out loud.

Now, as John stepped into his own quiet, slightly musty-smelling room, uncertainty flooded back in full force. Was it truly a victory what he had propelled forth by helping Sherlock plunge back into The Work so suddenly and intensely? Sherlock seemed hell-bent on plunging in head-first without any regard for his body; would he risk too much, leaving John to be the one to pull him from the brink every time? There was no staged return available to the job of the world’s only consulting detective, was there?

The more John thought about it, the luckier he began to realise they'd been with the case. While not built to be accessible, the Henry house and the Met facilities had been surprisingly easy for Sherlock to navigate. Would Sherlock have to always rely on someone else to film and examine the crime scene? *People dump bodies in really remote places, don't they?*

John's own bedtime routines took less than ten minutes. He plugged his mobile into the charger, made sure it wasn't muted in case Sherlock needed him, then slipped under the covers. After the excitement and triumph of the case, he would have expected to succumb to sleep promptly, but though the last dregs of the adrenaline must have dissipated, he was left with a growing sense of unease. In the quiet, stuffy room it soon took a life of its own, carving his guts and making his hands shake. Even the leg that really shouldn't bother him anymore felt stiff and achy.

He hated discussing it with Ella; she seemed to think he internalised his anxiety up to the point where it turned into a physical entity, and he detested the theory because it made him sound like some hysteric. He hadn't used his cane for weeks and didn't want to go back to hating the sight of himself with it. No one who saw him on the street would know what had happened to him on a day when the leg was fine; he now looked pretty much the same as he had before.

The bland joy over that statement was instantaneously soured by the realisation that Sherlock would never again have that ability to blend in with all the people without disabilities — something which John had now learned to think of as a luxury. People stared at Sherlock all the time. Would John be able to cope with that if their roles were reversed? Would Sherlock be willing to endure that for the sake of returning to the career he loved? Could he get over being so self-
conscious in public? And what if he really found himself back in the public eye where he'd been before the accident? *He was a celebrity,* John reminded himself. *London's favourite detective.* The media would have a field day with such a phoenix rising story, possibly even turn it into some imbecilic inspiratory tale. What if that happened at a point when Sherlock was still too fragile, too preoccupied with his external image that a public exposé would make him become a Musgrave Court hermit again? Could John protect him from that, and how?

Mrs Hudson had described Sherlock as a workaholic — someone who found in his profession both a meaning for his life and a method for keeping his vices in check. Could John really bring that back for him permanently? The cerebral part of the process was what Sherlock had missed the most, of that much John was certain. Yet, Mycroft had described Sherlock as someone who had loved the legwork as well as the brain work, a very physical and corporeally restless person. The fact that he had been chasing a suspect when he got into the accident told John the same story. Would even the best compromise be good enough? It seemed that Sherlock could hardly live alone at Baker Street, renovations or no renovations, and he certainly needed a literal extra pair of hands for the work. John would certainly do whatever it took: run around crime scenes with a laptop or webcam or a bloody GoPro on his forehead, do all the things Sherlock couldn't physically manage. But would Sherlock want someone around all the time? John doing those things for him would be a reminder of things lost, a constant source of frustration. The autonomic dysreflexia had been a sucker-punch John hadn't expected because he'd allowed himself to be naively lulled into a false sense of security and hope by how well that first post-hiatus case had gone. They'd both got caught up in the excitement and forgot to be safe.

*Have I made a mistake?* John wondered, pummelling his pillow into shape to channel the mounting anxiety that pulsed in his throat and pounded against his ribs. *What if Sherlock decides the AD was just further evidence that none of this is ever going to work?*

He slammed his head back onto the faintly lavender-smelling pillow, the sense of having pushed a now unstoppable freight train in motion becoming almost overwhelming. He had to believe he was doing the right thing, and up until the AD hit, he had done so. *I don't really know what the hell am I doing. Except gambling for Sherlock’s life with my own ignorance as a poor man's wager.* He grunted in frustration into the fabric-covered downs under his cheek, forcing himself to admit how great the risk of failure was.

If he was to survive the aftermath of that failure which, in his exhausted and anxious state seemed very possible, he needed a plan for scraping himself together. The thought tore at his guts, and immense guilt for even considering anything but a future where Sherlock was alive and happy nearly crumbled the fledgeling resolve he'd tried to scrape together so that he could get through these months.

He was in deep; he knew that. And that's exactly why he needed to take a step back and consider his own safety and happiness.

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After focussing so much on Sherlock's care, it had eluded John's notice until the day after the case that his own pain meds had run out. He had taken the last one on the night of the case without realising; he'd been sure that there was one more blister sheet left.

Most of the time he just used the milder ones: paracetamol and the occasional over-the-counter anti-inflammatory. The stronger stuff he only took on nights he got jolted awake by a nightmare or
a throb in his shoulder and wanted to get back to sleep. He knew that oxycodone wasn't really advisable to be used as a night crutch against anxiety but, out of some overblown sense of pride and denial, he'd declined the sleeping pills he'd been offered in rehab.

Self-prescribing was not allowed, and perhaps that was for the best. He had been putting off registering with a GP and discussing the renewal of his prescriptions since he wasn't really sure whether to argue against or for fulfilling it. A part of him didn't want it on his NHS record that he'd been on oxycodone, even though there was nothing untoward about taking such medications short-term for a documented injury. John just knew how nit-picky the GMC and some of his colleagues were with such matters. He, too, had been sceptical of most requests to renew opiate prescriptions during his A&E shifts as a trainee surgeon.

Scrunching up the empty cardboard package with the word OxyContin printed in bright letters on a white background, he sat down on the bed. He needed to get his meds sorted — the first item on a depressingly long list of things he was putting off. The next would be to have a think on returning to medicine. If he didn't start planning a return soon, he'd have to deal with an increasing amount of recertification red tape.

The longer he sat there, thinking about trying to settle for some non-surgical option he wouldn't hate too much, the more overwhelmed he felt. Finally, he decided that it couldn't be helped: he didn't have the time or the energy to worry about his broken career until the situation with Sherlock was resolved.

The next Monday — his usual day off — John gladly accepted Mycroft's offer that he could hitch a ride to High Wycombe as Mycroft headed to London.

John hadn't told the older Holmes about the errand he needed to run, yet that is precisely what Mycroft mentioned first thing in the car.

"Physician — heal thyself seems to have become an obsolete notion," his employer mused. "In some countries, doctors are allowed to self-prescribe, though they are still instructed to delegate treatment with substances affecting the central nervous system to a colleague."

John grit his teeth: he didn't want to draw Mycroft's attention to the fact of what kind of a prescription he wanted to get renewed.

"I presume I don't need to remind you to keep any and all regulated substances away from Sherlock. I assume your use of oxycodone remains limited."

"Yeah."

None of your business, John cursed internally and kept his eyes fixed on the landscape. He hadn't mentioned registering with a GP, and the address he'd given to the driver in no way signalled what business might be located there. What was it this time that gave me away? Browser history? He had done some googling about the addiction risk of oxycodone last night, hemming and hawing about the decision.

He glanced at Mycroft, who was reading The Economist on the opposite side of the spacious back seat. Does the nosy git spy on the bloody wifi?
John's leg chose that time to start twinging, and he straightened it across the generous space between the seats. *Great. Just great.* The oxycodone seemed to do good things to his leg even more than it did his shoulder. *Which makes it a chemical crutch.* Maybe he should swallow his pride and stick to the wooden one if and when the issues with his leg got bad again. He still liked knowing he had some of the tablets left for tougher times. He tried never to lean on alcohol to soothe his nerves and to unrruffle his feathers; what had happened with his father and Harry clearly signalled a genetic predisposition to addiction. There was something less embarrassing, something less… cliché about prescribed opiates, even though John knew perfectly well their significant risks.

Once his plan regarding Sherlock was done, he'd chuck it all: the oxys *and* the cane. *Once all this is over, one way or the other.* He needed to prepare himself, make a plan for how to get through it if—

*Don't think about it.*

Yet, he had to do just that, didn't he? There could easily be some major setback such as the Met deciding Sherlock was too much of a liability. They couldn't even argue employee discrimination since Sherlock had no official ties to NSY. What would John be left with if his plan turned out to not work?

He recalled Tallie's words: *'His life is hard'* Well, whose wasn't? John's certainly would be if this six-month deal ended with Sherlock going—

John cleared his throat and shook his head slightly, which prompted Mycroft to lift a brow before his focus shifted back to the magazine.

*I have to prepare. There are no guarantees that what I'm doing will work.* Failure was a possibility; even Mycroft believed that.

Watching the countryside change to the urban sprawl of London outside the car window, John commanded himself to harden his heart and begin making a second plan, a contingency for himself in case the worst happened. He jutted up his chin, brows knitting slightly as he summoned the determination that he knew he possessed on his better days. He needed… *things* in his life, things and people outside Musgrave Court. Harry was a good start, but his relationship with her was still fragile and nothing on which to build a future. No, he needed *new* things, things that would force him to leave the flat, things that would remind him that while some lives ended, others went on.

It still felt impossible, imagining a world, a life, Musgrave Court, Mycroft's life, *John's life without Sherlock.* But he had to try, didn't he?

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There was plenty of choice in GP surgeries in the area close to Wycombe Hospital. John had picked a smaller practice, which would be easy to swap out of, depending on where he'd be living after the six months were up.

*Don't think about it,* he commanded while vacillating on the pavement. He needed to summon a professional, serene game face, not walk in looking disheartened because he was worrying about Sherlock again.

A melodic chime was activated when he opened the door to Deeds Grove Surgery on its namesake
side street. Located in a relatively new-looking office block, the place had an online reservation service and an informative, modern website, which John had liked.

He walked up to the reception counter, where a young man with blond hair in a neat ponytail was stapling together forms.

"Morning, sir," he said in friendly greeting the minute he spotted John.

"Morning. Here to register. Couldn't book an appointment before doing that." Registering as a patient was not something the surgery offered through an online service.

"Certainly, sir."

"Doctor."

"Excuse me?"

"That would be Doctor. Or, well, Mister since I was a surgeon, but I guess it's Doctor Watson, now," he said, wanting to bite his tongue for rambling. Only consultant surgeons went by 'Mister'. He wasn't sure what he was, now.

"Doctor…?"

"Watson. John Watson. Here's my…" He patted through his pockets to find his old NHS medical card, nearly knocking over the cane he'd leaned on the counter. The cards weren't issued anymore but should still be accepted as proof of identity.

"I'll need a current ID as well," the receptionist told him with a courteous smile. "Could you fill these out?" He asked, passing John a stack of forms and receiving his passport in exchange.

John skimmed the first form, not worrying about delaying the queue to the reception desk because there was none. "I'm not exactly sure where my old records are. The military doesn't yet have an electronic system, and the paper copies could be, well, anywhere between here and Kandahar."

The receptionist leaned past the counter to address a woman walking past. She wore a crisp white blouse, and forest green trousers paired with kitten heels, and a personnel card in a lanyard hung from her neck. Her long chestnut hair was open, and she had a quickdraw smile, high cheekbones and a long, sharp nose. Her appearance was… distinctive but not as striking as Sherlock's.

She looks nice, John thought.

"Doctor Sawyer?" The young man called out to her, and she immediate readjusted her course to meet John by the reception desk. "Yes, Oliver?"

"This is Doctor Watson."

The female physician — whose personnel card John could now see said 'Sarah Sawyer' — frowned. "I hadn't booked any interviews for today, though I could squeeze you in, Lord knows we're snowed under this week. When could you start?"

Now, it was John's time to be confused. "Start? I was hoping for an appointment today. Got some prescriptions I need to—"

"Doctor Watson wants to register with us," Oliver hastily explained.

"Oh," Sarah Sawyer said. "Patient registration. Is there a problem?"
"He doesn't know where his military medical records are," Oliver said.

"Oh, that's easy. Navy, Army or Air Force?"

"RAMC, so Army," John replied.

"That'd be the Army Personnel Centre in Glasgow; the address is on the NHS website. Oliver, could you sort this out for Doctor…?"

"John Watson." He frowned, tilted his head. "So, you're recruiting?"

"God, yes," Sarah huffed. "Had to cancel half our sessions this afternoon because I've got one on sick leave and another with a family emergency. You wouldn't be looking, would you?"

John was startled by the suggestion. "I… um… I need to consider some options. Not now, but in a few months, maybe." He left out the fact that he might not be living in the area beyond that.

Don't think about why.

"No harm in having a chat about it, is there? I've got one partner with a mat leave coming up, and there's August to consider, too, when the new trainees start. I need more hands on deck, or we'll sink. Listen, I'm busy as hell, but we could grab a sandwich down the street and see if we could make something happen?"

John lifted up his forms. "I've got these to do first, I believe."

"And I'm with a patient, waiting for lidocaine to kick in. I'll be free in fifteen."

"Okay." John felt whiplashed by this sudden development, but there was no harm in talking to his colleague about his options, was there? Not that he wanted to work where he was a patient, but then again, he could always re-register elsewhere.

Ten minutes later, all forms were filled, and Oliver had faxed a request to Glasgow for a full copy of John's records.

"Did you also want to book an appointment?" the receptionist then asked.

"I don't know. I just need these renewed, really," John said and dug out his prescriptions. He could buy the paracetamol and the non-steroidals over the counter, but they were more expensive and in smaller packages. He also preferred the prescription-only celecoxib to ibuprofen because its effect lasted through the night. The oxycodone prescription was the last he placed on the desk. Glancing around to make sure the two people who had now lined up behind him weren't privy to what it said, he showed it to Oliver.

"Oh," the receptionist said. "That one requires an appointment. Surgery policy," He began pounding away at his computer. "I can give you a slot on Friday. As Doctor Sawyer said, we're a bit short on appointments today. Doctor Ranaweera at nine-thirty?"

"Alright." John had been hoping to sort all this today, but he could certainly manage to wait three more days. He hoped Tallie could stay until lunchtime to keep Sherlock company.

John had meant to talk to Mycroft about whether Sherlock really needed such constant supervision. Things were better, weren't they, and if he had a date for Switzerland, why would he try to—

John's train of thought was interrupted by Doctor Sawyer who called out his first name. She was
now wielding a purse and wearing a nicely tailored, grey-laced-with-white jacket on top of her blouse.

Joining John by the desk, she glanced at the topmost prescription in the pile. Her smile didn't falter. "Shall we?"

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Their sandwich lunch felt more like reconnecting with an old acquaintance than it did a job interview. He and Sarah instantly got on well, had the same sense of humour, and there was an easiness in interacting with her that John found to be a breath of fresh air after the suffocation of Musgrave Court — and dealing with Mycroft in particular.

John explained that he couldn't commit to a new job right now or even make very firm plans for the remainder of the year. "Personal matters. It's complicated. I am licensed, though, with no limitations on my record."

"Good. You don't have a CV with you, do you?" Sarah asked, sipping her iced tea.

"No, but I kind of remember where I've been, so…" John joked.

She nodded. "Just give me a summary."

After he finished explaining about his early postgraduate training, the shift to RAMC and his traumatology consultant status, she whistled. "You might be a bit overqualified for the sort of trauma we get here, but it would be great to have you available to consult on injuries. It's annoying, needing to queue for phone consults from Wycombe all the time. Any other special skills I should know about?"

"Well, I played the clarinet at school."

"I'll be looking forward to hearing… that, then," Sarah replied, and they both burst into laughter.

All that now remained of their sandwiches were crumbs, and Sarah glanced at her watch. "I need to head back. You got everything sorted with Oliver?"

John nodded. He didn't make a move to rise from the booth; he still had a splosh of tea left. "Think so."

Sarah worried her lip, and John allowed his gaze to linger on it.

"Listen, I hate to dash," she lamented, "This was really nice, John. We'd love to have you, but I understand if you can't commit to anything right now. It was really nice meeting you."

"This was really nice, Sarah," John echoed, emphasising her name. I'm not her patient. She's not my physician. We could have met in a medical conference, or at a bar. It's fine.

"How about dinner?" He asked before his brain had really connected with his heart or his mouth in any meaningful way. The word had just popped out without permission — a Pavlovian reaction to the obvious interest Sarah was radiating. John had never been shy about asking women out, never hesitant about politely expressing his desires. His army mates had called him 'Three Continents Watson', but not because he was some weasel who used people. No, enthusiastic consent was his biggest turn-on, and so what if he wasn't a great fan of extending a fun night out into a joint
breakfast…

Sarah shifted her weight. "Um, sure." She scribbled her number on a napkin she snatched from a receptacle. "Call me? Wycombe doesn't have much in the way of fine dining, but there's a very decent curry house on the other side of the tracks if you're into that."

"I love a good curry." John refrained from mentioning he and Sherlock had already tried takeaway from all the three Indian restaurants in the area and the establishment Sarah must have been referring to was the worst of the bunch.

*Sherlock had liked their chutney best, though.*

John grit his teeth. Even though they had discussed his current work situation, he hadn't explained any details, hadn't volunteered as to why he was unemployable for several months more. All he had said was that he needed some time to explore his options. He made a mental note to stick to that decision.

Sarah gave him an enthusiastic wave and a smile as she walked back towards the surgery past the facade of the café. John waved back, then finished his tea. Through the large window behind his booth, sunlight streamed in and painted the interior in warm, yellow tones. He wanted to linger, to hold on to what he knew would be fleeting: freedom from the heaviness in his heart he only barely kept at bay at Musgrave. He wanted a moment of the unanswered questions and the sense of time ticking away, which plagued him at night. Free from the sense of dread chilling his marrow, free from the memory of Sherlock smiling at him. The autonomic dysreflexia had scared John — more than he'd been willing to admit even right after it had happened. The Work had to be the most important part of his plan and, though Sherlock hadn't seemed very rattled by the aftermath, it was a discouraging reminder of the risks involved. The work of a private eye — or a consulting detective — was hardly conducive for regular routines or good self-care, which John should have realised beforehand. How much additional hardship could Sherlock be coaxed to endure to be able to continue in his beloved profession? There was no way to know, except through trial and error, and every setback broke John's heart as badly as he suspected they did Sherlock's, over and over and over again.

So many questions, so few answers, so little certainty.

Yes, John absolutely needed time out of mind even if time was a currency in which he was the least wealthy right now. He had every right to use his free time for whatever he wanted, and socialising would be good for him. Even Mycroft would probably agree. Maybe it would be a good example for Sherlock if John dated. It would show that while their injuries were not entirely compatible, neither John's history nor Sherlock's present life was reason enough to give up on other people.

Like a mantra, John once again reminded himself that he should keep his proverbial distance to it all if he were to survive this. He needed an escape hatch in case failing in his monumental task threatened to crush him.

*Think about Sarah. She looks fit.*

He tried, he really tried, but his thoughts slipped back to Sherlock.

He couldn’t deny feeling a thrilling spark of... *something* between him and Sherlock during the case, but it must have been just adrenaline. *A spur-of-the-moment thought, nothing more.* John had no idea if Sherlock had even noticed; the man was so socially oblivious that the moment could have meant anything else or simply nothing to him. He had been focussed on solving the case, not on John, let alone *flirting*. Yet, John couldn’t help remembering the way his stomach had flipped...
when Sherlock’s eyes had repeatedly settled on him, the sparkle in them making him seem so alive and happy... More than a few times, Sherlock had also glanced at John as if making sure he still had his attention, that John was impressed and not bored. As if John being there mattered a great deal.

He swallowed and pushed such thoughts out of his mind. They were dangerous, terrifying, and Sherlock would most likely consider them an unwelcome side-track. John needed to keep his task clear in his head and not start daydreaming.

The next day, John was washing up breakfast dishes in the kitchen, stealing occasional glances through the sitting room window.

Leo and Sherlock were doing their exercises outside since it was warm. The PT considered the uneven surface of the lawn — covered with a yoga mat — a good extra challenge for balance and muscle control.

The long hand of the clock soon hit noon, and Leo wandered inside to ask John for a glass of water. There was sweat beading on his forehead from pacing Sherlock by doing sit-ups by his side, and his grin was infectious; John couldn’t help returning it as he finished arranging plates into the cupboard.

The physical therapist grabbed a chair and crossed an ankle on top of his knee while John wiped his hands on a tea towel and ran two glasses under the tap.

An Australian by birth, Leo had met a local girl when she'd been on a working holiday Down Under, and he'd followed her to England. He'd had his own, successful practice in Sydney, working with sports professionals when he wasn't teaching surfing at Bondi Beach; Helen had been one of his Bondi customers. At first, Sherlock had merely tolerated his presence but now, John was happy to see him occasionally even laughing at Leo's brand of humour, which often skirted on laddish. Perhaps what Sherlock found so amusing was that Leo firmly stuck to the assumption that Sherlock, of all people, might go in for that sort of thing.

One shouldn't let easy-going first impressions deceive, though — Leo had a Master's in clinical rehabilitation, an additional degree in occupational therapy, and plenty of additional specialist training in neurological rehab. Mycroft couldn't have done better in picking a PT, and John had often teased Leo about being way overqualified to help him with his shoulder every Wednesday after Sherlock's training session.

"Good session," Leo praised. "He added five extra to any rep number I suggested. Shouldn't be long 'til he can push with his arms enough to sit up on his own."

"Sherlock not coming back in yet?" John asked, settling at the table with a half-drunk glass of orange juice.

"Told me to leave him sprawled on the swag out there since the weather's so great."
John turned his head to look out the window, and sure enough, Sherlock was star-fished on the yoga mat on the grass, eyes closed, and arms stretched above his head. His hair was a sweaty mess, and he looked relaxed. The sight made John break into a smile.

"He talks about you all the time, you know," Leo told him, taking a big gulp of water. His tone carried a hint of gentle joshing.

John hummed in reply, unsure what to do with such a statement. He took a sip from his own glass to conceal his smile.

Leo's expression then turned slightly more serious. "Listen, I want to talk to him about wrist splints for at least a couple of nights a week; I'm seeing some signs of a contracture risk for his wrists which is common for C6 and C7."

"I know his mother's been pressing for tendon transfer for his ankles."

Leo frowned. "Why? There was definitely something going on there when we first started, but he's put in the work, hasn't bailed on our appointments once after that wobbly he had before his Mum came over, plus Tallie does her bit with maintenance exercises. His ankles are fine."

"I don't think Mrs Holmes is really very up-to-date on how he's doing."

Leo grimaced. "Dunno. But yeah, I tried to talk to him about the wrists; went all crook on me. Don’t suppose you could have a word…?"

John leaned back in his chair, shaking his head. "He'd instantly catch on to the fact that we've been discussing this behind his back. We can talk to him together, but it has to come from you. Anything that sounds like a therapeutic or assistive device is going to be a tough sell."

"I know you don't want to get all clucky with him as The Boss does," Leo mused, referring, of course, to Mycroft, "but he doesn't quite listen to anyone like he listens to you."
Sarah was exactly John’s type, as he discovered on their date.

She was intelligent and witty, confident and down-to-earth. She laughed easily and John found himself immediately relaxing in her presence, just as he had over their shared lunch a few days prior. She was attractive, fit... No reason at all not to seize the opportunity for a date. He had called her the very next day, choosing to embrace the chance he'd been given before he lost his nerve. He hadn’t been on a proper date since joining the army, and he was looking forward to a delicious meal and some light-hearted company. Despite their initial discussion regarding curry, John had done some online research and suggested something slightly upmarket: a steakhouse in Beaconsfield which had good reviews for its ambience and extensive menu. Sarah had readily agreed, saying that she didn't mind at all driving the few extra minutes outside of Wycombe.

They ordered a bottle of wine and wild Atlantic scallops for a starter, nibbling and sipping as they made their way through typical first date conversation topics. John described his time in the army and his work as a traumatologist, taking care to avoid any mention of his injury. He learned that Sarah had grown up in High Wycombe, and gone to medical school in London during which she'd had a short-lived marriage to an EMT. She had taken over management of the surgery in Wycombe when the founder, her father, passed away from liver cancer only a few years after she finished her speciality training. She had two sisters with whom she got along well.

Their main courses were delivered during a lull in the conversation; Sarah had ordered grilled sea bass with a pesto velouté and roasted aubergine, while John had gone the traditional route with an aged ribeye. The steak arrived perfectly marbled, juices soaking into his mash as he slid his knife through the meat as easily as if he were slicing butter. He closed his eyes, humming contentedly around his first bite.

“Good?” Sarah asked teasingly, her eyes sparkling over her wine glass as she took a sip. The alcohol had flushed her cheeks a bit.

John grinned, feeling the effects of his own two glasses of wine buzzing pleasantly through his veins. “Very good.”

"This is good, too," Sarah said, lifting her wine glass. "Shame I can't have more than one glass," she complained, placing the glass back on the table. She was the designated driver, after all.

They ate in silence until Sarah brought up the inevitable: “So what was it that you said you do now for a living? You're not currently practising, are you?”

John chewed his bite of meat thoroughly, pausing to take a drink from his water glass with an apologetic shrug.

He shook his head, dabbing at his mouth with his napkin. "I’m an… I guess assistant and caregiver to a man in recovery from a spinal cord injury.”

Sarah's smile was sympathetic, and she raised her eyebrows, encouraging him to go on.

“I don’t actually handle a lot of nursing aspects of it; he already had a rota of home nurses for all of that when I was hired. Mostly I’m there to…” He racked his brain for an adequate description.

There wasn’t an easy way to explain that he was there on suicide watch, to make sure that Sherlock followed through on his deal to grace the earth with six more months of his presence. It probably
would be hard to explain that he had a plan to try to convince a man who had given up to fight, instead. And that I'm trying to scrape together a plan in case I fail.

John realised he’d trailed off awkwardly, leaving Sarah patiently waiting for him to finish the rest of his thought. He cleared his suddenly tight throat and met her gaze with a forced smile. "I guess I'm mostly there to help him find himself again."

"Not a job description you hear every day," Sarah replied, sounding curious.

John finished another mouthful and quickly dabbed his lips, struggling to decide whether he should resist the sudden and intense temptation to talk about Sherlock, after all. He could use a sounding board. "He used to be a detective — not a police one but some sort of a consulting sleuth. Worked with Scotland Yard. Now, he just… He's sort of given up on everything. Lives with his big brother who's some government bigshot; the brother was the one who hired me. He's tried his best to help, but I don't think the two of them are very similar. I don't think he… gets it."

"Gets what?"

"What it's like when you think that the thing you wanted to do all your life, you just can't, not anymore, and you don't know what comes next or if anything could feel as good as your old life. When you're just asking if there's any point to, well, anything."

Sarah bit her lip, perhaps reading something in his barrage of words that made her hesitant to reply. The implication must have been clear to her that John considered himself much more an expert in knowing what it felt like to feel hopeless and desperate.

John opened his mouth, preparing to apologise for the dark turn their date had taken.

But Sarah's curiosity about John's work was not sated yet. "What level injury does he have?"

"It extends up to C7; pretty complicated since there's a kind of a non-complete slice through on that level and then a partial crush injury just below. Nobody knows how many of his spinal tracts were spared."

"Is his respiratory function compromised?"

"No, not really, unless he gets an infection." John ripped a piece of bread in two, deep in thought. "He's in a wheelchair, of course. Not a lot of sensation below his ribcage."

"That would be horrible, wouldn't it, to not be able to feel anything?" Sarah said, her voice suddenly dropping in pitch.

John was startled to feel her hand on his knee under the table. He couldn't tell at all whether she was trying to be comforting or coming on to him. He also wasn't sure how he'd feel about the latter. Talking about Sherlock certainly wasn't putting him in the mood.

Yet, he found it hard to stop and leaned forward. "No, that's just it. I think he feels everything a bit too much — he's so overwhelmed he's drowning in it, too depressed to see if things could get better. It's already been over a year since the accident, and the longer it takes the harder it's going to be to regain function and get on with his life."

Sarah withdrew her hand, glancing around the dining room before asking, "Is he married?"

There was little enthusiasm in her question and John suspected she was just being polite.
"No. I talked to his landlady, who seemed to be one of his only... They were close before the accident."

"Sounds like an uphill climb," Sarah said, shaking her head. "Shouldn't they have hired, I don't know, a psychotherapist?" There was an unspoken second question now in the air: why did John need to be the one to address such issues? How was he somehow qualified to help?

John snorted. "His brother hired every conceivable kind of professional help, and Sherlock's chased every one of them off. He's clever, but he's also a very all-or-nothing bloke; things can't be the way they were before, but he refuses to settle for anything less."

"But you're a doctor, John, one without a lot of training in rehabilitation. Wouldn't you want something a bit more… acute, closer to your speciality?" Sarah seemed to then regret the way she'd phrased that because she continued hastily: "I meant that he must have his own doctors. Seems a bit of a waste to hire a consultant surgeon for something that anyone with a nursing degree could do to help a wheelchair-bound SCI patient."

_Sherlock_, John thought. _His name is Sherlock. He's not just some bloke in a wheelchair. And no, not just anyone with a bloody nursing degree could manage dealing with him!_

He tried to stomp down on the anger that had suddenly awakened by telling himself that the points Sarah had raised were perfectly reasonable. What made him a person who could plausibly help Sherlock? More importantly: were those reasons something he wanted to discuss with Sarah? I know how Sherlock feels, at least a little bit. I want him to live, because... because every moment without him is a moment wasted. Because I like him. Because I really, really—

The realisation suddenly hit that he had been much keener to talk about Sherlock than he was to get to know her better. What the hell was he even doing here, at this restaurant, with Sarah? Was this really the right time to date people? Why had he thought that this was a good idea?

"Sorry," John said, reaching for his water glass again. He'd lost his taste for the wine. "I know you didn't come here to talk about all that." It was best not to continue talking about Sherlock, since it suddenly felt like he and Sarah were on opposite sides. John knew he was being irrational, but Sarah couldn't know what the stakes were. She didn't know how thin the knife-edge was. "It's been intense, and I've still got several months left in my contract."

She smiled, but that smile had changed. It no longer held a keen interest, the exciting promise of more. Now, it was friendly but detached. "It's okay. Sounds like what you're doing is really important to you."

"Yeah," John confirmed. "It really is."

The date could have led to something, it really could have; before John's life had been wrecked by a bullet, he wouldn't have thought twice about turning on the charm to get a leg over. But, it had never felt _wrong_ like it had tonight. It had never felt like he needed to consider the feelings of anyone other than the two people involved.

Not even Sarah's last attempt at flirting shook him out of his restless reverie — from the feeling that there was somewhere else he needed to be. After a few moments of silent chewing as they worked their way through the dregs of their mains, Sarah re-crossed her legs under the table, bumping their knees together, and leaned in to whisper conspiratorially about a couple seated a few tables away; the man was one of her patients, but his date was most definitely _not_ his wife.
John chuckled, and was pleased that it didn’t even sound forced. He tried his best to engage in the rest of the date, sympathetic to her attempts to salvage it. They swapped work stories during their dessert of oversweet tiramisu, admitting defeat after only a few bites each.

Sarah’s foot came to rest comfortably against John's calf, occasionally nudging against it. Though he didn’t pull away, he found himself wanting to, anxious to hurry through the proceedings and return home. He was relieved when the bill arrived, hastily pulling out his wallet and returning Sarah’s gracious smile; paying was the least he could do. She was nice, and he felt a momentary pang of wishing that things were different.

But did he, really? Different in what way? Did he wish he’d never met Sherlock? God, no. Who knows what he would have done if he’d had to continue to endure that abysmal bedsit and having nothing to do except to feel sorry for himself. It felt backwards that if he’d not been hired by Mycroft Holmes, if he’d not met Sherlock, he wouldn't be sitting there with an attractive woman but trying to hastily extricate himself from her company.

Before parting ways outside of the restaurant, Sarah gave him a quick hug but didn’t initiate more or suggest continuing their evening someplace else. She didn't offer him a lift back to the Court, nor would John have needed it: a familiar black Bentley stood idling at the corner when they exited the restaurant. The irritation for such presumptuousness on Mycroft's part that he wouldn't get to follow Sarah home didn't last nearly as long as it should have.

In the car, John spared only a few moments for reflecting on their date. It was pretty clear that Sarah had been interested in him, even after he had demonstrated he could easily slip into being rather morose. She was a graceful flirt, easily slipping compliments into the conversation with a sweet smile. He had enjoyed the attention, had liked feeling interesting and masculine and attractive, and naturally it had been nice having someone to talk to that only knew him as John-the-potential-colleague-and-friend instead of other, less flattering descriptors that had somehow clung to him after getting shot. When he was alone and having a bad day, those descriptors seemed to clatter in his head like rocks in a barrel, noisy and distracting. Sarah's interest had silenced them momentarily.

Then that discussion about Sherlock had happened. John now realised it had probably sounded like wasting half a date griping about an ex. Maybe he had needed her support as a colleague more than he’d wanted her as a date.

Still wasn't a completely rubbish evening, John decided as he let himself in the front door of Musgrave Court. Even though he hadn’t rushed her off to bed as his former self would’ve done, it had been nice to talk to someone, to have an evening out. He wondered if he should’ve tried harder, that maybe after... No, he thought firmly as he hung his coat in the wardrobe just off the main corridor. Safe to admit that I really didn’t want that. He shrugged, giving up trying to convince himself otherwise.

At the intersection that led to either his own bedroom or the annexe, John hesitated and paused to check his watch. It was only half-past eight. Best shite date ever, he chuckled — especially since it meant that he might be able to spend some time with Sherlock before heading to bed. So, he headed to the annexe, hankering for a mug of tea and a biscuit. Maybe Sherlock would still be in the rec room and they could continue watching that documentary about Arabian dessert animals. John had discovered that Sherlock possessed an encyclopaedic knowledge base of toxins and poisons. All for The Work, of course.

John was surprised to find that only one light was on in the main area, and Tallie was watching TV alone. She turned upon hearing footsteps. "Hey, John. You're back early."
"Yeah, I… Nevermind," he dismissed, wanting to push the date and Sarah out of his thoughts, now.

His questioning look made Tallie nod towards the bedroom. "He's sleeping, I think. Finally."

"Sleeping? At this hour? Why the hell would Sherlock go to bed at eight in the evening? "He's not ill, is he?"

Tallie shook her head. "No, but it's his back. It comes and goes — nerve pain in the shoulder blades and triceps are common in people with his injury level. He's been working harder than ever with Leo lately; maybe that's aggravated it."

John folded his arms. "He didn't say anything to me earlier."

Sherlock had been quieter than usual all day, lapsing into complete silence during lunch and retreating to his bedroom immediately afterwards without asking to be helped into bed for a nap. John hadn’t seen him again before Tallie arrived for her afternoon visit. While reading in the annexe to bide his time before he had to leave for Wycombe to meet Sarah, John had kept an ear perked for the comforting whir of the wheelchair but had been content to just let Sherlock be.

John’s mind had been preoccupied with his upcoming date, anyway, and he had excused himself to his bedroom earlier than usual before dinnertime to shower and get dressed.

"He didn't want you to think it was because of that case he took," Tallie said plainly. "I don't think it's that and Leo doesn't either, but Sherlock doesn't want to disappoint you."

"He'll disappoint me more if he doesn't tell me these things!" Hadn't Sherlock learned anything from his AD flare-up after the case?

Tallie grimaced at his raised tone. "John, please keep your voice down."

"If he'd told me, I'd have stayed home today."

Tallie stood up and crossed her arms as she leaned a hip against the back seat of the sofa. "It's alright, John; you need your time off, too. I had nothing planned, so I stayed for the evening when Mycroft asked. He's been on conference calls all day and Sherlock wasn't in the mood to watch TV with him, anyway."

A sudden surge of anger towards the older Holmes flooded through John. His brother was feeling poorly, and Mycroft turfed the whole thing to hired help so that he could work?

*Then again, where was I? On a bloody date. And it didn't occur to me anything could be wrong earlier even though he spent half the day sulking in the bedroom.* Embarrassed, John realised that he may have just misdirected anger meant for himself to his employer.

"This is not new," Tallie consoled him. "It comes and goes. Surely, you've picked up on when he has bad days. Sometimes it's more than just the stuff in his head."

*I should have been here. "How is he?"

"Like I said, sleeping. I gave him some Xanax with Mister Holmes' permission. He had some tramadol earlier, plus his usual pain meds and a heat pack. Can't lie on his back at the moment."

"Mycroft's not a doctor. He shouldn't be making those decisions." John knew that there were more effective neuropathic pain medications than what Sherlock was currently on. Mycroft seemed to be so rattled by the suicide attempt that he'd even withhold such necessary things just to avoid having several overdose-risky substances in the house. *Tramadol is probably like pissing in a house fire*
for someone who's used heroin. Then again, there was some proof that it was more effective for neuropathic pain than other opiates.

\textit{I should have been here}, John cursed.

Guilt over being absent gnawed at him even if he knew Tallie could effortlessly handle anything and everything that Sherlock needed. After all, she had worked with him much longer than John and both Sherlock and Mycroft trusted her. But, John's remorse and the choking worry which simmered right below the surface of his determination kept trying to take over. He'd thought that the silence earlier that day was, well, Sherlock being Sherlock. \textit{Why the hell wouldn't he tell me he was having a bad day?}

The bedroom door was slightly ajar. Tallie's worried gaze followed John as he widened the crack and peered in. The bathroom lights were on, making the door cast a soft shadow on the carpet. The lights in the bedroom itself were dimmed to minimum, but John could easily make out the shape of Sherlock on the bed, the heat pack still on his bare back as he lay on his stomach. The duvet had only been pulled up to his waist. His hands were tucked under his pillow, his head turned towards the window, so John could only see his dark curls contrasted against the white pillow cover. His chest expanded steadily, deeply, and he was very still.

\textit{Sleeping, or pretending to do so.} John wouldn't put it past the man to fake it in order to eavesdrop on their conversation if he thought it might be about him.

He retreated back to the kitchen, where Tallie was putting on her coat.

"If I wasn't here, you would have stayed, wouldn't you?" John asked. The thought of leaving Sherlock alone in such a state felt cruel.

"Mister Holmes is keeping an eye on him through the CCTV, and he said that he'd bring his laptop to the sitting room soon. He said I could go at quarter to nine."

John's lips tightened and he bit his tongue. "I'll stay. No need to bother Mycroft."

"John," Tallie said softly. "You can't be here \textit{all} the time. It's not good for either of you. Can we...?" she went to the door adjoining the annexe to the main house, beckoning John to follow.

Reluctantly, he followed her, anticipating what she wanted to have a private word about. John\textit{ wanted} to be here and fuck it whether it was good for him. \textit{Sherlock needs me. He needed me today and wouldn't even tell me. Probably read it on me this morning where I was going. I need to make this up to him.}

Tallie looked sombre. She removed her hands from her coat pockets and let them hang at her sides. "Look, John, I'm just... I've been in this situation before. It's important to hold on to your own life, and to prepare a bit—"

"In what situation?" John demanded coldly. "Waiting for someone to die? You don't think this is a little different than looking after someone with terminal cancer or end-stage ALS? Sherlock's got every chance to make things work, to get on with his life, but you're fucking telling me to just prepare to watch him die, to bloody give up on him? I get it, how he feels about a lot of stuff, but I also get that after someone is mixed up in that for a long time it gets to them, too, that—that—whatever Stockholm syndrome you and Mycroft are both trapped in. You both walk all over him; take away his autonomy for so many things... yet you're perfectly fine giving in to his stupidest wish? How is that logical, hm? How is that looking out for him?"
Tallie looked taken aback. "Stupidest? What about what he wants? You don't think he's given a lot of thought to how he wants or doesn't want to live? How is dismissing his greatest wish not walking over him, too?"

John glanced towards the annexe door, squeezing his eyes shut momentarily before facing her again. "I can't give up on him. Not now, not ever."

"Is that for your sake or his?"

John's mobile rang to rescue him from answering, and Tallie began to button up her coat again.

"Are you done?" John demanded, finger hovering on the button to accept the call.

Tallie's reply was to shrug and tighten her lips into an irritated line. "See you tomorrow, John. You better get that," she said, nodding towards John's mobile, on the screen of which they could both see the name Mycroft Holmes flashing.

John gave Tallie a resigned nod and turned away before he answered.

"Evening, John," their employer said before John had even uttered a hello. "I see you've returned. A word in the library?"

The man had an annoying habit of posing questions which were really orders.

John lifted the phone away from his ear. "Mycroft wants a word," he told Tallie, pinning her down with his gaze. "Can you wait to leave until I come back? Please?"

"I'll be in the kitchen," she relented, her expression softening as he glanced back towards the annexe.

"Thanks," John said, though he didn't feel much genuine gratitude towards her in that moment. Once again, he felt very alone in trying to combat the stagnant expectation of loss which lingered at Musgrave Court like a bad smell.

"I want to get him an appointment to see a pain specialist," John announced from the library entrance the minute he spotted Mycroft at the opposite end of the room.

"I assumed his neurologist had such matters under control."

John ignored the counterargument. "And I want whatever's recommended, meds or otherwise, to be available at the annexe and to be given to him when he needs them."

"Are you implying his needs are not currently being met?"

"For… reasons, he doesn't always tell anyone except Tallie when he's having a bad day with the pain. If he could be the one to decide when to take something stronger, it might make him feel a bit more in control, wouldn't it? There are time-locked drug dispensers," John suggested. "If he could take responsibility for all that…"

"Out of the question. I'm sure he could circumvent any contraption known to man when it comes to having a fix—"

"It's not a bloody fix if he’s in pain! And, I think he needs that assessment particularly to see
whether he needs something specific for neuropathic pain. There's capsaicin treatment, specialised physio, newer meds, TENS…"

"Very well. If you could pass onto me some suitable names, this will be arranged. I assume the required level of expertise would reside in London?"

"Maybe, unless there's someone closer. I'll look into it."

Maybe Sarah knew someone in the region who was worth their salt? Then again, it might be a bit awkward to contact her again, especially if it was pertaining to the very man that had been the elephant in the dining room.

"So be it," the older Holmes said. "Now, tell me: how is the blogging going?" Mycroft's distaste for the concept was obvious. "Need I remind you of your physician's duty to keep a confidence, and the non-disclosure clauses in your employment contract?"

John hadn't written much about Sherlock after his first post about taking the job, just bits and pieces commenting on the area and the house. "I would never reveal anything private."

In hindsight, perhaps he shouldn't even have mentioned the name Sherlock — there couldn't be many by that name. But, he'd only mentioned meeting someone by that first name; hardly something that would fall under medical confidence. He had considered typing up a bit of something about the case, but Sherlock had documented some of his work on his own blog, before. Wouldn't he be the best at detailing what had happened? Still, a part of John was tempted to share what he was learning, what had impressed him. As Sherlock had phrased it, the game was on again, and John was fascinated by it. Judging by the latest comments on Sherlock's *Science of Deduction* blog and the fact that some people had even looked up John's blog because Sherlock's first name had been mentioned, clearly there could be an audience interested in Sherlock's further adventures. Surely John could help him with that, write things up in a way that underlined his brilliance and not his disability?

Mycroft cleared his throat to regain his attention. “Ensure that you don’t. Now, what can I get you?” The older Holmes then asked, already standing beside the well-stocked glass-and-brass bar cart stationed at the opposite end of the library from the fireplace, conveniently close to two Chesterfield armchairs. “Do tell me — for future reference — what your tastes are. Earlier tonight, you indulged in a choice of Riesling with your meal, which was appropriate for your feminine company but not the food. Recently, at other occasions, you have gone for red wine or whisky. Perhaps that might reflect on your current preferences lying in something more masculine?"

Mycroft lifted up a decanter half full of an amber-coloured liquid, and the way he inspected the handwritten label seemed, to John, a bit theatrical.

“How do you know what I had for dinner tonight?” John asked, crossing his arms.

“I make it my business to keep an eye on all important developments regarding Sherlock.”

John’s mouth tightened into a line, and he made a conscious effort not to clench his fist. With Mycroft Holmes, a battle for dominance of the stage always raged on, and John doubted that, in the circles the man moved in, such things could be won with open displays of emotion. As he watched the older Holmes, he was reminded of a careful hunter circling their prey.

“Whisky,” John said firmly.

Mycroft nodded. "I think we have just the thing in this house to please you, Captain Watson." He
couldn’t decide if the calculated, amused sharpness in Mycroft’s tone was mockery or acceptance. There was a coldness to it that made John feel as though he was being judged.

He exhaled through his nose, settling into one of the chairs. “If there’s something you want to say to me, say it."

Mycroft poured two fingers of Glenfiddich into a tumbler from a bottle on the bottom shelf of the cart, added two ice cubes without asking whether John wanted them, and brought the glass to him. John scowled at it; the rich, golden colour of the liquid shifted and flickered as it reflected the flames crackling in the fireplace.

"Don't presume I am surprised at your attempt at a courtship with Doctor Sawyer, or that I disapprove on principle. Under other circumstances I would not comment on such matters, but I'm sure you would agree that our situation calls for careful deliberation of all details."

John wanted to protest, wanted to tell his boss off for thinking he had any business in commenting on who John should spend his time with, or how. Yet, the chastising he now expected echoed his own thoughts from earlier: *I should have been here*. 

Mycroft took a seat opposite, leaning slightly forward and taking a sip of whatever he'd poured himself from the crystal decanter. "It has been my impression that Sherlock is more afraid of hope that he is of death, because only the latter offers certainty, a comforting predictability and no potential for further disappointment. I believe I have warned you before of how flimsy his confidence is. If someone was to toy with it, to make light of the affection he so rarely bestows on others…"

John started at the word *affection*; it sounded so foreign on the lips of a man that John had assumed wouldn’t recognise affection even if it bit him in the arse.

John took a large swallow of his drink before arranging his features carefully into one of passive indifference complete with a shrug. "So, this is the 'hurt him and I will hunt you down' speech, then? Big brother making sure that… what exactly?"

"*Doctor Watson.*" The tone was cold and invited no counter-arguments. "You are to remember you are a guest in my *house*. I detest bluntness over a more civil approach, but if that is what you require, then on your head, be it. If your obvious romantic interest in Sherlock is limited to that of an indulgence, an… *experiment*, as he would phrase such things, it could work against everything we are hoping to achieve. If your *assistance* becomes a liability, I will not hesitate to protect what remains of Sherlock's motivation to keep going by removing you from the picture. Do I make myself clear?"

"Out of curiosity—" John mused, not the least bit of intimidated. "—what was your general idea when it came to Sherlock perhaps wanting to have a relationship with someone in the future? Not very easy, living under big brother's wing. Would you just have laughed at the very idea before hiding him away like a ghost in the attic? Would you have told him to contend himself with chatting with the hired help?"

"Sherlock doesn't do 'relationships'. Human companionship has never been something he has actively sought."

"What came first, him not seeking it or having failed in his attempts to get along with people?" *If someone were disappointed enough times, wouldn't they stop trying?* On the night when John had gone to see Sherlock after he'd dropped his phone and had a bit of a wobbly, he had clearly wanted company. Nobody wants to be alone, not even mad recluse geniuses.
Perhaps especially not mad recluse geniuses.

Mycroft regarded John tiredly, his imposing ire diluted by John's unflappable demeanour. "Would you truly begrudge me from wanting to spare him from further disappointments?" the older Holmes asked.

"What you just said, about unpredictable and all… That's life. If you want to find something great, if you want to try to make things better, you have to do things which carry the risk of disappointment." John heard his own words and felt a bit disingenuous. After all, hadn't he turned away from everything and everyone after his injury, shoved away all who tried to help, who tried to tell him things could get better? "I don't want to hurt him. That's the last thing I want to do, I swear."

"When I employed you, I saw potential. But I also saw a risk. I saw a man seeking to fulfil his own void with a new purpose. Have you truly examined your heart regarding your motives? Are you certain that it truly is Sherlock you are making fumbling attempts to love — and not just regain that feeling towards yourself? It is not the idea of your romantic endeavours that is troubling but the timing of them. Was it an experiment, perhaps, or an escape attempt?"

John was stunned. And stung. "I—"

"I will not have this end in a doublesome tragedy. Sherlock needs to want to save himself for himself, not out of guilt for someone who has become too emotionally reliant on him or vice versa. You said he isn't always honest to you regarding his physical wellbeing. Have you asked yourself why?"

"I didn't say he wasn't honest to me in particular," John protested but knew that there was a grain of truth in Mycroft's words. Still, he detested the insinuation that Sherlock's motives for saying or not saying something somehow nullified the progress that was happening between them, or that they were somehow the consequence of some transgression of John's. "Before, you claimed you wanted to save him by any means necessary, but something good actually appearing in his life that might make him think differently is suddenly risky and too much?" John's tone was becoming venomous. "I want him to live just as much as you do!"

"In that case, I would advise you to cease your dalliance with Doctor Sawyer, assuming it has survived your prematurely aborted date. Promptly, if I may add. Sherlock did his best trying to hide his disappointment and anger from me this afternoon regarding your date, but he may not be able to conceal it for long."

"There is no dalliance. It was more of a job interview than a proper date."

"That was clearly not the conclusion Sherlock drew."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"He would not admit to the reason, but with a few select questions, I discovered that you had concealed from him a date which he, of course, could've easily deduced was going to happen. He was in a most surly mood; I had to refuse to engage in the food fight he sought to start with a slice of apple. Thankfully, his trajectory was off."

"He was in pain. Of course, he was cranky!" John snapped. "You're reading too much into it."

"I daresay I know him well enough to tell when he's solely suffering from intense physical discomfort and when he's in pain of another kind. According to Natalia, when he requested
additional medication and her help with retreating to bed, she offered to call you. That request was adamantly rejected. 'John doesn't want to be here,' is what Sherlock told her."

The dagger hit home.

John knows he's been hesitant to consider why he had felt the need to bolt, to suddenly start dating again by welcoming Sarah's advances.

He's afraid.

He's afraid of caring this much about someone who may soon not be there. He's afraid that nothing will be enough. That he won't be enough. He's afraid of both loss and the rejection it would include. What if he can't fix things, fix what's wrong with Sherlock's life? He can't force someone to think differently, to see the silver lining. And, he's not exactly leading by example, is he? He wants to make Sherlock happy, but is he up for the job? John is certain that, before the accident, Sherlock wouldn't have looked at him twice. He had accused Tallie of her and Mycroft suffering from some version of a Stockholm syndrome, but is what's going on between him and Sherlock just a form of another syndrome — the one named after Florence Nightingale?

If John had met Sherlock someplace else after the accident, met him without being hired to look after him, would he have been as fascinated and beguiled by the man as he is now?

The answer is clearer than he would ever have thought.

*God, yes, I would have been.*

Whether it would have been the Sherlock of Before or Sherlock after the accident, he doesn't care — John firmly believes he's still the same person, someone whose real personality he is seeing more and more of every day, assuming John doesn't go and fuck it all up, now, by alienating him.

His hideous date with Sarah had clarified whose company it is that he wants most of all, who it is he thinks about first thing in the morning and last thing at night, and not because he's paid to do so. He needs to meet this head-on if he's to stay; perhaps that is also Mycroft's point. Leaving Musgrave Court isn't an option, not now and after especially since he had already tried to do it once and failed at the starting line.

"I don't want to hurt him," John said quietly, swirling the whisky in his glass. "He's suffered enough."

"Quite, yes." Mycroft still looked bristly in a way that painfully resembled his younger brother's sulks.

Mycroft picked up the laptop he'd placed on a side table with the screen turned away from the door without flipping down the lid, unplugged the charger cable and headed for the door carrying the computer. John remembered that he had planned to continue working at the annexe.

"He's sleeping," John informed him. "Tallie promised to stay put until you got there."

"I'm aware," Mycroft remarked and shifted the laptop in his arms so that John could glance at the screen: it shoved a view of the Court's CCTV cameras with the highlighted one being in Sherlock's bedroom.

"Was it always like this, between the two of you?" John asked. He didn't specify whether he meant the rows or Mycroft's spying on his sibling.
"Our parents have not always been very good at relating to him or addressing his needs."

"So what did you do to piss him off, then? Nicked all his Smurfs, broke his Actionman?" The edge of John's lip quirked up.

Mycroft was not amused. "He has always resented needing support and, by extension, those who deliver it." Mycroft's gaze swept John's sitting form from top to toe. "With a singular exception."

Mycroft then headed for the doorway but paused just as he was about to disappear into the corridor. "Since I hired you, I have had the strange suspicion that you could be the making of my brother — or make him worse than ever. Now, if you'll excuse me, I shall go attend to him so that you may have the agreed-upon night off."

"You'll call me if... if he needs something?" John asked.

Mycroft wasn't quite smiling, but John was willing to take what he could get.

"Goodnight, Doctor Watson."

The next morning was a Saturday — one which had been agreed upon as half a day off for John since he had not known how late his date would keep him. He lingered in his bedroom until he was certain that Mycroft, who worked most Saturdays, had left for London. He then wandered into the main house kitchen for a quick breakfast and a chat with Sophie. He didn't really want to talk to Tallie, so he waited to enter the annexe until she, too, was leaving at around ten.

After opening the connecting door John picked up the sound of the hoover — Sophie must have come to the annexe after serving John tea. She was in charge of cleaning both in the main house and the annexe, but Tallie occasionally took a dustpan or a hoover out of a closet to lighten the older woman's load.

Sherlock was in the kitchen, his tablet stand set up to lean on the fruit bowl. There was a half-drunk glass of Sophie's homemade lemonade in front of him. Tall glasses were still a challenge, so there was a straw jutting out. Sherlock's gaze was focused on an article full of chemical formulae he was reading on the tablet.

"Morning," John greeted, taking a seat by the kitchen island.

"How was the date?" Sherlock asked pointedly without looking at John. His tone was biting, the T as sharp as the strike of a puff adder.

"Shite, actually," John replied deadpan. "Got home before nine which has got to be some sort of a record. Apparently, it's considered bad form to talk constantly about your mad genius housemate all the time on a date. She wasn’t impressed." John chuckled.

That got Sherlock's attention. His gaze shifted slowly to John, fixing him in place. "Is that how you describe me to other people?" He looked as though he couldn't quite choose between confounded and indignant.

"Sometimes. I could also say you're a detective I work for."
"Former detective."

John could have started an argument on that but that would only have led to a sour and pointless tangent. He shrugged. "Mostly I say my friend Sherlock."

This brought forth a strange bout of almost tic-like blinking. Sherlock's eyes were fixed on him as he did it, and it went on for such a long time that John started half suspecting the man was having an absence seizure.

"Sherlock…?" He tried.

A frown appeared on Sherlock's forehead. He opened his mouth only to snap it shut without uttering a word.

_Not a seizure, then, just garden-variety confusion._ "No, it's getting a bit scary now," John said.

Finally, Sherlock seemed to slip back into himself. "I'm your… friend?" He pronounced the word carefully, as though suspicious of a new taste.

"Yeah, of course you are," John confirmed.

"It's your day off," Sherlock pointed out, the divot between his brows deepening.

"Yes, and I wanted to come see what you were doing. Especially after I heard you had a crap day yesterday."

"You came here on your day off because I'm your… friend?"

"Those things can be connected, yes. People usually like to spend time with their friends."

"Usually?"

John's brows elevated briefly as he tried to parse the tangent. It seemed true to character that Sherlock would latch onto something he thought was a rule and tried to pick it apart for future reference and application in social circumstances.

"You work here," Sherlock pointed out, looking like he had discovered a loophole in John's statements. "That is not the same." He seemed calmer, now, probably since he was convinced that he'd just proven that John had to be wrong, somehow.

"No, it's not the same. Which is why I thought I might make that distinction. Your brother thinks you're a bit unfamiliar with the concept of friends," John plucked up the courage to offer. "Maybe I wanted to prove him wrong."

_Instead, you've proven his point perfectly_, John thought and sighed.

Sherlock arranged his hands primly on his lap and said nothing.

"So, do you want to deduce all about my rubbish date, or shall we do something more fun?" John asked as he grabbed an apple from the bowl. They weren't the usual sort that got deposited in the bowl by Sophie or Tallie but a light green variety.

“Granny Smith,” Sherlock replied, having apparently read John's mind. “I prefer them to sweeter, doughier kinds.”

He had learned that Sherlock was surprisingly partial to sour things while being generally very
picky about his food's smell, texture, and taste. *He must have told Tallie or Mycroft to get those apples*, John realised and wanted to pump his fist. Sherlock expressing any preferences for anything was a good thing — a huge improvement on sitting like a statue in his chair, hoping for a meteor to strike and wipe humanity off the face of the Earth with him first in line.

*You just wait, Mycroft Holmes*, John thought triumphantly. *I am not going to make a mess of this again. And I sure as hell won't give up.*
Dormant

Chapter Notes

It's raining fic! J insisted that sitting on this chapter was not on. Elsie called her a trash possum but agreed on a premature ejaculation of this bit of the story which is one of their favourites possibly. You may also want to check either of their Tumblrs for chapter-related graphics. Or possibly both their Tumblrs.

On Monday night, the texted words "Could you get me a glass of water? This one tastes off" dragged John out of bed and back into the annexe.

On Wednesday night it was "The sound of the air conditioning has changed. I need you to investigate, John" followed two hours later, by: "The metallic legs of your armchair might reflect sunlight on my face in the morning; could you possibly move it about eleven inches to the left?"

Thursday night: "I dropped my tablet."

Friday night: "John the curtains are not properly closed." with a sequel one hour later, which consisted of: "I think someone's left the light on in the kitchen".

After negotiating the distance between his room in the main house and annexe in a bathrobe and his pyjamas for the seventh time that week on Saturday night, John once again allowed Sherlock to coax him to linger with some tangential conversation until his eyes began to droop and he began to drift back into sleep.

John could tell what was going on: Sherlock had finally climbed over the mental threshold of summoning John, but he couldn't quite say what he really wanted, which was more nocturnal company. John remembers like yesterday that first time when he'd answered Sherlock's distressed call for help instead of Mycroft; there was no reason to assume that nights would have got much easier for Sherlock since.

Since John was happy that Sherlock felt comfortable to turn to him like this, and he felt rather unsure how to address the issue without embarrassing his friend, John has acquiesced. Every night, Sherlock said goodnight with the air of a man who wanted to be left alone for some quiet time, but soon after the annexe emptied of people for the night, he got antsy and wanted company. The only problem was that John could hardly sit vigil from dusk till dawn beside his bed in case he woke up disoriented and frightened, and hiking back and forth between the buildings was getting exhausting. Instead of waiting for things to get so bad he was at the verge of a panic attack, Sherlock seemed to call him in when he was at the start of that process, and even just John's arrival seemed to defuse things.

He remembered Tallie saying something about staying nights at the annexe, so one morning, over a mug of tea while Sherlock was reading in the garden swaddled in a throw, John took up the subject with her. They hadn't spoken much beyond the usual polite pleasantries after John's outburst at her, and he was relieved when she didn't seem evasive.
"I used to leave the spare bedroom door open as well as the door to his bedroom," she explained. "It seemed to help that there was someone close by. After I moved out — I gathered this from what Mister Holmes said later — Sherlock started to call him nearly every night. He clearly didn't want to do that, but…"

"…there was nobody else available," John confirmed, nodding. As far as he knew, Sherlock now called him directly at night instead of contacting Mycroft.

"Do you think it might stop, eventually?" John asked her, "The anxiety with being alone at night, the panic attacks?"

Tallie bit her lip. "I don't know. In some ways, a year is a short time to adjust."

This reminded John of what Sherlock had told him about how long research said it could take for dreams to change when it came to body image. How much did Sherlock remember about the accident and about waking up from sedation at the intensive care unit? John's recollections about the first days after he'd been shot were patchy at best, distorted and punctured by morphine and shock and anaesthesia. He still woke up from nightmares in panic, too, and though Sherlock hadn't been to war, John had no trouble believing that what he'd gone through had been terribly traumatizing in other ways. Talk therapy hadn't been his thing, but since there were others at the veterans' rehab centre that had been through similar things, being able to complain and be grumpy at the staff had provided an outlet for making sense of what had happened to him. Something told John that Sherlock might well need to talk about what he had gone through but didn't know how and didn't trust anyone to listen, to really listen.

He didn't know how to change that, but there was one thing he could do something to make the nights easier.

John wasted no time in presenting his idea to Mycroft when he returned from London that evening.

"I think Sherlock should have someone with him at night instead of just CCTV, at least for now. You or me making the rounds from the main house nearly every night is impractical."

"Every night? I must apologise for that. It is really not what we agreed upon in your contract. I presumed things had been improving since I'd not had a single call from him in two weeks. How long has this been going on? You should have informed me; I shall have a stern word with Sherlock."

"No, no, don't, that's not what I— It's absolutely fine, I don't mind! I think things might get better if he knows…" …that I'm there… "…someone's close by and doesn't mind being contacted if he needs stuff." John cleared his throat.

"Your employment contract shall promptly be amended to reflect this."

John's mouth tightened. "Never mind the bloody contract. I was thinking I could move into the other bedroom in the annexe."

"The spare bedroom? Are you not satisfied with your current lodgings? The only fully equipped bathroom in the annexe is Sherlock's; surely, you would like some space, time off and away from
the annexe in the evenings."

John hadn't lived alone much in his adult life. First, there had been uni, then medical college, and during his postgrad years as a younger doctor, he had always had flatmates. In the army, he never slept alone; even just having his own room was a big improvement.

"I don't mind any of it," John pointedly countered. "Pay me or don't pay me, I don't care. I want to be there."

Mycroft's chin rose as he regarded John curiously. Perhaps he was recalling their earlier conversation regarding John's involvement. "You're solving crimes together, and now you're moving in with him. Very well. You are, of course, free to reclaim your current bedroom at any time."

Somehow, Mycroft had made solving crimes sound like having a tryst behind a dumpster. John decided he didn't care. We do this my way.

"Thanks. I'll move my stuff tonight."

"I'm sure Sophie can lend a hand."

"I was thinking of asking someone else for help."

Mycroft frowned. "Oh? Nurse Mullan, I presume?"

"Nope. I'm going to ask Sherlock," was John's grinning reply.

"Care for a flatmate?"

Sherlock's head snapped up. "Excuse me?"

John put down his fork and wiped some gravy off his lips. Dinner at the annexe consisted of meatballs, a nice peppery sauce and roast potatoes. "The spare bedroom. Thought I might give it a go if you don't mind."

Sherlock's eyes narrowed. "Why would you—" his words then trailed out as he must have realised that John verbalising the reason might be embarrassing for him. "It's a free country," he eventually settled for.

"Could use a hand carrying stuff," John suggested. Sherlock still rarely ventured into the main house save for occasionally picking out some books from the library. More often, he just gave John a list of which ones he wanted and where they were found; benefits of a photographic memory.

Two hours later, Sherlock trailed behind him back to the annexe, a large pile of John's clothes in his lap. It hadn't taken them long to move most of John's meagre collection of possessions into the spare bedroom and most of the time had been spent playfully bickering about Sherlock's suggestions on how to arrange his things.

"God help me, I am not adopting some Holmes family legacy sock index system dating back to the Saxons," John protested and closed the drawer.
"But how will you find anything?" Sherlock complained, exasperated.

"Unlike you, I don't own three hundred posh shirts."

Sherlock's keen eyes scanned the room. "Admittedly, your wardrobe is somewhat... utilitarian."

John threw a cardigan at him, which made a perfect landing to cover most of Sherlock's head. He dragged it off and held it away from himself as though disgusted. "I think some colour-blind Saxon left this behind."

John laughed, shaking his head. "Come on. I'll make us some tea."

Just after eleven that night, John rose from the sofa, collected their empty mugs and headed for the kitchen. Glancing behind his shoulder, he picked up on the slight, delighted quirk up of Sherlock's lip as he continued to read an article on his tablet. Courtesy of Tallie, Sherlock was in pyjamas and his blue dressing gown. She would be off for the next two days but, instead of an agency nurse coming round three times a day, John had asked Sherlock if he wanted him instead for the night routines and Sherlock had said yes without even taking much time to consider the offer.

"I'm for bed, John said. "Or did you want to stay up longer?"

Sherlock's brows furrowed as he switched off the tablet by pressing the power button with the side of his forefinger. "It's fine. I believe the Helvetica Chimica Acta has outstayed its welcome for today."

"That's about fonts, then?"

Sherlock gave him his patented 'I cannot fathom the depths of your idiocy' look. "It's a journal of chemistry published by the Swiss Chemical Society, impact factor 1.138."

"Sounds riveting."

"For a medical professional, it should be. This issue reported a promising study on cobalamin derivatives with certain polypyridyl complexes as photosensitizers for photodynamic therapy."

John smiled secretly as he followed Sherlock into the bedroom. He had no idea what polypyridyl complexes were, but the way Sherlock's entire being seemed to light up when he enthused about science was a sight to behold. Two days earlier, he had lectured John about what he described as a potentially revolutionary study on how crayfish that snacked on human bodies might preserve evidence of toxins better than other carcass scavengers. John had both grinned and shuddered.

Sherlock managed to slip the dressing gown off from his shoulders while John got his feet off the supports. He knew Sherlock had been working towards transferring himself from chair to bed with Leo, but work was still needed for him to manage. Now, instead of keeping his arms firmly on his lap like before, Sherlock gently perched his fingers on John's shoulders as he pulled him slightly forward to the edge of the seat and then used the belt to lift him onto the bed.

"I'll leave the doors open a bit," John promised.
"No need," Sherlock dismissed.

"I'll do it anyway," John said, and left for his new bedroom.

Just as the faint sound of a longcase clock in the main house chimed midnight, John heard his name being called out. He had been nearly caught by sleep.

"Everything alright?" He called out.


To John, he sounded calm, the pitch of his voice low and last syllable distorted by a yawn.

John smiled and replied with his own goodnight.

It seemed that Sherlock had been just… experimenting? Checking that he was within earshot? John hoped that the fact of not being alone in the annexe would prove satisfactory for being able to safely go to sleep and lo and behold: fifteen minutes later, a quiet snore could be heard from the opposite bedroom.

John kneaded his pillow into a comfortable shape and slept until the morning without interruptions.

A few days later, John was in good spirits when he walked in the front entrance of Musgrave Hall following a Sunday brunch with Harry. After the meal, he and Harry had walked to a nearby gallery run by Harry's new girlfriend, Ann. She and John instantly got along; she had a similar sense of humour to both Watsons. Harry deserved to find someone who was good for her and Ann seemed very promising; they'd met at AA, which meant that she'd understand her struggles.

Seeing his sister continue to do well put at least one worry on hold in John's head. I can focus on Sherlock, he had thought on the bus, wondering what would be on the agenda for their evening. Sherlock had an experiment going which pertained to one of Lestrade's cold cases: it involved bleach, a T-bone steak and graphite he'd asked John to cut out of a few old pencils.

John hadn't quite understood his chemistry-heavy explanation about the process but had diligently and happily followed the instructions Sherlock had given him. A day after it was up and running in a plastic container in the fridge, John had heard Sherlock speaking to someone on the phone about obtaining some human muscle samples along with a few chemicals. Sherlock was trying to make that request but seemed to be getting derailed by having to dismiss things the person at the end of the line was saying.

'Thirteen months is hardly forever,' he had protested, and soon thereafter told the other person that he was back to work, which seemed to produce such an amount of explicit delight that Sherlock held the phone away from his ear. His arm still tired quickly when not using the loudspeaker, and he needed Siri to operate most of the functions on the device.
"That was exhausting," Sherlock had commented dryly after ringing off.

"Who was it?"

"Molly Hooper. She's a pathologist at—"

"Barts. Yeah, I know. She called some time ago. I told you, remember? I assume you didn't do anything about it then."

"I anticipated the level of sentiment I'd have to endure when I got in touch with her after this… hiatus. My ears are ringing."

John's lip quirked up. "They've all missed you."

Sherlock gave him a blank look. "I deduced, early on, that Molly had developed some manner of infatuation with me. I've actively tried not to encourage it."

"It also sounded like she was — is — your friend and cares about you."

"I couldn't comment on that." Sherlock then headed to the sitting room.

Now, as John took a sharp turn at the door of his former bedroom to head to the annexe — strange how easily that route had become automatic — he thought of Sherlock's adamant dismissal of anyone's fondness towards him. What if someone he had really liked, someone male, had tried to get closer? Would Sherlock ever have believed it was real, that they really wanted that with him? Could anyone convince him of such a thing now? After his conversation with Mycroft on the topic, John had given up trying to gauge whether his involvement with — and attachment to — Sherlock was getting a bit too intense.

He'd given up on trying to work out his work description because this wasn't work anymore. Now, he simply allowed himself to react without trying to act professional, did what he felt like doing in Sherlock's presence, which most often was to spend much more time with him than his official working hours dictated. He didn't want to put words to what it was that he and Sherlock were doing, what it was that they were becoming to each other; some words like friendship seemed woefully inadequate and beside the point, and other words were as enticing as they were frightening. *I'm not his nurse or his doctor. Half the time, even personal assistant seems a bit... not right.*

Most often, John settled for the word 'companion' in his head. He liked that, and it seemed neither dismissive nor exaggerating. Sherlock clearly didn't want to see him as an employee, either. In fact, he got disapprovingly sour whenever Mycroft saw fit to subtly remind him of the fact that John was on the clock and had a salary. John, too, felt disapprovingly sour during those moments. He'd be there even without the pay, but without the pay, he wouldn't have been there in the first place. *So bloody complicated.*

He shed his coat in his foyer facing the garden and went to look for Sherlock. Neither he nor Tallie was anywhere in the annexe. John decided it was a good thing; perhaps Sherlock had finally relented to have afternoon tea with Mycroft. John had kept trying to gently encourage Sherlock both in spending time in the main house and interacting with his brother. Despite John disapproving of the man's methods, he did believe that Mycroft's motives were benign.

John nearly missed the note attached to the fridge door with a magnet: 'UPSTAIRS BATHROOM' it said in a barely legible, large scrawl that certainly wasn't Tallie's handwriting. Having seen many samples of it, John knew that Mycroft's freehand was smallish and elegant, so only one possibility
was left: Sherlock had written the note.

Something about the note made John nervous. Where was Tallie? Or Mycroft? This couldn't be some plan to— to— it wasn't that sort of a note, was it?

Breathing hard, John sprinted out of the annexe to the main corridor, then upstairs, nearly tripping on an oriental rug adorning the landing. The door to the large, luxurious bathroom he had discovered during his flu was ajar, and the light was on. The handle hit the corridor wall hard when John violently yanked it open.

The sound startled Tallie who was just about to pull a large, rolled-up towel from a shelf. "Good Christ, John! Are you trying to give me a heart attack?!"

"I saw the note." John panted, "I thought — I thought —"

"You thought that some sinister Byronian plan was being executed, pardon the expression," Sherlock's baritone commented from behind Tallie.

She stepped aside, revealing Sherlock sitting in the bathtub which was filled with steaming, slightly lilac-tinted water. A faint scent of lavender floated in the humid air.

"I told him you might freak out, but no, Sherlock insisted he needed to practice his writing."

"I didn't know you were doing that," John breathed out. His fingertips were still tingling with adrenaline, and he tried to get his breathing back under control.

"The occupational therapist at Amersham isn't a complete dolt," Sherlock replied dryly and let his hands float to the surface.

Tallie placed the towel on one of two chairs near the large, claw-footed tub. John took a few steps into the room proper, wondering if it was appropriate. Then again, Sherlock's note could have been intended as an invitation.

"How are you sitting up?" John asked, finding consolation in the neutrality of practical things. He knew Sherlock's balance and torso muscles had improved, but couldn't help remembering what had happened at Frimley.

"There's an L-shaped backboard that tilts back slightly," Tallie explained. It arrived in the mail today together with that," she pointed to a strange-looking plastic thing that looked like a large, deflated pool toy.

"Mycroft's most un-English habit is his propensity for forgoing proper baths for a quick morning shower," Sherlock announced. "This room was getting very little use. Criminal. I used to like baths when I was still capable of taking them without all the preparations taking excruciatingly long."

"Still can't leave you to it, though," Tallie reminded him, then turned to John. "He needs someone in the room in case the backboard slides out of place or something."

The look she gave John was meaningful enough that he realised what she was trying to signal: this was his chance to make amends for the slip-up at Frimley, to build a bit more trust.

Tallie's usual afternoon visit had technically ended some time ago. If she left now, he and Sherlock would have to work out all these new things themselves. He'd have to help Sherlock with clothes and maybe even with washing up. Would it be a bit much for either or both of them?
No, John decided, because there was really nothing to decide. If he didn't act weird about it, Sherlock should have no reason to be embarrassed. Sherlock's hair was dry, his curls immaculately arranged, shiny and bouncy. Tallie was doing a good job under Sherlock's tutelage; her patience with him seemed infinite enough to put up with all the exasperated commands along the lines of 'crunch with the towel, don't rub it so hard for Christ's sake; you don't want to give me an Afro, do you?' Maybe Sherlock didn't intend to wash his hair at all today; his soft mop certainly didn't look like it needed shampoo.

"I don't have anything on. Keep you company?" John asked, swallowing hard.

"I was hoping you would," Sherlock said in an odd tone. "Let's give Tallie a break, shall we?"

John felt his insides warm at the implication of we and took a seat on the chair closest to the tub. "Should have brought a book," he joked, dipping a finger in. "You can't have been in here long; this is still positively scalding."

"Sound analysis, but I was hoping you'd go deeper," Sherlock joked, in his tone a hint of something subtle which was hard to define.

John shook his finger dry. "No bubbles?"

"I detest most bubble bath substances with their pungent, artificial aromas. A high-quality bath oil that contains proper herbal essentials is preferable. Lavender, verbena… Mint will do in a pinch."

Why was Sherlock informing John of these things as though they were something he ought to memorise for future reference? "That's... good to know," he stumbled out.

"Why?" Sherlock asked in a mock-innocent voice. "Were you planning a new career as a spa attendant?"

"No, I was..." John gave him a look. "Christmas presents," he added hastily, proud of coming up with such a sound and decent explanation. He was most decidedly not thinking about the physical realities of Sherlock in a bath, possibly in a bathtub big enough for two...

He cleared his throat and decided to play it safe by looking at other things than Sherlock's face. His chest was a familiar sight: very little hair, ribs slightly more visible than they should be, a small scar probably from a pleural drain. Neck and opposite shoulder: more scars, most likely from the surgery to stabilise his spine and to repair a broken humerus. Long, beautiful, sinewy neck—Stick to medical facts, John reminded himself. He noticed that Sherlock's catheter was still in place but that Tallie had capped it instead of dropping the bag on the floor. The catheter was one more reason for avoiding lots of chemical products in bathwater.

Deciding that the opposite end of the tub was a safer sight, John's eyes roamed across the water… and landed on Sherlock's nether regions. They were quite well visible; the bath oil in the water was only creating some iridescent swirls on the surface instead of the safe cover a proper bubble bath would have provided.

The water was doing a lousy job concealing the fact that Sherlock was hard.

John's eyes darted up and skidded to a halt on the wall, the tiling of which he decided had to become very fascinating very fast.

Sherlock lifted his arms to rest on the edges of the tub and closed his eyes. Silence took over the room, which hardly helped John get his mind off the fact that there was a gorgeous man in a bathtub right there sporting rather handsome wood. In fact, even just the awareness of the sight he
was now trying to avoid was threatening to break out a mirroring reaction in John. As the reality of
that reaction dawned on him, he froze and his traitorous cock, which was beginning to make his
jeans slightly uncomfortable, gave an impatient twitch. John quickly lifted his leg closest to
Sherlock on top of the other. Mycroft wouldn't hesitate even for a second to fire me for such
unprofessionalism—or would he?

He was startled when Sherlock spoke and wrenched him out of his desperate attempt to rearrange
the contents of his head into something approaching decent.

"Your breathing has changed, and you're fidgeting," Sherlock remarked, his eyes still closed.
"Why?"

Was John imagining things, or had his always deep voice dipped even a few notes lower? The man
always noticed everything, remembered everything, saw everything—there was no way to deflect
the topic away from the truth.

Be professional, John commanded himself. The notion of not wanting to embarrass Sherlock
floated to the surface of his swirling thoughts and helped him refocus.

"It's all fine, Sherlock," he said, proud of how confident and reassuring he managed to sound. "It's a
perfectly normal reaction; probably the warm water mixed with friction from the catheter,
combined with what has probably been a long abstinence for you."

Sherlock's eyes opened and fixed on John, who felt like squirming under the piercing scrutiny.
"What are you talking about?"

John raised his brows and cleared his throat, flicking his gaze to somewhere in the general area of
Sherlock's waist and then quickly to the towel rack.

"What are you—" Sherlock repeated, suddenly trailing out. "Oh." His voice was now filled with
sudden wonder instead of embarrassment.

John just had to see his expression. Sherlock was frowning, fingers curled around the edges of the
tub as he carefully leaned forward, not yet trusting that his back muscles wouldn't cave in and tip
him forward.

"Interesting." Sherlock's tone indicated that this was not merely an unfortunate incident
accidentally witnessed by someone else, but an experiment to be studied, an interesting specimen to
be examined. A... novelty, somehow?

"It hasn't—" Sherlock muttered. "They told me it probably wouldn't... Not like this, not since—"
He trailed out again. His words sounded perplexed, lost in thought.

The breathy amazement still thick in his voice was not helping John calm his libido. "You don't
feel it?"

"It was difficult to tell the sensation apart from the warmth of the water and the fact that my lower
back has been either cramping or tired. Now that I know it's there, it's... Yes, the sensation
registers. This of course often happens when it has to be handled, but it never lasts, and I'm not sure
what's—"

John found it odd, the thoroughly clinical and detached tone and manner with which Sherlock was
discussing his penis. It seemed that, in his thinking, it had turned into a... thing, nothing with any
sentimental value and thus no cause for embarrassment, either.
"What did they tell you after the accident? I assume your neurosurgeon talked to you about it?"

Facts, facts, stick to facts. And medicine. "Or maybe a PT did?" This reminded John of his own physical therapy sessions at rehab, which worked to quickly and neatly deflate his own arousal.

"One of the surgeons explained that psychogenic phenomena would be unlikely, though not impossible since the C7 level of the spinal column was partly dissected and the crush injury below could have spared some tracts, but that retaining much function was unlikely. I wasn't holding out much hope. Not after so long. Could just be the warm water. As I said, I frequently experience what I believe they call reflexogenic episodes, but they are short-lived." He scrutinised himself again. "This is… perhaps not that."

John had to tip a hat for the fact that Sherlock had managed that entire explanation without using the word 'erection'. And John was not going to slam it on the table, either. "I bet there's plenty that they can do nowadays to help with… all that."

"Pointless," Sherlock announced. "I always considered myself married to my work. I didn't seek those sorts of things because they only complicate matters. Good riddance," he said and was obviously trying to sound humorous, but his expression was no longer relaxed. He was staring at the opposite wall and John could feel the distance between them grow.

Wanting desperately to say the right thing, John bit his tongue. He needed to defuse the now severely deflated tension in the room; before, there had been an almost delicious playfulness to their strange discussion. Now, what had often happened had struck again: something had reminded Sherlock of what he had lost. If their roles were reversed in their current states, John would have trouble believing in a chance to meet someone, too. That's why Sarah's interest had felt so good and startling.

However, John remembered how Mrs Hudson had described his life before; it seemed that not all of Sherlock's abysmal confidence with someone being interested in him was the result of being in a wheelchair. Did he not see the same thing in the mirror that John — and probably lots of others — saw when they looked at him, had seen especially when they looked at him before the accident? Rare was the man who was so delicately, effortlessly handsome as Sherlock. How the hell had the man not had a line of suitors reaching around the block?

Who the hell knows about Sherlock Holmes? All that John could say for certain was that the wheelchair did little to dilute the effect the man was having on him.

He didn't want to belittle Sherlock's attempt at lightening the mood by dismissing his claim that he had no use for stiffies, but he hardly wanted to echo the statement that relationships simply were not something Sherlock Holmes could ever indulge in.

What the hell do I say?!

"Don't underestimate the importance of this," John said. "It's still a part of you, and clearly, it still works."

"Yes," Sherlock confirmed; he was now looking right down at… it again. "I suppose it does."

John tried to not look at… it. "So, any more cases from Lestrade?"

"He tried to peddle me two ongoing investigations yesterday. Solved them by email once he put the crime scene photos on Dropbox."

John chuckled. "Less than… what was that scale of yours? One to ten?"
"Not worth my time getting out of the house for anything less than an eight. Used to be six, but there are practicalities to consider now." Sherlock didn't sound keen.

"Did you take on private cases, too?" John bit his lip; he probably should have used the present tense.

"Sometimes. Dull. Mostly suspicions of spousal infidelity, missing persons, or online fraud."

"Can't compare to a juicy murder, can they?"

"Of course not," Sherlock confirmed. "The experiment is coming along nicely, by the way; Tallie took some photos inside the container."

"Make sure you get Mycroft to give her some hazard pay."

"Water's getting cold."

"Alright. How do you think we should—"

"Just give me that thing on the floor and plug it in once I'm on it," Sherlock explained disinterestedly. John passed him the contraption, which looked like a flotation device. It turned out to slowly fill with air with the help of a small electric pump, lifting Sherlock so high in the tub that it was easy to move him to the edge and then into his wheelchair.

"Why didn't I look into such devices before?" Sherlock wondered out loud as he watched — haphazardly covered with a towel, courtesy of John — as the latter shoved the now-deflated device into its dust cover.

"Maybe it was the same as with the Work?" John plucked up the courage to suggest. "You didn't believe there was any potential there."

"And I suppose you want to take credit for these things, then?"

John didn't expect the accusatory tone. "No, of course not! It's just that—"

"You should," Sherlock suddenly said. He slid his hands out from underneath the towel and placed them on his lap.

John felt rather whiplashed now.

"I didn't want to do any of it on my own. Didn't want to have to explain all the practical things to Lestrade and the others. I didn't want to face all that… alone."

"Lestrade seems to know you really well; I'm sure he would have helped."

Sherlock looked up at him, and in his ocean-coloured eyes, there was a strange look: half hopeful, half resigned, and so open that John was startled.

"I meant what I've said before about such matters, John: I don't have 'friends' — I've only got the one," he said, and John wondered how a statement so shy and quiet could still be so pointed. "I could hardly ask Lestrade to drive me home and get me to bed."

Sherlock opted out of pants; John had no idea whether he normally wore them to bed or not. John did help him into a fresh set of pyjamas once they got back to the annexe. John uncapped the catheter and attached it to a fresh bag.
"I could have tried to do that," Sherlock pointed out.

Why didn't you? John wondered. Many individuals with a C7 injury could even catheterise themselves. Maybe Sherlock could do lots more once he gets more caught up with physio?

Instead, he shrugged. "Next time, then."

As had become their routine, John grabbed the book he'd been reading in the evenings and settled into the armchair now permanently residing by Sherlock's bedroom window. They both read for half an hour before Sherlock used a voice command to turn off the lights.

John had picked up a clip-attachment light for his reading material from a bookshop so that he could read even after Sherlock wanted to sleep, but after such an eventful day he felt like turning in, too.

"Night," he said to Sherlock, climbing to his feet.

"Goodnight, John," came the content reply from inside a mound of bedding.

John couldn't even remember how long ago he'd had someone in his life to say goodnight to without it being just a polite thing between mates. His hookups had rarely stayed the night; usually, John suggested going to their places since those tended to be nicer than what he had been living in, and he wanted to slip out into the night before breakfast. He'd had an on-off girlfriend at uni but being with her, staying the night at a college dorm together had never felt like this. Never this right. Never like he wanted to stay.

After Sherlock's breathing deepened, signalling a transition from slumber to deep sleep, John made a final check that his phone was charged and easily accessible. When he tapped the home button to check the battery, the lit screen gave him a glimpse of Sherlock as he slept. Slightly messy, his hair looked even lovelier than usual, boyish and lush. The tension and perhaps even pain that always seemed to sharpen his features when awake was gone, replaced with a serenity that made John ache to reach out and run a finger along a jawbone, to cup a cheek and to press a kiss on a forehead.

He didn't.

It wouldn't be right, not as long as he wasn't quite sure of this thing between them, which he had no words to describe.

He left both their bedroom doors ajar. After brushing his teeth in the small toilet next to the spare bedroom — his bedroom, now — he prepared to turn off the lights and slip under the covers. Once again, he nearly missed something left for him even though he must have walked past it twice.

It was an envelope, carefully placed to lean against the alarm clock on his bedside cabinet. Inside, he found first a ticket: *The London Symphony Orchestra; Sir Simon Rattle, conductor; Vilde Frang, violin. Dvořák Symphony no. 9 ("From The New World") op. 95, Barber: violin concerto, op. 14, Ernst: Variations on "The Last Rose of Summer".*

Most of those names meant little to John. He was not much of a classical music enthusiast but was aware that Simon Rattle was rather famous. Dvořák, he knew to be a composer. He put the ticket down on the cabinet and sat down to read the note peeking out of the envelope. He recognised Tallie's handwriting, but the signature underneath was Sherlock's. It was shaky, nearly illegible, and John appreciated that he had gone through the trouble of painstakingly scrawling it.

'John—" the note began, "You have demonstrated to have a gift for silence, which makes you quite invaluable as a companion. Your talents would be well suited for this particular night out. So,
unless inconvenient, I would appreciate it if you could accompany me. Even if inconvenient, I hope you'll do it anyway.

—SHERLOCK"
Dinner three days later was a quiet affair, eaten earlier than usual so they could leave in plenty of time for the concert in order to avoid as many complications as possible. John had called ahead to the venue to make sure it was as accessible as the website promised and accepted an offer of a valet showing them to their places from the entrance.

Over lemon-drizzled cod and potato casserole, Tallie tried to engage both men in small talk, but John's nerves were suppressing both his appetite and his patience for pleasantries. After a few impolite grunts from him and Sherlock, Tallie gave up the fight, and the rest of the meal continued in fidgety silence.

Once Tallie and Sherlock disappeared into the loo to get him ready, John reviewed all of the instructions Tallie and Mycroft had given him with regards to Sherlock’s care. It seemed to be important for Sherlock that John drive them instead of the two of being escorted in one of Mycroft’s armoured cars. John had agreed, thrilled to say yes to anything that would ensure Sherlock would actually leave the house. He wouldn’t have been surprised if Sherlock got cold feet at the last minute — willingly negotiating a concert crowd was a big step.

Dabbing his lips and taking his plate to the dishwasher, it occurred to John that he had no idea what to wear to such an event. Would it be a casual affair? A few artsy people in jaunty hats and flowing apparel? Or was this a black-tie event? Should he have rented something festive? Surely, Sherlock would have mentioned it — unless he was content to watch John make a fool of himself as payback for Frimley?

Somehow, John doubted that vengeance was the man's motive for the invitation. There was an aspect to the whole thing that both gave John's belly a delicious flutter but confused him as well. This felt like a date, though there was nothing that really set it apart from their prior outings. This time, Sherlock had taken the initiative, which was a huge thing in its own right.

A glance at the digital screen of the spare bedroom's alarm clock startled John into action from his suspicions and his spiralling self-pity over clothes he didn't own. Into battle, he told himself and turned on the lights so that he could rummage around his wardrobe.

He was reaching for the handle of the oak door when what was hanging on it stopped him at his tracks. What had been hard to spot in the dark was a garment bag he’d never seen before. The name Turnbull & Asser with an address on Jermyn Street adorned it, and inside, he discovered a beautiful three-piece suit, charcoal grey and slim cut. Stacked on the floor underneath were two black boxes. John cocked an eyebrow, curiosity getting the better of him as he grabbed the envelope placed on the topmost box.

The cardstock was heavyweight, smooth in his hand, and embossed with a gilded emblem of Musgrave Court. Written on the front in dark blue ink was a simple sentiment: 'Wishing you a
pleasant evening'. John flipped the card over. In the same neat print were two letters: M.H.

John snorted. Bloody drama queens, both of them. A quick google search told him that even just the tie — described as the Exclusive Collection Red Magadar Silk Tie — had cost over a hundred and forty pounds.

John would have to think of a creative and equally dramatic, if less costly, way to express his gratitude to Mycroft later. Maybe he could recruit Sherlock for brainstorming, but right now, he had a concert to attend.

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Thirty minutes later, John had showered, shaved, and slid into the perfectly fitting suit. Besides the tie, the two boxes had revealed matching socks adorned with charcoal dots and a pair of simple, black Derby shoes. He turned in front of the mirror inside the wardrobe door with his head held high, feeling good about the way he looked for the first time in a long time. The double-breasted waistcoat was tight against his stomach, and he felt his posture stiffening with habitual military precision. He looked… not just good but great. He felt the part, too.

With his hand on the doorknob, pushing the door open, John paused and drew in a deep breath, chuckling self-consciously when it quivered. He was a soldier. Of course, he wasn't nervous about a silly concert. Not even with…

Oh.

In the kitchen, Tallie stepped back from Sherlock’s chair with a flourish, her eyes sparkling. John stared. And stared.

Instead of being still slightly shaggy like before, Sherlock’s hair now looked freshly and beautifully cut and perfectly coiffed, each curl dark and shiny, stark against the paleness of his skin. Whoever had styled his hair had also given him a perfect shave: his cheekbones stood out high and sharp above his collar. He was wearing a slim, midnight blue suit John had not seen before, and a crisp white shirt. No tie and the top two buttons were undone. John's mouth felt dry as he watched long fingers still their invisible lint-picking as a pair of bright, sea-glass eyes lifted to meet his.

John grinned, having difficulty containing his delight at how great and obvious an effort Sherlock had made for the evening. Wouldn't want me to upstage you, eh?

Sherlock's eyes scanned him from top to toe, then gave a tiny nod with the edge of his lip quirked up. "Red was a good choice."

"You know as well as I do that it wasn’t mine. Found it mysteriously hanging in my room. Must’ve been someone who wanted to ensure that I looked properly posh enough to be seen in public with his younger brother."

Sherlock’s mouth twitched as though suppressing a laugh. "He procured it, yes, but only after I chose all the pieces. Left to your own devices, who knows what vestiary abomination you would’ve put on."

Sherlock feigned a shudder which made John laugh — a short bark of a thing that felt equally
foreign and familiar. "Is that where Mycroft gets his clothes from, then, this Turnbull & Asser?"

"No. Gieves & Hawkes are the ones who have clothed Holmes men for centuries, which suits his sense of stuffy tradition. Turnbull & Asser, as it happens, are known for their sartorial services to one James Bond, though not in the later films where they gave the contracts to some upstart American companies. When I pointed this out to Mycroft and told him to go there, he made a face as though I was asking him to go shop at Marks & Spencer," Sherlock chuckled.

"Maybe we should start inviting him to our movie nights to civilise him a bit, especially since he's in intelligence, too," John plucked up the courage to suggest.

"Especially since he likes to flaunt his own, yes. I suspect he likes to imagine even the Queen as one of his minions."

A brief silence left them fidgeting awkwardly, expectation and newness heavy in the air.

"You look good," John finally said. He remembered reading the labels in the walk-in wardrobe; Sherlock had many suits for John to remember, so he wasn't sure whether this one was new or not. It certainly fit like a glove, and Sherlock was now — still — much thinner than in his old photos. *He got himself a new suit just for this? Well, maybe not just for tonight, but still…*

Sherlock tugged at the cuff of his shirt so that it peeked just so out of his jacket sleeve. "Thank you, though some of my best features will remain unseen since I have one rather bulky accessory."

Tallie helped Sherlock get settled in the car, slipping the bag which attached to the back of his wheelchair onto the seat next to John. Together, they checked that they had everything Sherlock could possibly need. As usual, when they left the house, Sherlock had wanted the headrest of the wheelchair removed.

"Have fun, you two!" Tallie gave a little wave as she stepped away from the car, a small, knowing smile playing across her lips.

Sherlock didn’t seem to hear her; his eyes were fixed on the back of the seat in front of him, and his jaw was clenched. John took a deep breath, the moment feeling monumental somehow, and shifted the car into reverse.

The drive to the concert venue went without a hitch since they were headed the opposite way from commuter traffic. They passed the time critiquing the previous night’s episode of Game of Thrones, which they had watched with Tallie, pausing every so often to explain a major plot point to her since she was only a casual viewer. Sherlock, who always relished picking apart the logic of anything fictional for John’s amusement, unsurprisingly remembered all the plots and characters with ease when John struggled to recall what had happened only a week before. He seemed to appreciate the political intrigue of the story and the dragons if little else. John decided he enjoyed watching anything as long as it happened with Sherlock on the sofa next to him.

Once in Islington, John was faced with the task of finding a parking space. He circled the block, cursing the narrow one-way streets close to St Luke's Garden. His good feeling about the evening began to dwindle severely as he circled a third time, finally managing to squeeze into a tight spot on Mitchell Street that tested his parallel parking skills. He was breaking into a nervous sweat by
the time he lowered the chair ramp to the kerb. Sherlock’s jaw was tight as he set off down the pavement towards their destination and John cursed; he hadn’t meant for his own tightening nerves to infect his companion’s.

Before getting to know Sherlock, John had never realised how rubbish most pavements were, how pockmarked with holes that were left unpatched, and how high many kerbs were. It made for slow going if Sherlock had to steer around such obstacles, often having to travel down a street for some time to find a safer crossing. His chair could manage some obstacles, but there was a height limit. Parking by the kerb was often impossible, and perfectly able-bodied arsehats parking in disabled spaces seemed so rife that John had half a mind to write a strongly worded column to a newspaper just to vent his frustrations.

St Luke’s was a former church which had undergone extensive renovations to become a fully accessible concert venue and practice space for the London Symphony Orchestra. When the two men reached the main entrance, an attendant noticed them at the top of the wheelchair access ramp and directed them into the concert hall and showed them to their seats right in the middle of the stage in the tenth row. John would be taking the seat at the edge of the row, and Sherlock slid into the space indicated next to it.

John walked around and made sure the brakes on the chair were locked. He fumbled a bit, having to shift around to avoid blocking the walkway from other patrons. *Sherlock needs me to sort everything out to make sure this goes well.*

All around them, seats were starting to fill, and John's mouth suddenly felt too dry, his skin too hot and tight. He tried to tell himself that everything was fine, that all the potential access issues had now been circumvented and they were in their seats well ahead of time. Perhaps he just needed a bit of time for the residual adrenaline to settle. Driving in London, especially with Sherlock, put him terribly on edge still. Digging around in the bag underneath Sherlock's wheelchair, he procured bottled water, half of which he drank in big gulps, trying to quell the nervous quivering of his muscles.

"John." Sherlock had gone completely still, hissing the single syllable through his teeth.

Startled out of his racing thoughts, John's head snapped up, and he moved around to the front of the wheelchair, trying to work out what was wrong.


"Right, yeah. Yeah, I’m fine. Just need to—" John gave the water bottle still in his hand a little shake, inclining his head to indicate his plan to return it to the bag. But something caught his eye as he did; Sherlock's cushion had shifted, and the edge was folded over, pinned under his thigh. John knew it could cause a pressure point like that and Sherlock wouldn't even be able to feel the discomfort and a potential sore forming.

John would have to fix it. Glancing around, he squatted down in front of Sherlock, sliding his left hand around the edge of the seat to see if he could flip it back down.

"John." Sherlock’s voice was dangerously low, now, and he was glaring daggers. "What on earth are you doing?"

"Sorry. Sorry, it’s just the cushion is folded, and I think—" John leaned forward, his right arm wrapped around Sherlock’s waist as his left index finger worked the edge of the cushion from back to front. Without pausing to think about how odd what he was doing would look like, he pulled and lifted Sherlock in one swift move and felt the cushion slip solidly back into place. "Aha! Got it!"
Triumphantly he looked up, grinning, but Sherlock wasn't looking at him, despite their close proximity. His gaze was fixed somewhere over John's right shoulder, and his lips were pressed into a thin line. The smile slid from John's lips as he rocked back on his heels and stood up. He could feel the stares of everyone in the vicinity as he sank into his seat, his face hot. At least the audience members close who were giving them wary glances averted their gazes when John glared at them.

"John?"

He shifted to look at Sherlock as the lights dimmed in warning and a melodic chime sounded for the third time to alert patrons that the concert was about to begin.

Sherlock no longer looked angry. In fact, his eyes were twinkling as he continued, sotto voce: "Next time, buy me dinner first."

John tried to hide his smile, glancing away. He opened his mouth to reply, but just then, the audience lights dimmed completely, leaving only the stage lit for the musicians. Soon, the orchestra walked onto the stage, then created a cacophony of tuning their instruments before the conductor's arrival was marked with thunderous applause. Once Sir Simon Rattle raised his baton, the sound of quiet, sombre, yet somehow hopeful strings filled the former church hall. A single horn sounded before giving way for the dulcet sounds of high-pitched woodwinds.

For a while, John remained twitchy, shifting in his seat and glancing around the hall instead of being able to concentrate on the music. But eventually, once the melodic patterns of the composition began to come forth in earnest, he was able to let the music soothe his nerves, settling in and around him. He enjoyed watching the perfectly coordinated work of the violinists; from their seats, they had a very good view of the strings on the left side of the conductor. John's quick online search that afternoon had characterised this Dvořák piece as one of the most performed symphonies — an approachable and highly regarded classic. Since it would last about fifty minutes, the solo violinist, whose promising career Sherlock had outlined in the car, a whiff of noticeable envy in his voice, would come in after the interval. Until then, the stage belonged to the London Symphony Orchestra to strut their stuff.

Once the novelty of the luscious soundscape wore off, John stole a glance at Sherlock, hoping for a glimpse of the rare private smile occasionally seen when Sherlock had his headphones on at home. Even with his eyes closed, Sherlock always seemed to know when someone else was looking and such smiles easily disappeared, shuttered behind a stiff mask of indifference. Now, instead of framing a content, serene expression, Sherlock's eyes were downcast, fixed on the back of the seat in front of him. There were shadows etched on his features rather than the expected, shifting joy.

John leaned slightly forward in his chair, bumping his arm against Sherlock's to try to catch his attention. His lips were parted, and with the exception of his nostrils, which flared with each heavy exhale, he was completely motionless, and he didn't turn his head to look at the source of the physical intrusion. John watched him for a moment, his brow knitting. To an outsider, it might look like Sherlock was just concentrating on the music, but there was an urgent tenseness to him that didn't match the way Sherlock normally seemed to enjoy music. If John didn't know better, he might have thought that Sherlock was trying to block out what was happening on stage. John hesitated, not wanting to draw undue attention, but instinctually sensing that something was wrong. Trusting that Sherlock would tell him if anything was physically wrong, he shifted his eyes back to the stage to try to enjoy the rest of the performance.

For a few minutes, he managed to do just that — to allow himself to get wrapped up in the music. But when he glanced again to his right, Sherlock's breathing had quickened, and his lips were pressed together so hard they were blanching. Properly concerned now, John slid his palm onto...
Sherlock’s arm as a silent question. Sherlock flinched, his eyes tightening, but his gaze remained fixed straight ahead.

"Something wrong?" John whispered as quietly as possible. "AD?" he mouthed; it was the only theory that came to mind.

Sherlock shook his head, his jaw clenching but did not offer any other information.

Eventually, John turned back to the stage, but his concentration was shattered, each minute lasting hours. He found himself jittery, wanting the music to finish so he could get verbal confirmation of Sherlock’s wellbeing. The very second the audience broke into applause to mark the end of the Dvořák symphony, John bent to collect his program that had slipped off his lap, but before he could check on Sherlock, the wheelchair backed up and began determinedly heading up the ramp for the doors to the foyer.

John stood quickly to chase after him, feeling as ridiculous as he was fretted. What the hell had come over Sherlock? John finally caught up with him at the back of the queue heading out through the ticket control spot. Sherlock had been forced to stop and was craning his head, presumably trying to find a gap in the crowd he could squeeze through. Ignoring the dirty looks he was getting from people trying to make their way to the bar, John pressed through until he could grab the right armrest of Sherlock’s chair.

Panting, he asked, "Sherlock! Where the hell are you going?"

It didn't seem like Sherlock to be in a hurry to get to a bar, and with his catheter, he wouldn't need the loo. John cocked his head to the side, the irritation at being left turning into concern once again.

Sherlock looked pale, and his voice shook slightly as he answered: "I want to leave."

"But the violinist you wanted to hear is in the second half, isn’t she?" John asked, his eyes skimming the man seated before him. His first instinct was to coddle and examine: press a hand to Sherlock's forehead, make him drink some water, check his pulse to make sure this wasn't AD after all, but he refrained. He didn't want to get into a public argument about fussing too much, so instead, he asked simply, "Are you okay?"

When Sherlock didn’t answer, and his eyes kept darting anxiously around the throng of people closing in, John pressed further. "Is something hurting you? Headache? Your catheter…?" Panic attack? He hadn't witnessed Sherlock having those in public, only at night. What the hell is going on?

The space between them and the rest of the queue suddenly widened, and Sherlock wasted no time in moving forward without so much as a glance in John's direction. John cursed under his breath, jogging after him, trying to keep the back of the wheelchair in his sights in the thick crowd, which parted just enough to let Sherlock through.

"Sherlock!" he shouted, zigzagging between patrons and even accidentally stepping on the short train of an older woman's blue evening gown. Muttering a string of haphazard apologies, John sprinted forward until he could finally plant himself firmly in Sherlock's way.

They were now in a less crowded spot next to a mahogany-panelled sidewall of the downstairs foyer. John could feel the draft from the main doors.

"Alright, enough," he said, unable to keep the irritation out of his voice. "You have to talk to me.
What is going on?” He leaned his palms on the armrests of the wheelchair, bringing their faces close and blocking Sherlock's escape route.

"I just want to go." Sherlock's voice was tight, his eyes glancing around wildly. His hands came up to push against John's chest.

John straightened but kept his hands clamped on the armrests to try to prevent Sherlock from leaving again. "Was the performance not good?" He asked stupidly. He couldn't always follow or understand the inner workings of Sherlock's brain, but he could feel a prickling fear at the back of his neck he couldn't ignore. Could it really be the crowds? He seemed fine with that when we arrived.

"Sherlock. Please talk to me." John needed words, and quickly, before he would start panicking over what was going on. I will stand here and guess at the reasons all night before letting him shut me out again.

He shifted to see Sherlock better in the shadowy recess of the alcove they’d tucked themselves into while meandering through the crowd, gripping Sherlock’s upper arms to capture his attention. Sherlock’s chin was tipped up, his eyes boring holes into the ceiling instead of looking at John. Though he was tense, and John could feel him trembling under his palms, he no longer seemed to want to escape his clutches, so John lessened his grip to what he hoped was a gentle, encouraging squeeze instead.

Sherlock's shoulders slumped, all the angry determination leaving him at once. He turned his head to face the wall. "John, please. It was— Can't we just—"

John glanced down sharply at the choked sound of Sherlock’s voice, leaned closer to see better — and froze at the sight: there were tears trickling from beneath Sherlock’s eyelids, which were squeezed so tightly together they appeared to be pearly white. Sherlock swallowed, clearly trying to take a last stand against crying as he opened his eyes and dropped them to watch his fingers gripping the fabric of his trousers covering his knees.

John couldn't breathe; the pain emanating from his companion wrapped around him like a vice, drowning him in a horror that he couldn't remember having felt since— no. He shook his head violently to clear the shadows lurking in his head and squatted down on his haunches just beside Sherlock’s feet. Get it together, Watson.

"Sherlock…” He tried again, gentling his voice as much as possible. "Whatever it is, you can tell me."

"I can't play, John," Sherlock’s words burst out of him as more tears carved paths down his cheeks. "I can't— not ever— I can't play anymore—"

The rest was lost to convulsive sobs, which John instinctively muted by leaning closer and pulling Sherlock tightly against him. He wrapped his arms protectively around the other man's shoulders, a violent need taking his hands to shield this private moment from curious and ignorant onlookers. Stunned into silence, John pressed his head against the perfectly arranged curls being mussed by his jacket. He was now blinking rapidly, too, in an attempt to banish the moisture gathering in his own eyes. His heart ached.

"Sherlock, it's—" he tried to whisper when he found his voice again.

"Don't tell me it's okay!" The abrupt, tear-broken but still angry reply cut through John's attempt at consolation. Sherlock pulled back, his wet eyes flashing. "Don't say such things; don't be like all
the other… other idiots!" He spat out. "Don't be like all the people who pretend they know what it's like."

And then, as quickly as it had sparked into life, the fight drained from him. He slumped back against John, curling fingers into his jacket as though afraid to let go, his thin frame shaking with choked-up sobs.

Wanting to lend whatever strength he had, John pressed Sherlock's head against the warmth of his torso. He took a deep breath, willing himself not to try to offer empty words to fix what could not be repaired, what could not be changed.

"You're right," he whispered into the space above Sherlock’s head, into the dark corner of the foyer, into the dark spaces of his own mind. "It's not okay, but it could be, one day."

He couldn't be sure that the other man had heard him but, as he continued to hold Sherlock, he watched the other people milling around, and he was overcome by a sudden calm where once had been nothing but anger. None of them knew the path the two men huddled in a quiet corner had had to take to get to that day. None of them knew the things that had converged to bring them here, to this concert performance, to this huge milestone of Sherlock letting out some of what he’d been holding in for so long. They are lucky, John thought, watching the crowd thinning as the interval was drawing to a close. Lucky to still be able to believe nothing is going to happen to them. He stopped paying attention to anything but Sherlock; it didn't matter if passers-by were looking at them, and Sherlock’s words about not being 'like the other idiots' echoed back to the surface of John's thoughts. He remembered the things told to him by staff at rehab: all those dismissive placations and promises of things getting better. He had felt as though the whole place reeked of dishonesty, of an unwillingness to really face the less savoury emotions of the endless parade of traumatised patients coming and going through the doors. Though it may have just been him projecting, he had felt an unspoken expectation of getting one's shit together, to get better or get gone, even when everyone was at their nicest. Sometimes he had wanted nothing more than a single person to just listen to his ranting and cursing instead of trying to be so damned therapeutic. To listen, without trying to solve the problem, or dismissing the emotions because they were too raw, too uncomfortable to witness.

Is that what Sherlock had gone through, too? Or, more accurately, what felt he was still going through? Had he learned that there was no room for thoughts and words that made others uncomfortable because they were signs that he hadn't yet succeeded in achieving their standards of better and recovered? Even Mycroft always seemed so business-like, often reacting unfavourably to Sherlock's verbal lashings-out instead of seeing them for what they were: attempts at diverting attention away from how he was really feeling. Could it be that, through their gratingly cheery dismissals, others had denied Sherlock the chance to grieve so that he could then get the hell on with his life; that they had unwittingly suspended him in sorrow he could not overcome until it was expressed? When listening to his music at home, it was probably easy for Sherlock to distance himself, or to shut it off when it threatened to break through into memories he didn't want to think about. Now, faced with the physicality of his beloved instrument being played beautifully by those on stage, he was faced with evidence so undeniable, inescapable and tangible of what he had lost that it became too much.

A sucker punch, a shot through the chest. John knew what that felt like. He had tried to cling to denial too, refusing to face any of his own demons while simultaneously trying to exorcise Sherlock’s. How unfair he had been in expecting that, with a bit of encouragement, Sherlock would just stiff up the lip, try harder, find a silver lining.

John couldn't fix a broken spine, but he could do what others couldn't: be here for Sherlock right
now. He willed himself to stop resisting, to stop trying to deflect and erase, and that's when the strangest thing happened. At that moment, he felt as though something broke, something let go. And, woven into the fabric of the sorrow that separated them like a wall from the world, was now relief. Things didn't have to be alright right now, but it had to be better for Sherlock to get this out than to avoid the topic forever. This shocking moment of raw honesty he had suddenly witnessed now felt like a precious gift, one John knew he had to handle delicately.

A chime sounded overhead, and the rest of the crowd began to trail towards the concert hall. The foyer was warm, dimly lit, and John felt no hurry to shift away or to leave their private bubble. Still lost in thought, he almost missed the moment when Sherlock finally exhaled and pushed himself gently away, wiping at his face ineffectively with the back of his hands. John fished tissues out from the bag hanging from the wheelchair and stood between him and the open space of the foyer, wanting to give Sherlock a bit of privacy to collect himself.

His breath caught in his throat as his eyes met Sherlock’s. They were rimmed in red, making them look even greener than usual, and John was close enough to notice there was a tiny speck of brown above one pupil. He couldn’t help but smile, a gentle one that echoed the sadness distorting the beautiful face he was studying.

"Okay?" He breathed, terribly afraid of saying the wrong thing.

Sherlock briefly closed his eyes, his head dipping in a nod. A curl escaped from behind his ear, loosened by the friction of being rubbed against John’s coat. John bit his lip, reaching out to tuck the ringlet back where it belonged. His finger lightly traced the shell of Sherlock’s ear and his jawbone before he removed his hand. He thought he heard Sherlock pull in a quick breath.

The chime sounded again, breaking the spell.

"We can still make it back to our seats," John suggested hesitantly, stepping back and dropping his eyes to the floor. "That is if you want—"

"Yes," Sherlock said quickly. "I do want."

"Come on, then." John reached out his hand, and Sherlock took it, curling his fingers against the back of John's briefly before letting go as they turned up the ramped walkway back to the concert hall.

They made it back to their seats just as the lights dimmed. Try as he might, John could not focus on the first few minutes of the soloist’s performance. His thoughts and eyes constantly wandered back to Sherlock, worried that it would still be too much. But, every glance at his friend told John that he had found a semblance of calm again. His shoulders were relaxed back against his chair, his fingers occasionally tapping against his thigh as though playing an instrument. Those movements were slow, of course — so unlike those John could see the string players performing on stage. He pushed the comparison out of his mind, choosing to count Sherlock’s indulgence of muscle memory as a positive sign, no matter how minimal.

John would never pretend to be able to tell a good violinist from a spectacular one, but even he was mesmerised by the animated, joyous performance of the young Norwegian woman on stage. He’d read in the hand program he had lost at some point during running after Sherlock that Vilde Frang had debuted with the Norwegian Radio Orchestra at the age of ten. She was physically captivating: her long limbs and expressive face helped conjure a mental image of what Sherlock must have looked like while he played. Oh, how John would’ve loved to watch that gorgeous man teasing the strings of his own violin with those long fingers…
A bit of movement at the edge of his right visual field caught John’s attention. Sherlock's hand was dangling over the edge of his armrest, palm turned upward, fingers curled invitingly. It took John a moment before he realised what was being requested. He glanced up at Sherlock once the realisation came, his heart skipping a beat. Sherlock’s lips lifted into a gentle curve as John slipped his hand into Sherlock's and tangled their fingers together. Sherlock gave a squeeze, then pressed their joined hands against his thigh where they remained for some time. When John glanced at him next, his face had relaxed completely, the tight lines around his eyes and mouth dissolved, making him look softer and younger than usual. Every so often, the perfect cupid's bow of his mouth would part, and he would suck in a quick breath, letting it out again in a delicate puff. His eyes slipped closed, and for a moment, he looked completely at ease, more peaceful than John had ever seen him. His lashes fluttered as his eyelids lifted, but the serenity of the moment did not abate.

With difficulty, John brought his attention back to the stage and watched the rest of the performance, though his thoughts were firmly fixed on the man next to him. As the final notes faded, John gave Sherlock’s hand a squeeze before releasing it, bracing his palms into his own knees to stand up.

"John. Wait, please."

Nearly habitually, he scanned the sight of Sherlock who still looked reassuringly peaceful. The hall was nearly empty, the murmured conversations and the occasional greeting fading into the dampness of the early spring evening.

"Alright? Let me just collect our things quickly, and we'll go—"

Sherlock’s eyes were closed again, the same soft smile relaxing his handsome features. "I’m fine." His voice was quiet, lacking its usual acerbic quality. "Can we sit here for a little while? For just a moment, I’d love to just…” He shook his head. "Never mind. It’s… sentiment. Forget it."

"No," John insisted. "Tell me. I won't laugh." I will never laugh at you. Not the way you think.

"I never did any of this. Went places with… others, for fun. There was work, and the people connected to that, but otherwise… I just wanted to pretend, I guess, for a moment, that it was still possible. That I could have attended a concert like this with someone who could have been… is my —" he suddenly cut off the sentence, his eyes trained on his fingers, restlessly moving against the knee of his trousers. John recognised it for the tell it was; Sherlock worried he had said or was about to say the wrong thing.

"Friend?" John suggested quietly.

The gentle curve of Sherlock’s lips returned, though his eyes did not lift. "Yes," he accepted after a moment. "Friend."

And so they sat, shoulder to shoulder, two men who had been to a concert together.

Chapter End Notes

Art by khorazir inspired by this chapter.
It rained for the next four days straight — the kind of downpour that made it seem as though the sun had gone into permanent hibernation. But neither the rain nor the way it made his shoulder ache all day, could dampen John's mood. Surely Sherlock felt it too: the magnetic pull towards one another's orbit and the change in their interactions after the concert.

John suspected that Mycroft and Tallie had noticed the sudden change in the atmosphere of the annexe as well — the way every moment seemed to spark with electricity suddenly — but neither of them mentioned it, save for a few knowing smiles from her. It seemed to John that Sherlock was beginning to trust him; he awarded John his attention nearly constantly, and there was something amazingly unadulterated in the way he reacted when he made John laugh. Laugh lines around his mouth and charming little crinkles around his eyes now appeared when he smiled. Sulking had decreased to a minimum; Sherlock started actively suggesting things to do and even seemed to tolerate Mycroft better.

That was not to say that John found it suddenly easy to interpret Sherlock's moods. Being around Sherlock was no longer the walk on eggshells it had been at first, but his confidence in public continued to be brittle and his temper volatile. They'd taken a big step forward, but it had been one step where surely many more were needed. John had no way of knowing how many would be enough to tip the scales in terms of how Sherlock saw his future. On a particularly good day, John hoped that the balance was already tilting favourably, that he no longer needed to worry about what Sherlock would decide. John still maintained the idea that it wouldn't be a good idea to try to discuss Switzerland with Sherlock; any inclination that John's motives for being around him were centred on that could be potentially destructive.

And it wouldn't reflect the truth.

Because if there was one thing John continued to be certain of, it was that Switzerland or no Switzerland, this is where he wanted to be and that he needed Sherlock as much as Sherlock needed him. And he didn't care if this dependency was a bit not good. There was no looking back, no going back to John's own personal hell of pitying himself at that hovel of a flat, battling memories instead of the enemy every night. He'd lost important things, but he hoped that Sherlock felt the way he now did — that they had both gained the start of something, too. What was the point of just trying to decide whether life was better or worse after a disaster; it wasn't that black and white. All it needed to be was good enough. That there were more good things than reasons to just stop; things where one wanted to see what came next.

Would Sherlock want to see what could become of the two of them with time and a bit of effort from both parties? John kept replaying Sherlock's words about wanting to linger at the concert venue in his head — *I never did these things before, and now I really can't.* Had Sherlock meant them as a positive – an extended olive branch, a hesitant test of the waters to see if John would accept what he was offering? Or was it Sherlock’s way of mourning all that he had lost, even that which he’d never had in the first place? John wanted to kick himself for not pressing the issue further that night, but Sherlock had seemed content just to sit together when the concert finished, and after the tidal wave of emotions earlier in the night, John hadn't wanted to upset things again.

He still hadn't pushed Sherlock to talk about what had happened during the interval, and after four
days, he worried that too much time had passed. Clearly, it had been a long time coming, and John hoped that it might encourage Sherlock to continue discussing things that had happened — things he had kept close to his chest for fear that they would make others too uncomfortable and dismissive to listen. John couldn't help remembering what Sherlock's medical records from rehab had stated about his recovery: that he had refused to talk about the accident or its aftermath and seemed to be stuck at a stage of shock. John could only hope that the concert experience hadn't been so harrowing as to make him clam up again forever. He vowed to try and find a way to broach the subject again soon.

People grieve so differently, John thought as he opened his bedroom door after a post-lunch nap. Some individuals needed to go through everything right away when tragedy struck, needed to verbalise things over and over and over again to make sense of the events. For others, distraction and time were the best remedies; forcing them to go through trauma debriefing soon after the event could even be harmful. Lots could have probably been done to help Sherlock get on with things earlier, but maybe he had needed plenty of time and gentle coaxing instead of being wheeled into therapists' offices where he may have felt cornered to start talking about his accident and all that he had lost. Now, it seemed like the time had come for Sherlock to make those first attempts at using a sounding board, and John would listen. He would be there, and he would listen and bite his tongue when he was tempted to offer useless words of consolation or try to sidestep the difficult stuff.

Spotting their lunch dishes still unrinsed in the sink, where they sported the remains of a delicious lentil curry that Sherlock had requested from Sophie after seeing a recipe online, John turned on the tap. The annexe was quiet, which was unusual; Sherlock often had music playing softly during the day. Now that he thought about it, John couldn’t recall if Sherlock had played any music since the concert at all.

"Put something on, will you?" he prompted Sherlock who was reading in the sitting room. "Makes doing the wash-up a bit less boring."

"You're not doing the wash-up, the machine is," Sherlock pointed out, without lifting his eyes from the tablet.

"Smartarse."

John tossed a smirk over his shoulder, but his expression changed quickly when he saw the look on Sherlock's face. His jaw was clenched, and his eyes had taken on that faraway look that he often got when he remembered something unpleasant. Or more accurately, something formerly pleasant. John didn’t have to be a Holmesian mind-reader to deduce the cause of that look now.

“It doesn’t have to be... it’s okay. Got any Beatles on there?” He offered, hoping to lighten the mood.

Before Sherlock could answer, a knock sounded on the annexe's garden door. John shot a quizzical look in Sherlock’s direction, but he had turned his attention back to his tablet; to continue reading or to hunt for a Beatles track, John couldn’t be sure.

John crossed the annexe kitchen, drying his hands on a tea towel slung over his shoulder before pulling open the door.

"Afternoon. I’m Ian Crayhill, here to see Mister Holmes?" The man standing outside in an obviously expensive coat had a nasal, Brummie accent. He was holding an umbrella, but the bottom half of his dark grey trousers were soaked, and his loafers squeaked when he shifted.
John nodded towards the entrance to the main house. "Wrong door, mate. But you can go through this way to get to the main house if you like."

"John, no. It's not for Mycroft; he's for me."

Two heads turned to look as Sherlock crossed the floor.

"Mister Sherlock Holmes?"

"Yes. Right this way. John, perhaps you might take the condiments back to Sophie?"

The suggestion wasn't hard to interpret: it carried the request that John should make himself scarce. Puzzled, and more than a little insulted, John watched as the man followed Sherlock into the sitting room and shut the connecting door. John couldn’t pinpoint why he felt so forlorn all of a sudden. Surely, he should be happy that Sherlock was expressing an interest in… something. John wondered briefly why he hadn’t mentioned any appointments, but then chastised himself for thinking that he should. I'm not his keeper.

With a sigh, John finished the remaining lunch dishes and then decided he might as well head to the main house. After dropping off the now half-empty jar of apple chutney in the kitchen, he made for the library with an armful of Sherlock’s most recently requested books. Not his keeper, but apparently his errand boy.

When that route took him past the closed door of Mycroft’s study, his steps came to a halt. Should he mention the meeting to Mycroft? Maybe he’d be able to clear up some of the unease surrounding this mystery guest.

John raised his hand to knock just as the door pulled open and Mycroft walked out, nearly crashing into John, whose fist was still raised.

"Doctor Watson?" Mycroft raised an eyebrow.

John had noticed that he seemed to revert to more polite forms of addressing others when caught by surprise or when angry. The rest of the time, he was now habitually using John's first name.

"Is something the matter?" Mycroft tilted his head to glance around John, as though he could somehow conceal the large power chair. "Where’s Sherlock?"

Holmes the younger still rarely entered the main house so John thought that it shouldn’t have surprised the man so much that he wasn't present. John pushed on, waving vaguely with one hand in the direction of the annexe.

"He’s fine. He has a… visitor? Bloke in a suit, looks a bit official, thought maybe Sherlock had contacted someone about…" He wasn’t sure, really, how to finish that sentence, couldn’t conjure up a single scenario in which Sherlock would need to meet with someone that dressed like an accountant.

Mycroft's eyes widened, and he pulled a pocket watch out of his jacket. "I'm afraid I'm in a hurry. Did you catch a name?"

"Crayhill. He came to the garden door, so I thought that maybe he'd been here before."

"Damn!" Mycroft exclaimed.

John flinched in surprise, but his employer recovered quickly from his uncharacteristic outburst,
spinning on his heel and marching back into his office.

"It should not concern you, John," the older Holmes announced. "Just a minor setback."

The door shut, leaving John blinking at the smooth wood. More determined than ever to solve the mystery of the damp guest, John marched back to the annexe, glancing at the two shapes still visible through the smoked glass of the sitting room door.

He went to his bedroom and pulled out his laptop. He googled Ian Crayhill, pecking each individual letter out on the keyboard, an inexplicable pit in his stomach. The first few hits were for a YouTube artist, a young man with blue hair and a tattooed face. Scowling, John scrolled past the videos until he saw the next link: *Ian Crayhill — Inheritance, Wills and Probate Barrister*.

He felt as though someone had doused him in ice water.

*Will.*

*Final will and testament.*

*Final.*

Was Sherlock still going through with his plan?

The words echoed in John’s mind throughout the next hour. He felt empty, as though all the life had been pulled from him by a giant vacuum. He went to the library where he kept pulling books from the shelves and putting them back without reading a single word. Eventually, he stalked back to the annexe and sat, pretending to read the paper at the kitchen island. He couldn't hear any discernible bits of the conversation from behind the door.

He was grateful for the distraction when the barrister finally left, and Sherlock joined him in the kitchen for tea. He didn’t seem to notice John's forlorn expression, probably because he'd brought his tablet and soon presented an email to John on the screen.

"There's a case, John, and it's *at least an eight!*"


"No. Rhodes, *Greece.* But..." Sherlock’s face fell suddenly. "How am I supposed to—"

"I'll come with you," John announced without thinking. "I'll sort it all out. I'll talk to Tallie; we'll need her, too. " Determination now warmed the blood which fear had frozen. He didn't care how difficult it would be to manage a trip to a country made up of hills and mountains and islands and god-knows-what-else-kind-of unfriendly terrain. He didn't care whether Tallie was willing to leave her studies for a week or however long this took. John would make this happen. If this is what Sherlock wanted, then he'd make it happen.

*Greece, not bloody Switzerland.* Sun and beaches and people and anything but gloomy England and this bloody prison of a house with its looming death sentence. He would prove to Sherlock that he could go anywhere, do anything. That they could do anything they wanted.

He would prove to Sherlock that he should change his mind.
John's eyes opened as the plane lurched, a pocket of air causing a bit of turbulence. Automatically, his eyes shifted to the left to check on his companion.

Sherlock's right hand was wrapped around the armrest, the muscles of his forearm taut, his knuckles blanching white, broadcasting his unease. John’s eyes went to his face, the easiest-to-read barometer of Sherlock’s emotions. As expected, his jaw was clenched tightly, a muscle jumping in his cheek. His eyes were open, fixed steadily on the wall in front of him. The tightness around his eyes further conveyed his stress.

"All right?" John kept his voice low, meant only for Sherlock’s ears. Across the aisle to the right, Tallie had her eyes closed, though John knew she would be easily roused if needed.

When Sherlock didn’t immediately answer, John wasn’t surprised. The tension had been steadily rising since they’d arrived at Heathrow. Sherlock had been downright giddy during the preparations since there was the promise of a good case, but since his interest had focused on the case — and the case only — John and Tallie had been tasked with all the packing and preparations. At Musgrave Court that morning, Sherlock had been micromanaging and hurrying John up, following him around and talking nonstop, evidently antsy to get going, his lap full of toiletries and a pair of swim trunks.

In the midst of preparations, John had asked Mycroft what he had found out about Sherlock’s appointment with the barrister, and the answer was disappointing: Sherlock had refused to discuss it, stating that it was high time Mycroft stopped sticking his nose into other people's affairs. Mycroft also hadn't managed to squeeze anything out of the law firm; perhaps Sherlock had chosen them wisely when it came to preservation of his privacy. In the end, John had even asked Sherlock about it, but he had shrugged and said that it was just a bit of uninteresting personal business.

There was little more John could do to learn more, and he had his hands full with organising the practicalities of their trip. He’d contacted a London travel agent specialising in disabled customers and learned that Greek islands were mountainous and far from the ideal vacation spot for someone in a wheelchair. Needs must, of course; the case would dictate their destination. Tallie had thankfully been able to rearrange some of her other responsibilities in order to travel with them, and she had talked John through everything they would need to pack for Sherlock. The last twenty-four hours had been a whirlwind of activity as they’d prepared for this impromptu trip.

Sherlock’s mood had plummeted drastically, however, once they’d made their way into the check-in area of the airport, and John knew why: crowds. It was hard to keep up the facade of a consulting detective at work when people kept staring at him and then averting their gaze as though they’d done something bad. Thankfully there was a quiet corner close to the special luggage desk where they could transfer Sherlock into a narrow Heathrow wheelchair to load him onto the plane.

John didn't even suggest browsing around the shops and was thankful that Mycroft's Black Amex, which had mysteriously manifested itself in Sherlock's wallet, got them into a private lounge — John as a plus one and Tallie as an assistant. There, John had managed to coax Sherlock into some conversation, but he still seemed distracted and frustrated. It also hadn't helped that they had been escorted into the plane first, paraded through all the other passengers waiting at the gate. The looks they got were naturally not disapproving, but perhaps for Sherlock, the unease and the pity were infinitely worse.

He was silent once they got in the plane, not even nodding in reply to the cheery greetings of the stewards and stewardesses. John had transferred him from the wheelchair into his seat — business class, god bless Mycroft — then reached over his lap to find the other end of the safety belt.
This earned him a murderous glare. "Stop fussing, John," Sherlock commanded, and began fumbling around between his seat and the wall for the buckle. It took him some time, during which John stood close by, practically twitching to intervene and get it done.

He’d noticed that Sherlock’s shoelace had come undone and decided that it wouldn’t matter during the flight; kneeling down to fix it right now would have certainly earned him a fresh bout of ire. John had exchanged a glance with Tallie; since she’d looked content with Sherlock’s arrangements, John had nodded curtly and taken his seat. As much as John was tempted to try to talk to him, to tell him it was all fine, he knew instinctively that the best thing he could do right now was to treat Sherlock as he would treat any able-bodied travelling companion.

The borrowed green wheelchair was taken away, and soon the other passengers began trailing in. Once some of them had taken their seats in business class, Sherlock no longer received much additional attention since sitting in his seat, he looked like any passenger.

The staff, however, were well aware of the situation. "Everything alright, sir? Anything you need?" A passing steward who had escorted them in asked them, clearly directing his words to Sherlock.


John flashed the steward an emergency smile that was probably more creepy than disarming. "We're fine, thanks, just fine."

After a moment of further hovering, the steward thankfully left them alone. John had opened the in-flight magazine, making light remarks on some of the content. Sherlock continued looking out the window, ignoring him until they began reversing out of the gate. As instructed, he opened the window blind and sat stiffly through the safety lecture.

After the plane's wheels left the runway, his anxiety climbed as steadily as the plane as it headed up towards the cloud cover. Since the fasten seatbelt sign was still on, there was no warning about the turbulence they encountered as they left behind the white cliffs of Dover. The plane lurched again, and John was glad for the band Tallie had packed that was holding Sherlock’s legs together so they wouldn’t knock about. John hadn't been surprised when Sherlock had painstakingly arranged the blanket supplied by a stewardess on his legs to hide it from view.

Shifting subtly, John moved his arm until it was pressed against Sherlock’s from shoulder to elbow. He let his hand drift up, trailing against Sherlock's little finger, making his intention clear. He could sense Sherlock watching him, the movement caught in the corner of his eye even though his gaze remained straight ahead. John covered his hand with his own, feeling the cool skin beneath his warm palm, the tendons rippling with each movement of the plane. John didn’t try to pry fingers off the armrest or offer any placating words of comfort. He had no idea if Sherlock’s reaction was borne from a lifelong fear of flying, or if his anxiety was rooted in something else.

John let his hand settle more firmly against Sherlock’s, tightening his fingers in a gesture that he hoped would be comforting rather than suffocating. "Everyone hates turbulence, eh?"

"I used to have a plan," Sherlock said quietly, eyes fixed on their joined hands.

"Plan for what?"

"Do you have any idea how many things can go wrong on a commercial flight? Before, I entertained myself by devising contingency plans for each scenario. Now, most of those scenarios would just end in…” He trailed out and sighed.
"So you're... not afraid of flying, but...?" John couldn't quite follow.

"I've always felt uneasy in aeroplanes, but it never reached the phobic level of irrational fear you are likely thinking of. Not that it really is entirely irrational."

"Yeah, no, it's not," John admitted. "If a plane drops, not much anyone can do without a parachute and knowing how to use it." He kept his voice low. This was not the kind of talk anyone wanted to hear during a flight.

"I do. In theory."

"Of course you do," John chuckled.

"I remember a fire alarm," Sherlock said, his words hesitant. "At the hospital. They escorted all the ambulatory people out first, of course — family members, walking patients. I assumed bedridden ones would be evacuated last and only if the situation really escalated; evacuating someone in an ITU bed, on a respirator, would take time. And I kept thinking that what if they forgot—" he snapped his mouth shut, looking embarrassed, now.

John gave his hand a squeeze. "They don't forget patients or leave them behind. Of course not. I don't even think they'd leave ITU patients last; they'd know how much effort it takes time to organise the transfer. If anything, I thought they'd start with patients who can't walk."

He remembered the night when he'd gone to help Sherlock instead of Mycroft. Sherlock had panicked because he thought that he’d lost his means of communication with the rest of the world — because he thought he'd lost his means of getting help.

"Even if that was the case, how would I have known someone was coming?" Sherlock insisted. "If they were too busy evacuating to man the call button system, how would the staff know someone needed help? Would they really remember everyone in an emergency?" Sherlock's tone was haunted, and he turned his head abruptly back towards the closed window blind.

Though he didn't enjoy hearing such things, John was grateful and glad for the rare glimpse of vulnerability. It's just that he couldn't quite connect Sherlock’s logic until suddenly, a memory of his own drifted in. He recalled very little about being evacuated out of the spot where their squad had been ambushed, but he did clearly remember seeing the car he'd been pulled out of bursting in flames, the gas tank exploding. Because of the pain and the blood loss and since he couldn't use his arm, there was little he could do but watch the flames go up as the others dragged him out of harm’s way. That moment had often flashed back into his consciousness at the hospital and during rehab: the overwhelming sense of helplessness, of reliance on others, of how close a call it had been. Seeing that explosion, he had been watching his own death, averted only by a few seconds.

_Explosion. Fire alarm. No way to save oneself._

It made so much sense, now, to John: before, Sherlock had successfully controlled his nervousness about flying by imagining all the ways in which he could get resourceful to protect himself, to escape. Now, most of the contingency plans he had imagined would be rendered useless by the fact that he had no use of his legs and the function of his upper limbs was far from that of the average able-bodied person.

John pulled in a slow, deep breath through his nose, feeling his own shoulders relax back against the seat. Next to him, Sherlock did the same; John heard his quiet exhalation and felt the movement in the seat. He hid his smile as he turned his head to glance at Sherlock.
"You won't be left behind. I would never let that happen," he promised.

Sherlock gave him a short, unimpressed look. "You're not always going to be around, are you? Just like Tallie isn't always available."

It stung, being compared to her. John kept forgetting that he was still doing all this within the framework of being employed to help Sherlock, and maybe that was becoming a problem. He didn't want this to be a job; he'd do it even if nobody paid him. There was nowhere he'd rather be than right here beside Sherlock.

If and when Switzerland doesn't happen, what will be the next step after these six months are up? John was quite certain that Mycroft would be happy to extend his contract, perhaps indefinitely, but was that what John really wanted in terms of work? The idea of a new contract felt quite wrong — he wanted to be with Sherlock, not work for the man.

"I'm not going anywhere," John repeated emphatically.

Sherlock's head snapped around to look at him. "I don't know what that means."

"That's for you to decide," John replied pointedly.

Sherlock was blinking hard now. Then, he seemed to decide he must have heard wrong or misunderstood since his expression shifted to the equivalent of a shrug.

John felt the tension lessen in the forearm under his and gradually, the fingers entwined with his own loosened their grip and finally extricated. Sherlock reached out to grab the copy of The Times he had snatched from a stand at the corner of the gate bridge, and John immediately missed the feeling of their joined hands.

He tipped his head back against the headrest. "Refresh my memory on the details of the case?" he asked, keeping his voice low.

Sherlock slid his eyes from the random page of the paper that he was pretending to read, feigning a sigh. "Honestly, John. You're a terrible assistant."

"Oi!" John nudged him with his elbow. "I'm not your bloody assistant!"

"No? Pity. I need one, and you are the best candidate."

"I'm the only candidate, and I've no idea what that says about either of us," John quipped back, grinning and bending at the waist to retrieve the small notebook from his bag that he'd been using to keep track of their cases. Even some of the ones Sherlock had just solved online were so outlandish and entertaining that John had even considered writing them up on his languishing blog. He'd done a post on the Jefferson Henry case which had gained him hundreds of readers, and Sherlock had complained about a sudden influx of what he described as 'idiot commenters' on his own blog, too.

As the world's only consulting detective recalled in a quiet voice the details of the case as they knew them so far, John couldn't help but let his thoughts drift to how intimate it felt to be travelling together. Should he dare to hope that getting out of Musgrave Court and England could help them get to know one another even better? More so than any of the physical interactions of their daily life, wouldn't this blur lines between patient and caregiver, or friends, or… more?

Sherlock glanced up at him from under long lashes, his pale eyes glowing in the dim light of the cabin, and John's breath caught. "Are you getting all of this?" Sherlock’s eyes narrowed as he
looked pointedly at the blank notebook page held loosely in John’s hand. "Are you even listening?"

"Yes! Yes, of course." John scrambled to drag his mind back to the case. "Jorja Williams, Ambassador. Missing for five days. Last seen leaving Mystikos after UN dinner on Monday night with an unknown male companion. Greek law enforcement is, and I quote, 'shockingly inept' and as of yet, have not managed to track down a single clue to her whereabouts." He scribbled hastily on the page, underlining $POLICE = IDIOTS$ twice. "Did I forget anything?"

Sherlock’s grin was sudden and surprising, creasing the corners of his eyes as he tossed his head to get an errant curl that had slipped down onto his forehead back into place.

"No. That’s the whole of it, I think."

John grinned back. "Great. Any ideas yet, genius?"

Sherlock’s head settled back against the seat, his palms pressed together, his forefingers resting lightly on the cupid’s bow of his upper lip. John folded his hands across his lap to resist the urge to fix the stubborn ringlet that had slipped back down onto Sherlock’s forehead again.

"Seven. So far. More data is required, of course."

With a chuckle, John settled back against his own seat, flicking a glance across the aisle to where Tallie was watching them, a soft smile on her face. She gave him a nod before letting her eyes drift closed again.

"Let me know if you need me," John murmured to Sherlock before letting himself relax in a similar fashion.

He felt the answering hum vibrate through the entire length of his body.

When John had begun his frantic scramble to construct this holiday, he realised that picking just the right hotel would be crucial. The landscape couldn’t be too hilly, it should have accessible amenities, and it needed to be nice, preferably also secluded and quiet to ensure there were plenty of spots he and Sherlock could retreat to, away from the attention of the other guests. The travel agent he’d spoken to on the phone had made the booking after John had said yes to her description of a place called Elysium Resort and Spa. The name felt kind of unfortunate, but the images and the website reeled him in once he had a proper look at the place that evening in his bedroom.

The place didn’t disappoint upon arrival. Somehow, despite its size and its lavishness, the entrance lobby didn’t feel garish, but airy and welcoming with its large windows and white marble. There were comfortable sofa and armchair groups scattered around the foyer, and the west wall was all window, opening to a panoramic view of the turquoise sea. John had tried to talk to Mycroft about limiting costs, only to be assured that no expense should be spared. John never had in his life stayed in an expensive suite and felt intensely self-conscious to request booking three of them, but he wanted to be close to Sherlock and Sherlock should have the best right now. Plus, it would have been kind of unfair to banish Tallie to a lower-tier room, wouldn’t it?
Tallie dropped her handbag onto an armchair and wandered to the open balcony overlooking the sea. Sherlock had already steered his chair into a corner of it and was watching the waves crashing below.

As John joined Tallie by the safety railing, she whistled. "Well done, John. The place is gorgeous."

"I just hope it lives up to what the travel rep promised about practicality." He glanced towards Sherlock, who was clearly out of earshot — especially since the brisk wind was blowing from his direction.

Tallie turned to look at John, her short hair shifting in the sea breeze. "We'll manage. There's two of us and one of him," she laughed. "You need to relax, too."

"We're kind of far from home, and he's going to be working — we are going to be working. The case, I mean, me and Sherlock." John added.

Tallie bit her lip. "Seems more daunting, now that we're actually here?"

John let out a breath, cursing himself for not being able to let go of his worries even when faced with such a view as the one spreading out before them. "I guess."

"You can't just tell someone they'll manage, that it's going to be alright. Part of actually believing that means going through the challenges with them and coming out the other end as winners."

Coming from anyone else, this might have sounded condescending and trite, but Tallie's tone carried the sense of someone who had been in this situation before.

"Did you work with people like him before?"

"You know as well as I do that there's no one like him."

John nodded.

Her expression then sobered. "Tetraplegics, yes, both recently injured and those who'd lived that way for a long time or all their lives. Paraplegics, several."

"Were they… are they happy?"

"You should ask them, not me. But if you want to know whether I think they were more miserable about their lives than the average person living with a severe disability or a chronic illness, then I have to say that, too, depends more on the personality and history of that individual than the fact that they have a spinal injury. I'd never be so presumptuous as to try to define the quality of their life for them, and it's not a static thing; it changes as time passes, their health changes or their recovery progresses."

"I just… I don't know at any time whether anything I'm doing is the right thing. Whether it'll work."

"You can't know, John, because it's not for you to define. You can't single-handedly make it work, because it depends on what he wants, what he values, how much work he's willing to put into finding his way, and what he considers fulfilling. There's no checklist to go through, no bucket list to make true that would make things good enough for him."

John swept his hand over the railing to indicate the view. "But this is alright, isn't it? I mean, who wouldn't like such a thing?"
In the corner, John could see that Sherlock's chin was lifted slightly, his eyes closed as he seemed to relish the baking afternoon sun and the salty breeze.

"Special occasions are just that — special occasions," Tallie said. "It's the details of everyday life that are the deciding factor."

"But at least this proves that he can have this, that we can do stuff like this."

Tallie's lip pinched together, and she didn't reply.

Her words now sunk in fully, and the sense of helplessness John had been battling every day since Isobel's visit was back with a vengeance. Tallie had made his chances of making a difference sound so much smaller than he had wanted to believe.

"Then what the hell do I do? What can I do?" John asked, his gaze shifting to the lonely, thoughtful figure of Sherlock against the backdrop of the barren hills behind the resort area.

"Love him, the best you can. And for god's sakes, John, stop fretting and try to enjoy yourself," Tallie chided, and her features broke into a knowing smile. "Just have another look at this and relish it," she prompted, spreading his arms to indicate the endless, glittering Mediterranean. "If he sees you worrying all the time, he's going to feel like a burden. Let go, John, and have a holiday." She leaned closer and bumped her shoulder against his to emphasise her point. "Show him a good example of how to do that. I doubt he's much good at lounging beside a pool. Teach him how to kick back once the case is done."

Sherlock was now typing on his phone, a determined frown signalling that it probably had something to do with the case. He was squinting hard in the bright sun; John realised his sunglasses were in the bag hanging from the back of the chair into which he couldn't get on his own.

"Okay." John breathed out, squeezing the safety railing briefly before pushing against it to step back. "Okay."

He went to Sherlock. "Ready to check in? Our rooms should be on the fifth floor and facing the sea, so the view from there might be even better."

Under the scorching Mediterranean sun, Sherlock looked every bit the pale Englishman he was. John swore he'd get him on the beach for some sunbathing even if he had to kidnap the man and fireman-carry him into a beach chair.

Sherlock's answering smile was soft and relaxed in a way it hadn't been since they'd left Musgrave that morning. "Lead the way."

Chapter End Notes

All our more or less sane Tumblr posts related to Proving A Point can be found here, including all the chapter-related photocollages J makes.
A Three-Patch Problem

Chapter Notes

What?? Another chapter so soon!?

We're soooo changeable. And we couldn't wait to give you even more Greek Island goodness (with a heeeaping pile of angst, because duh. It's US).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

John checked the time from the entertainment system's digital clock. They were in Sherlock's suite where the man had been doing the wheelchair equivalent of pacing for a good while now. Every so often he would freeze, hands steepled together with his fingertips on his lower lip, deep in thought. Occasionally, he muttered something, random words supposedly connected to the case, which made little sense to John.

"It's lunchtime," John announced, mostly to the empty air in the room since he assumed the lost-in-thought-looking Sherlock would ignore him while finishing his umpteenth circuit.

But, from his spot at the desk, John could see Sherlock's head snap up, his eyes unfocused for a few moments until he reoriented himself with his surroundings. John couldn't believe he hadn't bumped into anything yet.

"And?" Sherlock asked tetchily. He had made it clear that he hated being interrupted when he was in what he had explained to John was his Mind Palace.

John shrugged, unperturbed. He was still a medical professional — even when he was also acting as a detective’s assistant — and Sherlock needed to eat as much as he did.

"And I’m hungry. We could do room service or go down to the seafood place?"

"We shall do no such thing." Sherlock flicked his wrist dismissively, making his emphasis clear. "You are free to go get your lunch. Food interferes with my brain work." His eyes narrowed. "Speaking of which, can you get Tallie for me? I need to talk to her."

"Uh, yeah. Sure. Anything else?" John tried to keep the bitterness out of his voice, tried not to feel side-lined. He’d spent the morning feeling useless as Sherlock made some more calls and darted around trying to make sense of the case. Now, not only was he apparently being dismissed from helping with the case but from… everything else, too? What had he done wrong? Why did Sherlock suddenly want to speak to Tallie? It wasn’t time for Sherlock’s afternoon routines yet; did he have a particular reason to do it earlier than usual today?

"Do you want to go somewhere this afternoon?" John asked.

"We'll see."

Heaving a sigh at Sherlock’s cryptic answer, John retrieved his sunglasses from a side table. He vowed not to let this get to him; he'd grab a nice table in the sun, order some lobster and chips, and return refreshed and ready to help with the case in whatever small way he could. He’d never had lobster before and had spotted it being described on the menu as the restaurant's signature dish on
their tour of the premises the day before.

Maybe he could at least bring back a chocolate bar for Sherlock. John had learned that, despite his protestations about food being bad for his brain during cases, he could be coaxed into indulging his sweet tooth. John wondered if it had always been like this, or if having to endure Mycroft’s geriatric nutrition regime had deprived him of treats for such a long time that he was making up for it.

John was all for that.

If there was something, anything, that Sherlock used to enjoy, something that helped him focus or cheered him up, John would bend over backwards to obtain it. Of course, Tallie was right in that this was a holiday and not real everyday life, but right now, John was partial to believing that every moment, every good experience counted in some way. Instead of a chocolate bar, perhaps a muffin from the bakery downstairs would be even better. And he could throw in a nice coffee from the barista bar on the entrance floor, in the event that the case kept them awake late tonight. Sherlock tended to prefer double or triple cappuccinos when they went to cafes, with a pinch of sugar added in.

Satisfied with his plan and with his stomach churning with hunger, John left the suite and knocked on Tallie’s door on his way to the lifts. She opened the door in a nice, billowy sundress; once upon a time, John would have taken in the sight and made plans to suggest a very different kind of indulgence instead of getting Sherlock’s daily quota of caffeine filled.

But life had changed. Tallie was his friend. Sherlock was his friend as well, but... John didn’t let his mind wander any further down that road of what-ifs just yet, even though a strange niggling in his head was trying to nudge him forward. Maybe here, away from the oppressive stagnancy of Musgrave Court, they could both relax and redefine the parameters of their relationship beyond their still-rigid roles under Mycroft’s supervision.

"Once the case is done and we can celebrate, we'll— I'll definitely—"

"Sherlock wants a word," he told Tallie.

An hour and a half later, head buzzing pleasantly after two glasses of the Peloponnesian white from Lagorthi grapes the waiter had convinced John to pair with his seafood lunch, John did his shopping round and then made his way back upstairs.

The concierge had supplied both him and Tallie with extra key cards to Sherlock’s room. Grinning as he strode into the suite — paper bags filled with a double chocolate muffin and baklava plus a cappuccino with a double shot of espresso in hand — John was dismayed to find it empty. He checked the spacious bathroom, complete with all the safety features promised on their website’s accessibility section, then the alcove with a small sofa group overlooking the sea.

Sherlock’s was a corner suite, with a plexiglass balcony surrounding it from all sides. Soon enough, a movement caught John's eye. The curtains were shifting in the breeze from the open balcony door, and he could hear a familiar, deep baritone mingling with Tallie’s lilting voice. Still smiling, John left the paper bag with the pastries on the sofa table and carried the coffee with him as he joined the two in the pleasant, salty breeze outside.
It was only then that he took in what was going on.

Sherlock was holding a fork, between the prongs of which had been stuck a lit cigarette. Tallie was standing beside him, leaning her arms on the railing and appearing completely oblivious to what Sherlock was doing right there, next to her!

“Hello, John,” Sherlock said breezily, taking a long drag of the cigarette, painstakingly turning the utensil to avoid poking himself in the nose with the prongs.

“What the hell?” John asked. "How'd you— Where did you even get—"

"This is Greece," Sherlock pointed out disinterestedly as he shifted his gaze back to the horizon. "Everyone smokes. Got them at the pool bar."

"Why?"

"What do you mean, 'why'?" Sherlock asked, with another indulgent drag. "Nicotine is a stimulant that helps with concentration."

"I've never seen you smoke. Why the hell would you start now?"

"Mycroft has banned even nicotine patches from the house."

"He smoked before the accident," Tallie chimed in awkwardly, looking sympathetic of John's confused anger and attempting to play peacekeeper.

John ignored her. "But you must have got off them when you were in the hospital. And since."

"I did, but as you should well know as a physician, the craving never quite stops."

"And what have you got to say for yourself?" John demanded Tallie. "Is this what he needed you for? You're a nurse, for fuck's sake!"

Sherlock reversed away from the railing, positioning himself between her and John. "I didn't ask her to procure them, only to operate the lighter. You two are paid to assist me, and I needed assistance."

He shrugged and somehow, that gesture incensed John's anger into a wildfire. "That's just— That's got to be against some…" His protest withered in the face of Sherlock's glare. He lifted his eyes over Sherlock’s head, accusatory eyebrows raised in Tallie’s direction once again.

She did still look a little apologetic. "If he could, he would have done it himself. Patients make bad health decisions all the time, John, and it's their right even if we don't like it."

John resented the insinuation that he was the one doing something wrong by being angry.

Sherlock's eyes fixed on the large paper cup of coffee John was holding. "I'm not your patient, am I? Some have theorised that if caffeine was invented now, it would be a substance as controlled as nicotine. Pray tell, Doctor, why you consider delivering me such a stimulant to be an acceptable act for a physician, while Tallie helping me indulge in another is making you have kittens?"

"That's not comparable. You don't have the same lung function as you did before the accident, so I'd say that smoking is pretty much the most idiotic thing you could do, whereas coffee's just…"

"I would do whatever I wanted if I wasn't in this damned chair!" Sherlock suddenly snapped. "For all your saintly advocacy of choice, and the support you claim to lavish on me to be the one to call
the shots about my life, when push comes to shove you just turn to the same brand of custodial condescension as Mycroft! I didn't ask for your help, because I knew you'd get on your high horse."

"Even if you weren't in that chair, I'd do everything I could to help you quit," John fired back. "Not as your bloody doctor, but as someone who gives an even bigger damn about your health than some physician assigned to you would."

"You don't think Tallie gave me a lecture before snapping that lighter? She should be insulted by your assumption that nobody holds themselves to such a shining ethical standard as you."

Suddenly, it occurred to John why Tallie might have done it. And he liked that realisation even less than the idea that she had just caved in because Sherlock had somehow manipulated her into it.

John remembered seeing end-stage COPD and lung cancer patients smoking outside hospital buildings during his training in London. Some of them had even pressed the end of their cigarettes into their tracheostomy openings.

"A word, Tallie?" John cocked his head towards the main area of the suite.

"Someone's in trouble," Sherlock sing-songed bitterly as she stepped around him. As he took another drag from the cigarette, John spotted the packet on the armrest of a deck chair; more than one was missing from it.

"For the record, that fork thing looks ridiculous," John hissed as he spun on his heel. *It looks like something an addict would do.*

As he and Tallie made their way inside, he tried to contain his anger and anxiety with little success. He shut the balcony door firmly even though he knew that Sherlock could probably eavesdrop on them, anyway. He'd probably read lips or would be able to deduce their entire conversation by the way John’s left elbow looked or something.

"We're not granting fucking dying wishes," he snarled at Tallie. "Dignitas isn't going to happen. It can't happen. He's better, he's happy, he's got a case! We have to do what Mycroft hired us for which is to look after him, not help him get pneumonia or god knows what else!"

"This is the first time he's smoked since the accident." Tallie spoke calmly, her eyebrows raised at the hysteric edge to John’s voice.

He took a deep breath. "So what?"

"What he said to me was that he would understand if I declined. He said that he knows there's only so far that you'll go when it comes to helping him and giving him what he wants and letting him decide." Tallie swallowed. "I don't know if you see it, but he doesn't trust you entirely to listen to him. To really hear him. And you're so, so important to him."

Her words stung. "This isn't about some matter of principle. This is about the fact that smoking's bloody stupid, and for him, it's even more dangerous than most people."

"He knows all that. Before the accident, it was a choice he made. Because he could. Because he weighed that habit against the knowledge he had of how harmful it is and chose to do it, anyway. Every time we tell him no, tell him that he doesn't have that control over his life anymore to make good or bad choices, we make things worse."

John exhaled. He understood her point, agreed with it in a broader sense, but still…
"If he was dying, would you have lit that cig, John?" Tallie's grey eyes were steely, challenging. John stuck his hands in his shorts pockets, fingers curled into fists as he exhaled through his teeth. "Yeah. Maybe I would have. But he didn't ask me to do it, did he?" He bit his lip.

"He didn't do it to spite you," Tallie told him, her tone softer now. "He told me he'd only ask for this once. He'd quit twice before the accident, tended to only smoke during casework. He knew you wouldn't approve, and assumed you'd return later than you did."

It sounded like placation, and merely irritated John, who detested the notion of Sherlock wanting to hide something from him. I'm not perfect, but I'm not Mycroft, either! The last thing he wanted was to represent the same things that Big Brother Holmes did.

"The fork does look ridiculous. Clever of him, though," Tallie remarked, opening one of the water bottles delivered daily onto the suite's coffee table.

"Trust him to manage to be the cleverest and the stupidest person at the same time," John sighed. He went back to the balcony, where the fork Sherlock was still holding now only held the yellowish filter from the end of the cigarette.

John dug out his phone and connected it to the hotel WiFi for a quick Google search. "Nicotine patches are prescription-free in Greece. I'm getting you some. Give me that." He took the fork gingerly offered, dropped the cigarette butt in an ashtray nearby and placed the cutlery on the Adirondack table next to the deck chair. Just as John had deduced from having a look at the packet, he'd already smoked several.

"They lack the satisfaction of the habit, but if you insist. Just make sure you get enough of them. I need at least three."

"Three? You've not smoked in a year. You can't possibly need that much."

Sherlock shrugged. "It's a three-patch problem."

"Meaning what?"

"I don't smoke because I want the worst-case scenarios that your dullard physician's brain is currently conjuring up — I used to do it because it helped me think. For… reasons I have fewer nicotine receptors than the average person, so I need a bigger dose for it to take effect."

"I'll get you the patches, but I'm taking those, and they're not coming back." John grabbed the cigarette packet. "Don't ever ask me to watch you do that again."

"I didn't intend to. You really should shake your habit of shovelling in every meal as though your base might be invaded in the three minutes. Lobster thermidor, feta and olive salad and baklava go to waste when eaten like a Neanderthal."

Of course, he has somehow deduced every damned course I had. "Git."

"Mine was a holiday indulgence, not unlike your lobster or your headache-inducing wine. Isn't that what you've been harping on about, that this is also a nice vacation?" Sherlock argued pointedly.

"You're impossible."

"Yes, and you like it, so stop looking at me like a disgruntled schoolmistress. Regardless of your
protestations, the nicotine worked, so we'll have a busy afternoon ahead of us."

"Arm, please," John requested plainly two hours later, the newly acquired packet of Nicorette patches in hand.

"That used to be Mycroft's favourite phrase, too, when he was trying to enforce abstinence from other things."

"You can't enforce abstinence from anything on anyone," John replied, peeling off the tape from a patch and plastering it on the upper part of Sherlock's arm. "And before you ask, you're only getting one. You smoked several cigs, yes, but you've not smoked for a year."

"I told you, I need more than the average."

"You haven't needed any for a long time."

Something shifted in Sherlock's gaze. "You wouldn't be doing this if I wasn't… the way I am now."

"Yes, I bloody well would. I'd nag at any friend to stop smoking."

"John, I… I wasn't what you think of me. I may have been on the side of the angels, but don't think for a second that I was one of them. People who look at me with pity don't know me and they mistakenly assume I was some poor soul who was struck down. Those who did know me before probably think I got what I deserved."

"As you like to say, I'm not people. " John sat down on the armrest of the white leather sofa in Sherlock's suite. They were alone; Tallie had gone to have a swim after attending to Sherlock. A moment earlier, Sherlock had only pulled up his linen shirtsleeve just below the crook of his arm. Now, he tugged it up again, revealing the pockmarks and scarred veins. "Smoking wouldn't have been the thing that would most have put you off back then."

"None of this puts me off. I just… want to save you? Help you? Keep you healthy? Make you happy? "It sounds as though you're trying to warn me off."

"You don't know me, John. You didn't know me then."

"I like to think I know you pretty well now."

"This isn't me."

"Yes, it is."

"I like to think I'm the one who gets to define that."

"Why is he making the smoking sound like he's trying to demonstrate something bad about who he used to be? Why is he trying to scare me off?"

"I was using when I got hit," Sherlock told him in a detached tone, "Under the influence, as Mycroft likes to say; he has kindly kept that fact from our parents and Lestrade. I was good at what
I did, John, but heroes don't exist, and I certainly wasn't one of them. Mind you; it was controlled use, not addiction. Abstinence is not immortality, no matter what Mycroft thinks." There was a petulant pride in his statement. "The way I was treated by hospital staff tended to change the moment they heard about the cocaine."

John had seen this happen, alcoholics and drug users being treated as though their illnesses and injuries were some sort of karma come back to them. Christ. That can't have helped, first having to endure pity and then being judged. Every patient should be treated the same and seeing those lapses in ethics had always disgusted John.

"It goes without saying that you didn't deserve any of it," he insisted.

It then occurred to him to wonder whether Sherlock making statements about other people placing blame signalled his own regrets? "Anyone could get into an accident, that's why they're called accidents."

Sherlock shrugged. "Now, you know. Make of it what you will. I just thought you needed some perspective for your righteous hissy fit over just a cig."

"You can't scare me off, Sherlock. I won't leave." Ask me to stay, and I will!

"Everyone leaves. Always." Sherlock's tone was resigned. "Why would they want to—"

He trailed off and steered his chair to the area where the massive double bed was situated, then simply halted to look out the large window facing the sea. "Tallie will leave, once her studies are done. Mycroft needs to get back to work. The only option for me is an ever-changing rota of people who treat me like a slab of meat to be pushed around, shoved into track bottoms, washed and turned."

"Tallie's not going anywhere for some time. I'm not going anywhere," John promised. "Mycroft isn't going anywhere; we just need to build a system that works."

*What does he want me to say?* John wondered.

Sherlock didn't sound or look as though he believed any of John's promises.

"I refuse to accept that you're not the same person," John told him firmly. "Yes, you've changed just like I've changed, and everyone changes when they get older and go through stuff, but you can't say that I don't know anything about you."

John rose from the sofa and padded closer. He was barefoot, and the wooden floor felt pleasantly cool.

Sherlock turned his chair to face him. "You'll never know the real me. That's all gone."

John crossed the remaining distance between them and enclosed Sherlock’s right hand in both his own. "No, it's bloody not. It was just buried under so much stuff. There's just one Sherlock. Wouldn't you say you were more different as a child or as a teenager than you are now from before the accident? I didn't know you during those periods, either, and it doesn't matter, because I know you now, and I wouldn't give that up even for a glimpse of whoever you think you were before because honestly, who you were before the accident didn't sound like a very happy person."

John remembered well the things that Mrs Hudson, Greg Lestrade and Mycroft had told him about Sherlock's life before the accident. He lived alone, refused to believe he had any friends, buried himself in his work, went on drug binges when bored, used borderline moderately during cases,
and suffered bouts of what sounded like quite severe depression. Mrs Hudson had used the term *black moods*.

Sherlock gave John a glare. "And you think things have changed for the better for me, somehow? Are you deluded?"

"I'm saying it's a matter of perspective. We could both spend the rest of our lives mourning who we thought we were. Or, we can choose to look in a different direction. We can choose to get the hell on with it, to see what we could make of what we've got."

Sherlock scoffing, tossing his head. "I don't know how to do that."

"You're doing it right now, being on this case and all. You're doing it when you decide not to fight tooth and nail against every chance to do something more than just shut yourself away at the Court. You're doing it when you let yourself remember that you're not alone."

"I *am* alone."

"No, you’re not."

Sherlock pulled his hand away and curled his fingers around the armrest. "Then where's your wheelchair, John? And Mycroft's? And Tallie's? Where are your crushed spines that entitle you to give me all this advice?"

"Self-pity is bloody attractive, yes, but why do you think you're any worse off than the next bloke with a spinal injury? People in wheelchairs do amazing stuff with their lives. You're clever, and you could get pretty damned fit again. You can catch up with where you were headed with rehab. You can do this, Sherlock! Aren't you at least a little bit curious about how much better you could have it?" *All you need to do is not give up hope. All you need to do is not go to Switzerland.*

Sherlock exhaled, averted his gaze. "You keep having conversations about me behind my back, you like to manage the way others treat me. I make you feel important."

"That's because you are important!" John exclaimed.

"You're inferring a value on my existence I never asked for and don't know how to spend. You're just like everyone else with your lectures and unfounded optimism."

*No, I'm different because I love you,* John thought desperately. Could he say it? Would it make a difference?

"I'm not trying to be Mycroft," he replied. "I just… Look me in the eye and tell me that I'm wrong if I say that you were never that good at looking after yourself. That you didn't bother making choices that weren't about being in the moment."

John has had conversations with Lestrade about what Sherlock had been before the accident, and Mrs Hudson had also weighed in repeatedly on the subject.

"No, I suppose common sense and good self-care are not things I have been accused of possessing," Sherlock confirmed bitterly. "But what would be the bloody point, John? Why be safe, normal, average, reasonable when it's all so dreadfully boring? You are none of those things yourself, even if Mycroft might group you in with the rest of humanity whom he likes to describe as goldfish."

"So you wanted to live like some rockstar, then, before the accident? Climb high and burn bright?"
And now you can't because there are meds and bowel routines and wheelchair battery packs to consider.

"You're making fun of me."

Sherlock began to retreat from the conversation, but John planted his feet right in front of him.

"No, I'm not. Do you think I would have signed up for military service if I wanted normal and boring and safe? You said it — I'm none of those things, either, but I want to help you find a compromise."

"You can't turn me into something I'm not, John. Not even when I'm stuck in this," Sherlock replied, tapping his fingers on the hand rest of his chair.

"Trust me: that's the last thing I want, to change you. But there has to be a compromise, or you'll give me a heart attack worrying about you. It's not giving up if you find a slightly less reckless solution. Don't stop trying just because things can't be exactly the way they were before. You know I'm right," John pressed. "All you need is a tiny bit of doubt, a tiny bit of curiosity and I know you've got that in spades. Solve this case, Sherlock, and the next one, and the next one. Don't stop. Ever. You're right: it's not about me or my opinions, it's about you. What you want."

Because I'll do anything to give it to you, as long as it keeps you alive. Well, almost. Not giving in on the bloody cigarettes.

Chapter End Notes

Art by khorazir inspired by chapter 22.
Sherlock's Choice

Chapter Notes

This is the chapter we've been building up to for twenty-four chapters. It is intense, but necessary and YES THEY’LL STILL GET THEIR HAPPY ENDING, I PROMISE.<3

John yawned, adjusting his sunglasses against the shifting glare of the sun. His body felt relaxed and heavy against the canvas deck chair and he stretched, long and languid, wincing briefly at the twinge of sore muscles that had gone unused for quite some time. The warmth was doing wonders to his shoulder and, despite the circumstances surrounding their visit and the events of the case, he was trying his best to enjoy the sun and salty breeze prevalent on Rhodes. He was in no hurry to return to the cold, cloudy drabness of London, though he knew their time here was dwindling.

They had solved the case.

Or more accurately, it had nearly solved itself once Jorja’s body had been found, caught in the vegetation dotting the side of a seaside cliff. The Hellenic Police Force wanted to rule it an open-and-shut suicide, especially once the autopsy had been completed that showed she had died from injuries in keeping with a long tumble down the rocks. But Sherlock hadn’t accepted that solution, especially not once a scrap of paper had been found in her hand with the word RACHE on it.

"What the hell kind of a suicide note would that be?" He had asked the chief of police incredulously. "There's got to be a bigger part of it or at least one letter missing from the word; this can't be all of it!"

Convinced that foul play was involved, Sherlock began to explore the possibility of one of Jorja's colleagues being the culprit since she didn't seem to have many other contacts on Rhodes. Her ex-husband, a local, would have been their main person of interest if he hadn't been so damned difficult to find. Together with a handful of members from the Hellenic Police Force who seemed oddly proactive in making sure Sherlock could be involved every step of the way, despite the wheelchair making it challenging, they had gone on a wild-goose chase across the island for days. As time passed, however, the excitement of discovery turned to disillusionment and the two Englishmen grew more and more frustrated as they tried to piece together the motive for the young woman’s murder. Sherlock was particularly frustrated with the note consisting only of the German word for revenge, kept insisting that no one would leave such a cryptic message unless they wanted someone to investigate it.

“No one is that clever by accident!” He had claimed.

John's thoughts were wrenched back into the present as Sherlock appeared at his elbow now, one cup of a frothy liquid in his cup holder and another held precariously in the hand not operating the chair. A slice of pineapple and a tiny paper umbrella adorned each rim.
"What's this?" John sat up, retrieving the cup from Sherlock with a sceptical eyebrow raised.

He hadn’t expected to even see Sherlock for several hours. When he’d popped into Sherlock’s suite earlier to see if Sherlock had wanted to come to the pool with him and enjoy their last few days of paradise, he’d been waved away with the flick of a wrist. Maybe he had decided he wanted some company, after all.

"It’s a cocktail, John," Sherlock drawled. "I was assured that consuming it would cause you to become twenty-five per cent more relaxed, though I’d love to see the data supporting that conclusion, as it would have to be a —"

"Thank you." John cut him off with a smile. "Tallie around?"

"I believe she's having lunch with the golf instructor. The irritatingly attentive one."

"She succumbed, then?" The man was certainly attractive in a slick sort of way. Not John's type, but perhaps Tallie was in the mood for such holiday fun. Sherlock rolled his eyes in response.

"Care to join me?" John asked Sherlock, cocking his head towards a neighbouring chair. The occupant had just collected her book and sunglasses and left, tossing her beach towel into a basket by the pool bar.

"Join you so I can… relax?" Sherlock said the word as though it was a foreign concept.

John chuckled and swept his arm across their view of the sea. "Try it. What's the worst that could happen?"

With a theatrical sigh, Sherlock nodded. "Very well." He pushed the cup holder away from above his lap, careful not to slosh the liquid.

Glancing around to make sure the other people in their corner were not paying them too much attention, John made the transfer from wheelchair to deck chair, placing Sherlock's own frothy drink within reach on the small table between their seats.

John settled back against his own seat and took a sip of Sherlock's beverage offering. It was cold and fruity, with just the hint of burn from what must have been a considerable amount of alcohol.

"Should have brought a book. Or my tablet," Sherlock said, frowning as he lowered the sunglasses he’d stuck on top of his curls. He was wearing wide-legged, navy linen trousers and a white T-shirt topped with one of his light blue dress shirts, the sleeves rolled up to his elbows. John thought he looked handsome and confidently casual, vastly different from the track bottoms and apathy of their early days together. During the case, Sherlock had insisted on his suit trousers and properly tucked-in dress shirts no matter how many times Tallie pointed out the lack of logic between the weather and wearing business suit bits.

"Make it an experiment; see how long you can stand a beach holiday until your brain herniates. Or, you could consider this bit of downtime your reward for solving the case," John suggested. He reached his arm across the space separating their chairs, tapping his cup against Sherlock's. "Well done, by the way."

Sherlock scoffed. "I didn’t do anything. I was wrong."

Their search for a motive had come to a grinding halt when they discovered that Jorja hadn't lived at her official address for some time. After a divorce from a husband who now turned out to be even harder to track down than the motive, Jorja had left the flat she'd rented and gone to stay with
her former sister-in-law, Aileen. Aileen hated her brother Andreas nearly as much as Jorja did, and the two had formed a close bond after Jorja’s divorce. Aileen was devastated to hear that Jorja’s body had been found and though the young woman nodded stoically, her eyes filled with tears and she shuddered as she struggled to contain her grief.

"She was not happy, too much pressure all the time," Aileen had explained in a voice thickly accented and heavy with heartache. “Felt... trapped.”

"Surely she could have just resigned and found something else to do with a CV worthy of her current position. Her late position," Sherlock had reasoned.

"I don't know. She used to say more about… how she felt. But lately, it was as though she was just... blank. Turned off. When she didn't come home the other night, I assumed she'd gone to find… him." Even though the man was still AWOL, it was at least established from border control that he wasn't in the country and hadn't been there when Jorja had disappeared, either.

Some of Jorja's work papers — dated the night before she’d gone missing— had been found in Aileen's kitchen. Aileen had a watertight alibi, having been in Chalcis for a work assignment as a news photographer.

"But was she suicidal?" Sherlock had pressed, ignoring the look John had shot his way. "You must have been among the last to speak to her."

Aileen bit her lip before answering hesitantly. "She never said, but… anyone could see she was getting more and more unhappy. I have to say it's possible, but I would never have thought she would do such a thing."

Sherlock had then asked her if Jorja had spoken any German or had any connection to Germany.

Aileen shook her head slowly, her brow creased. "German…? No... why?"

Assuming another dead end, Sherlock had turned to leave, but John had pulled out his phone and shown Aileen a photo he'd snapped of the slip of paper found on Jorja’s body, wanting to know if she recognised the handwriting as Jorja’s.

All at once, Aileen’s carefully controlled façade crumbled and she sunk into a chair, hands covering her face, sobs racking her body.

"Ma’am?" John had touched her shoulder gently, exchanging a quizzical look with Sherlock.

"Rachel. Rachel, me. Me!" She’d emphasized her words with a jab to her chest, whispered words in Greek spilling from her lips in a stream as steady as the tears that trickled from her eyes.

Helplessly, John had gestured to one of the policemen lingering near the door for a translation.

Through some fumbling words of comfort, and a handful of tissues, they learned that the two women had shared a penchant for certain TV series, among them an American comedy, which had led to two nicknames: Monica and Rachel. Only Jorja ever called Aileen that; it was their private joke used as a term of endearment. Aileen was convinced that there must be more to the note, more that Jorja would have wanted to say besides just getting her attention.

So, instead of a threat of revenge, the note may well have been Jorja’s final words to her best friend, and John and Sherlock had promised they’d try to track down the rest of what Sherlock had also initially declared was likely just a part of what Jorja had written.
Assuming it had been thoroughly combed for evidence — and since Sherlock couldn't clamber down the cliff to see more — the two hadn't initially asked to be taken to the site where Jorja's body had been discovered, just looked at the police photos. Now, the task befell to John to climb the cliffs back and forth where they were accessible enough, his bad shoulder groaning. And sure enough, with the added focus of looking for something rather than anything, and assuming Jorja might have hidden the note somewhere relatively accessible so that it could be recovered, they found the rest of the ripped piece of paper, caught in a crevice of rock near the top of the cliff. It was dirty and wrinkled and damp from sea spray, but the contents were clear: Jorja Williams had committed suicide.

On their way back to the hotel, John had dialled Aileen to tell her that they had found the rest of the note and asked if she might like to see it. They had given the original to the police, but only after John had preserved it as a photograph on his mobile.

Aileen invited them back to the house. In the car, after John had given the driver the address, he had snuck a glance at Sherlock. He was quiet, distant, staring out the window with his fingers tapping restlessly on his knee. John let him be, sensing that he was deep in thought and wanting to get what would undoubtedly be an emotional encounter over with. Unsurprisingly, he turned down the offer to join John inside when they arrived back at the home Aileen and Jorja had shared.

"Talking to people, being doctorly, that's your forte," Sherlock had said dismissively, not even turning his head away from the window.

John's visit was short. Aileen was understandably upset, but seemed to find consolation in the fact that the matter could now be laid to rest. A foster child, Jorja had few relatives she had kept in touch with, and Aileen instantly volunteered to sort out funeral arrangements on Rhodes. John assured her there was nothing she could have done to prevent what Jorja had done, but the words tasted foul on his tongue. Did he really mean it? Could nothing and no one have convinced Jorja Williams to hold on, to find help, to look at her options? The photograph on the kitchen fridge was that of a happy woman in her early forties, sitting in the sun in a green dress. Carefree, untroubled. Not suicidal.

*What changed? What tipped her over the edge?* John couldn't help wondering. *Lots of people have shit lives and they feel trapped in jobs they hate and marriages which have gone stale. Why do some of them hold on through astounding adversity, and some just throw in the towel?*

When John slipped back into the car, Sherlock seemed antsy to get going. He wasted no time in giving the name of their hotel to the driver who had been smoking through a rolled-down window and reading the newspaper when John got back. It had taken the hotel an hour to secure them one of only a handful of wheelchair-adapted taxis on the island — a problem which had constantly complicated the investigation since the local police vans did not have extending ramps nor would Sherlock have agreed to ride in one, anyway.

"She's effectively lost her brother, and now her friend." John shook his head while fastening his seat belt. John was sitting just behind the driver, and the empty space for Sherlock's chair was next to him; there were doors on both sides of the van.

"Was she very hysterical?" Sherlock's tone was oddly disinterested, considering what he was asking.

John shrugged. There had been a moment when Aileen had been downright disconsolate after reading the note.

"Why'd she react that way? Seems a bit extreme, don't you think? Judging by what she told us, she
knew the woman was unhappy," Sherlock said.

John didn't like his dismissive tone and didn't manage to keep an edge off his voice. "Never met a family member who expects it, or who would react any differently than she did. That's the thing about death: it happens to those left behind, not really the person who leaves. That woman's going to spend the rest of her life wondering if she could have done something to prevent it, even if everyone tells her there was nothing more to be done."

It was dark in the back of the taxi, but as they passed a streetlamp, John could see Sherlock's tight, emotionless features.

"She's just lost her best friend, Sherlock. Anyone—" John swallowed, shifting in his seat so he could see Sherlock more fully. "Anyone would grieve that sort of a loss like mad."

Sherlock's brow creased. "But she had to know it was coming. She said so herself; Jorja had been different, likely visibly depressed, possibly suicidal for weeks or longer. It shouldn't have come as a shock."

"No one can ever prepare for suicide. Who the hell would be willing to accept that someone they love could choose death?"

The rest of the drive back to their hotel had passed in silence, and they'd retired to their individual rooms. John had ordered room service and heard both Sherlock and Tallie's room doors opening and closing around that time; presumably Tallie had gone in to sort him out for the night. John vacillated between knocking on the door as well to say goodnight and giving in to his exhaustion and leaving them to it. In the end, he sat on his bed, feeling as though the heaviness and sorrow of Aileen's home had followed him to the Elysium Resort.

Thankfully, a good night's sleep had lifted his spirits, and by breakfast time, John had vowed to enjoy what was now a holiday proper.

Now, he glanced over at Sherlock's deck chair. The man's eyes were closed but he looked far from relaxed, though his drink was more than halfway gone. John finished the rest of his own fruity concoction in one gulp, then stood.

"Hot out here." He nodded toward the inviting water of the pool once Sherlock opened his eyes to look at him. "Care for a dip?"

Since most of the poolside hotel patrons had likely been enticed away by the prospect of lunch in an air-conditioned restaurant, the area around this smaller pool by the beach was mostly empty. One end of it was in the shade, secluded behind the pool bar and nearly invisible to the few scattered sunbathers that dotted the deck chairs.

No curious onlookers. Which is why John had plucked up the courage to suggest swimming. He'd done a few laps earlier and the water had been just the thing when the scorching sun began beading up sweat on his temples.

To his surprise, Sherlock agreed.

"First things first, though," John announced, and dug around in the bag at the back of Sherlock’s wheelchair until he located the sun cream. He handed the bottle to Sherlock, who looked at it, then at John, then shifted his gaze back to the bottle as though trying to gauge its relevance.

"Do my back, and then I’ll do yours? It's water-resistant." John was quite certain that if he knelt
low enough, Sherlock could manage. He'd left the top open which was the only bit requiring fine motor skills.

Slowly and carefully, a concentrated frown crunching up the laugh lines around Sherlock's nose, he upended the bottle and managed to squirt some on his palm. John squatted down on his haunches, and Sherlock took his time meticulously spreading the cream on every bit of John's back — tentative at first, but soon with much more confident strokes. Closing his eyes, John relished the feel of those gentle palms on his shoulders and back, occasionally halting or lingering in a way which made John wonder if there was something that had caught the man's attention. He'd already seen John's bullet wound scars at Frimley, but perhaps they still retained his curiosity.

John returned the favour by helping Sherlock divest his shirts and making sure not an inch of that pale skin would be unprotected. Trousers were removed — though not nearly as graceful as Tallie always managed to make it look — after Sherlock assured John that he was wearing his swimwear beneath.

"New black swimwear."

"You gave those old Harrow ones the boot, then?" John asked, folding Sherlock's clothes on the sunbed.

"According to Tallie, they'd been worn so thin I would have been risking a public indecency fine."

John snorted and relished in the upward twitch of Sherlock's lips as he transferred Sherlock back to his chair for the short trek to the pool. There was a simple chair lift on the side of it towards which Sherlock aimed his wheelchair, John following behind. He half expected some hesitation since they must have both been remembering their Frimley trip, but none materialised from his companion. Soon enough, they were both comfortably submerged. The pool was no deeper than John's neck, and there was a sturdy railing around the sides to which Sherlock could hold onto. Once in the water, his recently much improved arm strength was adequate enough to hold him upright, but John still hovered by his side, finally trapping Sherlock between his hands by grasping the railing. Slowly, Sherlock let go of it, pinning John's arms between his own and his sides to steady himself.

They were now face to face with Sherlock's back against the railing; he was studying John's expression closely.

"It was good, what we did," John told him quietly. "At least Aileen knows, now, what happened to Jorja. And the note means she got to explain things in her own words."

He still felt uneasy about their conversation in the taxi and wanted to soften the effect of his words, which may have sounded judgemental. He felt relaxed, happy, too relieved about the case being over and everything having gone well to worry too much about upsetting Sherlock. He remembered Tallie's words about needing to let go, to show a good example of enjoying their surroundings.

Sherlock hummed, dots of sunlight streaming in from between the leaves of a jacaranda and playing on his face like a kaleidoscope. "You should be disappointed there was no international conspiracy or a murder behind it all. Rather a dull tale for your blog."

John wasn't sure if Sherlock had read any of what he'd put on his blog about their prior cases. "Dull? No. Human? Very."

"It's fine if you write up the deductive reasoning behind each case, but you could stop inflicting
"your opinions on the world regarding, for instance, my alleged ignorance about pedestrian things." Sherlock was smiling while pretending to be disgruntled, and John was tempted to wrap his arms around him properly, tightly.

"You said you deleted that the earth revolves around the sun but bragged about being able to name all the plant alkaloids found in Sussex forests," John reminded him. Admittedly, that alkaloid knowledge had solved one of the cold cases Lestrade had sent to Sherlock.

"My hard drive is limited in size. If I fill it with nonsense, there's not going to be room for stuff that really is useful for The Work."

"Such as 228 different types of tobacco ash?"

Sherlock scoffed, then shifted around in his arms to grab the railing again, and John retreated a little to give him more room. Keeping one hand firmly gripping the railing, Sherlock used his other for a rudimentary stroke underwater, inching forward a bit along the edge of the pool. John kept his feet on the bottom so that he could help the very second if Sherlock got into trouble.

"Leo thinks swimming could help with core muscle control," Sherlock said.

"Leo has lots of good ideas."

The sun had turned the pool into a glittering mirror and the sea beyond impossibly blue, the sort that John had mostly believed was the result of some creative photoshopping for travel brochures.

"This is… tolerable. We can stay for a few days more," Sherlock concluded after a comfortable silence which took them around the deep end of the pool into a sunnier spot. "There's plenty of flights back on any given day and our tickets are fully rebookable. Plus, you and Tallie seem to enjoy this sort of thing."

And you don't? John wondered fondly. He was quite sure Sherlock didn't think this too bad, either, but was just too… Sherlock to admit to liking it.

The rest of the day passed easily as they lounged in the sun, swam, and drank more of the delicious cocktails. No other mention was made of Aileen or Jorja, though John couldn't completely push them from his mind. When the sun had sunk low onto the horizon and storm clouds began to roll towards the island, he transferred Sherlock back to his wheelchair, then kneeled on the grass to replace Sherlock's bare feet on the footrests and to put his sandals back on. He let his hands linger more than usual, letting his palm slide along the bottom of Sherlock's soles and his fingers curl around his toes, wondering if Sherlock had been ticklish before the accident.

Suddenly, the air felt charged and John looked up. Sherlock was watching him intently, and though John had grown used to that intense focus, this time it felt different. Sherlock inhaled and for a moment, seemed to teeter on the edge of speech. John waited, but Sherlock blinked and looked away, moving his hand to his joystick.

"Sherlock…" John began, the words rasped through a throat that felt raw with emotion. He had no plan, he didn't really know what to say, but—
"Hungry?" Sherlock tapped the joystick, feigning nonchalance as he tipped his head in the direction of one of the resort restaurants.

John swallowed, standing to face Sherlock fully. Their eyes met, but John looked quickly away, his breath catching in his throat. "Starving."

"Would you like to see our dessert menu, gentlemen?" Their waiter inquired, picking up their empty breadbasket and their plates. John's was completely empty, and he was happy to see that only a little bit of saffron rice remained on Sherlock's.

John raised his brow at Sherlock, who shrugged.

"Sure, we do," John told the waiter with a smile. He was feeling full and was likely to just go for an espresso and perhaps some dessert wine, but he knew Sherlock would likely pick a sweet treat.

The one-page pudding menus were delivered just as Sherlock swallowed the last of his wine. He'd managed to drink it from a proper wine glass, even told John that the thin stem was easier for him to manage than a regular water glass. He had needed assistance with his grilled swordfish skewers, and John was still proud of the way in which he had managed to help without making it obvious. He'd simply asked if he could have a bite, and after Sherlock had nodded John had pushed the fish pieces from the skewer with a fork onto Sherlock's plate.

*His eating has improved. A lot,* John decided, feeling tempted to order every possible dessert the atmospheric beachside restaurant offered in celebration.

Pretending to read his menu card, he surreptitiously studied Sherlock. The wind kept tousling his hair which had been coiffed by Tallie into an artfully carefree style with just the right amount of product, and the aubergine shirt he was wearing without a jacket made his now slightly sun-kissed skin acquire an almost unearthly glow.

*God, he's gorgeous.* John shook his head secretly. *I don't ever want to take my eyes off of him.*

Ever the master of apropos, Sherlock put his menu down on the table. "Before you were deployed… was there a girlfriend? Or perhaps… boyfriend? Forgive me if I am completely off the mark here—"

John's brows rose but he was quick to give his companion a smile to signal he wasn't put off by the inquiry. He wasn't at all sure what signs Sherlock may have read on him, or whether he'd noticed John's lingering looks and recent stolen touches beyond the call of duty. He decided he was unequivocally glad this conversation was happening, since he had been trying to work out how to initiate something similar, but with the case going on it hadn't yet seemed like the right time. After their tense conversation about Jorja Williams' death which had brushed a bit too close for comfort, John was thrilled that Sherlock was now interested in this.

In *him.*

"No, it's fine," John said. "It's *all* fine, if you catch my drift," he added with enthusiastic conviction.
Sherlock’s chin lifted a bit as he studied John’s expression very carefully. Then, realisation seemed to dawn. "Oh," he said, licking his lower lip.

John’s gaze locked onto the pink tip of his tongue, darting quickly across soft, plump flesh. God, he wanted to suck that bit between his own lips, to meet that tongue where their mouths would join….

In the low light it was hard to tell, but perhaps a slight blush of colour appeared on Sherlock’s cheeks right before he picked up the menu again, hiding momentarily behind it.

"No, there wasn’t anyone I left behind," John explained. "That was for the best. Lots of mates found out that their girlfriends had ended up with someone else during their deployment. Being so far out there meant that you couldn’t even have that conversation face-to-face."

"What conversation?"

"About ending it?"

Sherlock’s reply was a frowning hum. He didn’t look like he knew what John meant. Maybe he’d never had such a conversation with anyone.

The waiter swung by and took their orders. Unsurprisingly, Sherlock went for the richest chocolate item on the list.

He then drew in a long breath. "In the army, did you ever… with other men? I believe the correct term is ‘hook-up’?" he added conscientiously.

The obvious air-quoted term had sounded though he was trying to pronounce a word in a foreign language, and John couldn’t help a fond smile from spreading across his features. *God, he is so bad at this, isn't he?*

John wouldn’t have him any other way.

"Yeah," he admitted. He’d never told anyone about David or James — there hadn’t been anyone to tell. Nobody wanted such things to become mess hall talk — especially not when it was about getting involved with a commanding officer. What he’d had weren’t relationships, just… maybe ‘hook-up’ was the right word, but he wasn’t sure he was comfortable sharing all that with Sherlock. Not yet. "Something like that.

"Did you keep in touch with them after you were sent home?"

*Did I keep in touch with a guy I gave a couple of hand jobs behind the mess tent and then left to die because I got shot and useless? Or with the other, who cheated on his girlfriend with me?" No, I didn’t. I’m sorry, Sherlock, it’s… We lost one of them. Not really light dinner talk."

"I don’t appreciate small talk. It’s a waste of time."

"I know. So, what about Mycroft?"

"You think Mycroft is an appropriate topic for a— a— restaurant meal?"

*What was he about to say instead of that?* John wondered.

"What about Mycroft?" Sherlock pressed.

"He’s not married, but he’s not seeing anyone either, is he?"
"Voluntarily celibate. Insists it’s because of his job; he likes to say he’s married to it and any romantic entanglement would prove problematic in terms of his extensive traveling and high security clearance. He doesn’t think a career man should indulge his baser instincts."

"I quite enjoy my baser instincts," John joked.

"I don’t share much of his world view. I do believe love makes people make the stupidest choices, clouds the judgement terribly. One might even say it’s the fly in the ointment, the grit in the lens…"

"But?"

"I may be less immune to its lure than Mycroft."

Sherlock sunk a dessert fork into the chocolate gateau which had just been delivered in front of him. Its lusciously thick mousse layer left a tiny frothy bit on Sherlock’s nose as he manoeuvred the first piece into his mouth.

Without stopping to think, John reached across the table — not with a napkin but with a bare finger, and swiped the bit off, plunging his forefinger into his mouth. "That’s amazing," he announced.

"Would you like some more?" Sherlock offered, pushing the plate a bit closer to John and pinning him with those impossible eyes.

"God, yes."

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After dinner, Sherlock determinedly led them to his suite. John walked over to the glass door of its balcony, intending it pull it shut against the impending storm gathering over the sea now barely visible in the darkness. The wind had picked up while they had been at dinner, and lightning flashed in the distance. The wrap-around balcony had all-plexiglass balustrades, which, together with the wall-to-ceiling windows in the common area and bedroom, allowed a full view of the raging waves reflecting the lights of the beachfront buildings.

"Leave it open. I want to hear the storm coming in." Sherlock requested from the bedroom. John found him positioned beside the bed. On the previous night he’d reclined on the chaise longue when John had been present, hands steepled underneath his chin in his usual thinking pose.

John was both delighted and surprised by the swift move into the bedroom. Then again, one never quite knew with Sherlock whether the man had gauged the usual meaning of such a gesture. This is a date, John reminded himself. What else could this have been, this, what we’ve been doing all day? The lingering touches, the smiles, the ease of their interactions only momentarily clouded by recollections of their tense taxi tide back to the hotel. Or, perhaps that was all just in John's head; if he was lucky, Sherlock's mind was no longer weighed down by that after the lovely day they’d had together.

John had felt like they’d been on a date. He’d wanted to imagine they’d been on one. And now his date had invited him back to his room.

"Want me to…?" John nodded towards the bed.

"Obviously."
The bed was a king-size double with a mountain of decorative pillows. They made the transfer with ease, both knowing what to expect and anticipating the other's moves. Sherlock wanted to sit up, so together they arranged some of the pillows behind Sherlock's neck and back so that he was comfortably reclined.

"Okay. Want anything else?" John lingered near the door, not wanting to leave yet, but unable to come up with an excuse to stay. He felt warm and relaxed, more than he had in months, and he knew that had everything to do with the company. "Want me to get Tallie?" He asked, trying to sound nonchalant in case Sherlock wanted to call it a night.

"No. Open the curtains."

The sight which greeted them from the large windows was breath-taking. From this side, they could see the Prasonisi lighthouse in the distance, sweeping through the blackness of the ocean towards the Levantine Basin. Lightning was cracking and rumbling, occasionally revealing the broken, grey ridges of the roiling waves.

Sherlock cleared his throat. "John, there's something..."

"Anything." John left the window and came to sit on the bed, arranging himself comfortably on his left side, one leg tucked underneath him, intentionally closer than usual.

Sherlock was still watching the storm, so John let his own gaze linger on him, watching as his chest rose and fell steadily. Sherlock had unbuttoned his dress shirt and it was now half-open, revealing a white T-shirt beneath. John wished he could remove them both, to let his lips whisper against the barely sun-kissed skin of Sherlock's chest, to inhale his warm and fragrant scent; he imagined he'd smell of saltwater and sun cream and home. He let his eyes travel up the long expanse pale neck, a thrill erupting in his belly at the simple intimacy of this moment.

This is it.

John thought he'd burst from the need to show Sherlock how much he meant to him, to tell him that he was treasured and important and loved, to show him what he might, at first, be reluctant to accept. The words that were the sum total of all of it felt heavy on his tongue: I love you. It felt suddenly important that Sherlock knew, that he heard it right now, and that John could prove it to him before they returned home. Would it be enough? Could John be enough?

Feeling bold, he shifted onto one elbow, tipping his chin up, and letting his voice drop. "Sherlock..."

Sherlock turned his head and met his gaze. John wet his lips and leaned forward, letting his eyes slip closed. He heard Sherlock’s quick stuttering inhale.

"John?"

There was something in his tone of voice that made John pause, tipping his head back so he could search Sherlock's eyes. As always, they were a kaleidoscope of colours and John made a mental note to catalogue them all sometime. Right now, though, they were cloudy with emotion and his eyebrows were tucked together in that focused, slightly apprehensive way that John loved. He wanted to bridge the distance between them, to press his lips against the divot that had appeared, but a sudden tension had electrified the air between them as though the thunderstorm outside was trying to reach in.

"Did I get it wrong?" John whispered. "Is this what you want?"
Sherlock didn't say anything for several long moments and John felt he had no choice but to pull back, his heart pounding.

"John... I need to tell you something." Sherlock said finally. He inhaled deeply before continuing, his eyes searching John’s, now looking desperate. "Six months ago, I contacted an organisation in Switzerland called Dignitas." His eyelids slid shut, the crease of his brow deepening.

John sucked in a breath and straightened up.

"Dignitas is a non-profit members' society that provides assisted suicide to individuals who suffer from terminal illness or severe physical or mental disability. It is supported by qualified Swiss doctors independent of the organisation," Sherlock recited, sounding like he had memorised some online article.

"Yes, I know, but..." John hesitated, swallowing thickly. "Why would you want to talk about this now?"

_The solicitor_, he remembered. Then, he recalled Sherlock's dismissive comments in the car about the effect of Jorja's death.

John pressed his lips together and Sherlock continued, as John knew he would. "I was given an appointment scheduled for the first of June — what did you just say?" Sherlock's eyes snapped open. "You know? Ohhh... you knew all along, didn’t you? Stupid, stupid... I should have heeded my suspicions. Instead, I assumed that a physician would hardly be able to stay silent about it, that if you really had known from the start, you'd be compelled to interfere. Of course! _Of course_ this was all some sort of plan, orchestrated by my literal big brother to... to..." The words exploded out of Sherlock and he struggled to catch his breath.

"I only found out when your Mum visited," John hurried to protest. "Mycroft never told me, nor did Tallie, though initially she seemed to assume I knew." He was grasping at straws and he knew it — what does it matter who told me or when?

He tried to reach for Sherlock in a weak offer of comfort, his head spinning with how quickly this conversation had taken a very different turn than expected, but Sherlock pulled away, his eyes flashing with fury.

"Don’t," Sherlock choked out. He swallowed, his next words laced with steel. "Well done! What a fine performance. What was it like, then? Tell me, John, did you get a down payment at the start and then a bonus each time _I made progress_?" Sherlock’s voice rose mockingly, "Double prizes if you can trick the pathetic cripple into thinking people actually care!"

"No! That’s not..." John shook his head in shock. This isn't how this was supposed to go at all! He had dared to hope they'd never have this conversation, hoped that _of course_ Switzerland wouldn't happen. "Nothing about how much I care for you is a trick! I thought maybe... with the cases and being here and being together... I don’t know... I guess I just hoped it would be enough, that I could show you—"

But Sherlock wasn’t listening. As John watched in horror, the walls that had nearly crumbled to dust over the last few months came slamming back up. Sherlock shook his head, his jaw tight, his eyes pinched shut. "You. _Thought_. That’s exactly the problem. _You_ thought, and Mycroft thought, and everyone always does so much _thinking_, but does anyone _ever_ stop to think about _what I want_?!

"Yes! _Always_! That's what this has been about!" John got to his feet, his voice rising. "Can’t you
see? I need you to want to live because I can’t imagine being without you! You’ve become my entire life, Sherlock! Of course, it’s your choice to… do that to yourself, but I need you to know that it might kill me too."

His vision blurred with the sudden onslaught of fear and he desperately tried to summon the calm he’d lost by clearing his throat and flicking his eyes away to stare out the window. "That’s what you never factored in, did you? That your choice will have consequences for other people. For not just me, but Mycroft, Tallie, your old friends, your parents…” He wrenched his gaze away from the blackness outside to face the darkness that had taken over Sherlock's gaze. "Once your life is over, it's not you who will miss it! Your brother's put his whole life on hold so that you could get back to yours and you’re just throwing it away without even trying! Just like for Jorja, your death is something that happens to other people even more than it does to you, and I can't just watch it happen!"

Everything he said felt wrong. Inadequate. Beside the point. He could never compete with Sherlock when it came to logic and solving problems, but he’d hoped that he would at least be good enough at loving the man.

Sherlock rolled his eyes. "Mycro put his life on hold? Oh, that's rich. Woe is he, then, and his hired help! Clearly, the lot of you deserve a medal for trying to save such a charity case. Stupid me for not having properly understood my role as someone you can store on the mantelpiece as a token of your sainthood!"

John curled his hands into fists to stop their shaking. "How can—" His voice broke and he didn't even care, "How can you say that to me?"

"I can do what I bloody well want. Isn't that the grand gift you are paid to bestow upon me, just as long as it doesn't inconvenience anyone or make anyone so terribly uncomfortable?"

"I didn't do any of this because I was paid! That's not… Of course, we all want you to live, not out of some principle but because you're… you, Sherlock! I want you to live because there's just no other option. Not for me. Not now." John was nearly shouting now, eyes burning and chest tight.

"Why?" Sherlock spat.

John was momentarily speechless. "Why?! Because I’m in love with you!"

Sherlock gaped. "John…I…” He inhaled, blinking.

But John could no longer stay and listen. There was nothing more to say, was there? This was it — Sherlock had made his decision. Why else would he take this up now, accuse John of these things, right when they were about to take a step forward in being together? Wouldn't this be the perfect moment to warn John off, to stop things from ever progressing to anything truly worth saving and protecting? Why else would Sherlock slam on the brakes now?

Switzerland isn't off the table, John realised; he's too far gone. I never stood a chance, did I? He can't see past any of what's he's gone through, doesn't want to see any of the good things he has.

I failed. Sherlock would never believe the real reasons why John had stayed, why John would stay forever. I failed him, I failed the us that never even existed, I failed Mycroft—

Without a word, John snatched his sunglasses off the chair and stomped to the door without another glance at the man on the bed. He couldn’t. He needed to get out and clear his head.

Tallie could sort out Sherlock tonight. Of course she would pick up on there being an issue and ask
a million questions, but John was prepared to ignore her. He had no acceptable answers for anyone, least of all Sherlock, it seemed. Sherlock, however, would always have the last word, would always think he knew all the answers nobody else would be willing to accept.

John's steps didn't falter, not even when he heard Sherlock calling out his name. He let the door slam behind him and strode down the hallway, not even sure where he was going as long as it would take him as far away as possible from what he was going to lose.

He dropped into a secluded corner seat in the terrace bar overlooking the sea on the hotel's entrance floor. It wasn't terribly late, but most patrons who hadn't been enticed by an early bedtime after a long day lounging in the sun were watching some match or other at the sports bar at the other end of the atrium. The terrace had tall plexiglass shields against the wind which was brisk enough to cause them to rattle in their hinges.

John ran his fingers — his hand still shaking from shock and anger — through his hair. What a waste. What a waste that he couldn't enjoy any of the rest of this holiday, now, because Sherlock would rather hold steadfastly to his pessimism than accept any of the good in his life. Their life. Or so John had thought. Now, Sherlock's words had erected a wall between them higher than the one John had had to cross to get to know him.

Nothing was enough. Switzerland will never be off the table. What else could it mean that Sherlock had spoken in present tense about having an appointment? Had nothing John had felt or said or done mattered? 'Having a shit day, so I'm just going to off myself, never mind anybody else.' What a selfish fuck.

John bit his lip, the salty tang of tears he refused to let out tickling his throat. How can Sherlock think like that? No wonder Mycroft had given up; not even a saint would have infinite patience for someone who was never willing to meet others half-way, never wanted to put in any effort unless the result would be identical to how things were before the accident, never gave in an inch. Clearly, Sherlock had decided that this was his plan and he was sticking to it; a final flipping off of a world he didn't think had ever wanted him, and he wouldn't let anyone contest that theory.

You fucking coward, John thought. Of course, it's easier that way: refuse to care, refuse to reconsider. Life is messy and hard and confusing and uncertain and a hell of a lot of work, whereas death is none of those things, not the way you've designed it!

The thing that hurt the most was that Sherlock wasn't even willing to try to face that fear for someone who loved him as much as John did, that he would refuse, flat-out, to address how John would feel if he was left behind. How could Sherlock not see how important, how dear, how vital he had become to John? Had John somehow completely failed to express it in a way he would have understood and believed?

John let out a hollow, disbelieving bark of a laugh. He was hardly any model for functional long-term relationships. As far as he knew, Sherlock had never had one, either. The blind leading the blind.

Every time he thought of the words he'd heard today, it was like a stab in the chest. He even tried to decide if it would have helped, if it would have made a damn bit difference if Sherlock had been willing to postpone the inevitable. A Damocles' sword would have always hung above them, a poisoned chalice would always sit between milk cartons in the fridge. Who the fuck could live like
that? His throat clenched and he felt as though his chest was caving in on itself, but he couldn't let the tears come, could he? It would mean defeat. It would mean that it was over.

But it is over, isn't it?

"John?" A soft, familiar voice called out from the direction of the potted palms hiding John from the other patrons in the bar. There were now more of them than when he'd first wandered in. He had no idea how long he'd sat there, deep in thought.

Tallie sat down in the chair opposite. The sun had done lovely things to her complexion, and the salt water had made her hair coarse and airy instead of its usual, flatter consistence back in rainy old England.

"What's going on?" she asked. It must have been clear as day from the sight of John that something was amiss. "I just talked to Sherlock and he was really—"

John shook his head hard. "No. I don't care." I can't care. Not anymore. Because if I do, there will be nothing left of me. "I don't want to hear it." He let out a ragged breath. "You were right. Mycroft was right. He was never going to… I'm such an idiot."

"No, you're not." Tallie's warm palm landed gently on his knee and gave a gentle squeeze.

"Tallie…" John's eyes squeezed shut, which only momentarily stemmed the flow of tears just as his first sob finally broke through.

After hearing that Tallie had promised to look after Sherlock for the remaining two days on the island, Mycroft accepted John's request for rescheduling only his flight back for the next day with quiet respect — likely reading more in John's tone than the latter would have wanted. John muttered a haphazard apology before ringing off, not having the heart to hear whatever empty, disappointed words Mycroft Holmes might have for a man who failed to save his brother.

John remembered very little about the morning flight back due to the amount of whisky he consumed; he nearly took a fall in the escalator at Heathrow when heading for the luggage carousels.

The taxi he took from the airport did not take him to Musgrave Court. Instead, the address John gave to the driver was Harry's. He would have to apologise for showing up drunk on the doorstep of someone trying their damnedest to stay sober, but that felt inconsequential in the face of his bigger fuck-up.

Tallie had tried to warn him. To prepare him. To keep him from getting too personally involved. But how else could he have even tried to make a difference? There had been Mycroft's herculean efforts, and all those professionals, including Tallie… They had failed, too, but John still felt so raw, small and betrayed as though this was his tragedy, his nose-dive alone.

He didn't care that all the clothes he had with him were dirty. He didn't care whether he got his final pay. He didn't care that a lot of his belongings were still at Musgrave Court. He couldn't care, because caring was what had got him into this mess.

It was also a rephrasing of what Mycroft Holmes had said to him when he made the call to say that he wanted to return early, and that he would be terminating his contract ahead of time: "Caring is
not an advantage, but I'm afraid no one is quite immune to it, be it a duty or a temptation."
"Sod this."

The Tesco Metro closest to Harry's flat was out of lactose-free milk. It meant that John would have to walk further away to another shop. He wondered idly if his outburst was disproportionate to this minor inconvenience but these days, disproportionate rage seemed to be the only emotion capable of punching through defeat and lethargy.

He hadn't had a decent night's sleep since Greece. When he'd woken up — *stopped lying down*, he corrected bitterly in his head — his shoulder had throbbed like mad, and his bad leg had felt stiff like a plank. After yet another miserably silent breakfast with Harry, during which he ate very little and was even less interested in conversation, he'd wandered around her smallish home battling a sense of claustrophobia. His mobile had taunted him from her kitchen worktop, silent and dark; he'd painstakingly deleted all past messages and several contacts from it and turned it to silent on the fight home. *How many days ago was that?* He hadn’t used it since, though on several occasions, he had found himself standing with it cradled in his hand as though it was his last remaining tie to the life he’d once had, one he was still incapable of severing completely. There was a self-flagellating voice in his head that become his constant companion recently: *Call him, you coward. Call him and listen to what he has to say before it’s too late.* After Harry had gone to work, that voice had got too loud, so John had stuffed his feet into shoes and stomped out of her flat, slamming the door behind him. She had pointedly suggested yesterday that he could, at least, visit the shops today instead of pacing a circle into the carpets or lying motionless on the couch. She had even drafted a list and left it on the kitchen table, giving him an awkward pat on the shoulder before grabbing her car keys.

So far, he had managed to avoid the conversations Harry kept trying to start, and he knew that he wasn't being a very nice houseguest. He knew it but couldn’t find it in himself to care. He knew his sister could read it all on him anyway; the pain, the frustration, the anxiety, the grief. There was no going back and no moving forward. *I can’t care. Not unless— or until—*

*No. Can’t think about it. He blinked, shaking his head at an advert for discounted cereal. I just can’t. Mustn't fall apart at fucking Tesco.*

It all struck him then how perfectly the way he felt matched what life had been like just after being discharged from rehab. He was staying in a place that was not his home, refusing to talk about the things that kept him up at night and struggling to get through the simple things others did every day.

This time, he had invalided himself home. *Greece was just another kind of battlefield.*

The packet of corn flakes he'd grabbed without thinking and was now holding like a village idiot halfway between the shelf and his basket, made a rustling complaint in his tight grip. He dropped it into the basket, wondering briefly if that had really been what Harry had told him to bring with the milk. He hadn't been listening, and he'd forgot the list on the kitchen table. It was hard to hear anything but his own thoughts these days, and those were the ones he kept trying to ignore. Some… *things* helped with that, but none of them were good ideas in the long-term, and it was
probably for the best that Harry had put a stop to his new bad habit right away.

Maybe he'd wanted her to find the oxycodone bottle. Maybe he hadn't. He didn't know why he did half the things he did these days. Harry hadn't been mad, nor had she launched into the kind of superior and self-referencing lecture about the perils of drugs and booze John would have expected from a Harry Watson who seemed to have finally gripped the tail of sobriety and held on. She'd flushed the tablets while he'd watched on silently, two days after he'd shown up on her doorstep.

"You know as well as I do that it only works when you're off your tits on it, and soon you're not chasing a high or the oblivion but just trying to avoid getting the shits and the shakes," she told him and flushed once more for good measure. "It's not fucking romantic or heroic, Johnny, grieving for someone before they're even dead."

He'd expected to want to yell at her, to break something, to storm out, but all he had felt was defeat. That scared him because it meant the fight was well and truly gone from him.

A day after that, late at night, a familiar number had begun flashing on the screen of his muted phone, and he'd watched the screen flicker with a racing heart.

Alive, he had thought, and he hadn't been sure if the crushing feeling in his chest was a relief or horrifyingly selfish anger over having to remain in this limbo. Guilt gnawed his bones hollow, yet his heart felt too broken for him to do anything but stare blankly at the screen. He didn’t think he had the strength to plunge back into clinging to hope by his fingernails, hope that answering the call could bring forth another kind of an ending. Hope that he’d reconsidered, that they could choose differently, together.

He was right, John had thought, watching the number glowing on the screen. Hope is the fucking worst.

The attempted call ended before it even went to voicemail. John clutched the phone in his hand but buried the limb under his pillow. He turned to face the wall, his throat burning against the well of tears. He needs me. He's alone in the annexe, and he needs me. I miss him so much, and he needs me.

His resolve had broken moments later. He pulled the phone out from under his pillow, dialling the familiar number with shaking fingers. There was no answer. For a moment, staring at the stripes of light created by passing cars on the wall of Harry's spare room, John could almost convince himself the call had just been a figment of his imagination. Convince himself that it was over, that his sleep-deprived and overwhelmed brain had simply imagined things, and that all he needed to do was get on with his life.

Now, he blinked again, his mind's eye struggling to shift back to the present. He glanced around and realised he had moved to the crisps aisle. As he should have expected, a deep baritone appeared in his head so loud, so real that he nearly expected to hear the familiar accompanying whirr: 'most of the so-called seasoned ones are ghastly. Sea salt and black pepper will do in a pinch, or red onion and vinegar if we must'.

John staggered blindly out of the aisle, heading toward the beckoning lure of the bottles of amber-coloured liquid at the rear of the shop. Will it always be like this? Will every bloody thing remind me of him, forever?

John paused as he reached for the cheapest bottle of whisky when the sharp, demanding sound of his mobile ringing startled him once again out of his head. He had no recollection of retrieving his mobile from Harry's kitchen worktop, or of turning it back on. He fumbled around in the bottom of
the large canvas shopping bag he had found at the bottom of Harry's shoe cupboard, disappointed when the ringing stopped before he managed to answer. Even if it would likely turn out to just be a phone salesman, he welcomed the chance to yell at someone. The ringing started again, and the caller’s persistence confirmed his suspicion; it must be a salesperson daring to bother him in the middle of the day.

A scathing tirade ready on his tongue, he hovered his finger on the green icon, but the name flashing on the screen finally registered properly. His heart stuttered, then punched into a slamming rhythm against his ribs, pounding frantically as though trying to force its way out. *Didn't I delete his contact information on the plane?*

Whether he had or hadn't was irrelevant: there was no denying that the screen was announcing that the caller was a *Mycroft Holmes.*

And John could think of only one reason the man would be calling him. *To tell me that— that— No, not yet. Please, God, not yet, not today, no.*

He scrambled to remember the date, but it was for nought. Time had blurred, become meaningless. He had avoided paying attention to the calendar, had even taken Harry's paper one off the wall. He just… couldn't.

He pressed the green icon and gripped the phone hard, his voice strained with dread. "Yes, hello?"

Mycroft wasted no time with pleasantries. "Sherlock has been admitted to the Critical Care unit of Wycombe Hospital with pneumonia."

John's breath left him in a rush at the unexpected words. *Alive. Still alive.*

He ran out of the store so fast he dropped his basket in the middle of an aisle.

"He had a slight cough on the day he and Natalia returned from Greece which persisted. Last night, she informed me that he had a fever; she was kind enough to stay overnight to keep an eye on him. He deteriorated in the early hours of the morning but thankfully is still managing without a respirator."

Mycroft's words were curt, and his visage haggard and tired.

"So, it's pneumonia? You said that on the phone?" John was still breathless from running to the hospital from the bus stop. It hadn't been difficult to find the HDU from the main lobby, and upon his arrival, he'd been directed into the family room where Mycroft was waiting.

"Diagnosis seems rather clear, yes, from what I have been able to glean from his doctors."

"Can I see him?"

"Of course."

Mycroft rose to his feet, and John could see that his suit was crumpled, perhaps from sitting in
uncomfortable hospital chairs. He led John into a two-person room; thankfully, the other bed was unoccupied. Two nurses sat in a glass-window booth in the middle, which allowed them to monitor two rooms at the same time.

The men stopped to stand side by side just inside the room, watching two nurses adjust a large, green positioning pillow behind Sherlock's back. He was lying on his side, facing the door with his eyes closed. John had grown used to Sherlock's existence being accompanied by the ambient sound of the quiet whirr of his wheelchair; now, that was replaced by the rhythmic hiss of a BiPAP mask. The contraption, tightly strapped onto his face to cover his nose and mouth, was helping him breathe on his own by providing a continuous positive airway pressure to keep his lung sacs open, and by pushing in extra airflow when he inhaled. The sight would have been alarming if John wasn't aware of the contraindications of BiPAP: complete respiratory arrest and unconsciousness. As long as Sherlock managed to keep his vitals and blood gas values acceptable while on it, there was no need for deep sedation with mechanical ventilation through an intubation tube.

As always, Mycroft read John's mind. "Intubation was discussed briefly this morning; I refrained from contacting you until a decision was made whether we could continue with the mask. He does require some sedation to tolerate the treatment, so has been mostly sleeping."

"Antibiotics?"

John didn't know to what Sherlock had given consent. I don't know anything anymore.

"Of course," Mycroft replied. "And inhaled medications, presumably to clear secretions."

John cleared his throat nervously, and one of the nurses attending the Sherlock glanced over her shoulder, flashing a quick and courteous smile at him. "I don't remember if he had a cough when I last saw him," he said quietly, nervously opening and closing his fist against his left thigh. "Maybe he caught this on the plane back, I don't know—" his rambling confession trailed out. He had been so angry, so distracted on that final night on Rhodes that, even if Sherlock had been coming down with something on the night when they'd last seen each other, he might not have noticed.

"You are blameless, John — for everything," Mycroft Holmes emphasised. "I assure you that Natalia has been her diligent self as well. These things simply happen in Sherlock's situation."

"When you called, I thought he was—" John couldn't bring himself to finish the sentence.

Mycroft shook his head with a warning glance. "Not now, John."

"Did he ask for me? Has he said anything about—"

_Christ, I'm such an idiot. I should have called him again. And again._ Now that John was here, things suddenly felt so much simpler. At Harrys' place, he just couldn't tell apart the need to protect himself from the crushing guilt of having walked away.

"He hasn't spoken of Rhodes, no," Mycroft said circumspectly.

The nurses retreated, their tasks finished, so John walked to Sherlock's bedside and did not hesitate to pick up the motionless, lithe hand resting on the sheets. Not caring a whit that Mycroft could see what he was doing, he pressed his lips briefly to the pale fingers and took a seat, enclosing Sherlock's hand in both his own. He had heard Mycroft's words about sedation but had to see for himself how deep under the man was. "Sherlock?"

Sherlock's head shifted slightly on the pillow, and John felt a flinch-like squeeze of his fingers before his hand went lax again. He didn't open his eyes.
"It has been touch-and-go. The pulmonologist who came by an hour ago was dissatisfied with the blood oxygen value on his latest sample," Mycroft remarked, nodding towards Sherlock's hand to indicate the arterial line taped securely onto his wrist.

Sometimes John had a hard time remembering the older Holmes was not a healthcare professional. Apart from select moments when he'd been understandably rather useless, Sherlock's brother was obviously well-read and highly intelligent and capable of understanding things well outside his own professional sphere.

"You look tired," John offered. "I can sit with him."

Mycroft vacillated at the foot of the bed but did not utter a single word protest. John wondered if the possibility for him to be briefly relieved of his relentless watch over his younger brother was why he'd summoned John, besides just out of courtesy for being Sherlock's… friend?

"Thank you, John," Mycroft finally said. "It has been a long road," he added quietly, eyes averted to the window. The blinds were closed, and the yellowish artificial light made Sherlock's complexion look wan and even paler than usual.

John nodded, and it was a salute from one soldier to another. "I know."

He sternly told himself not to consider the potential implications of Mycroft's statement — that if there truly were a road, that road would have an endpoint. And it might not be far.

*This could kill him. And if he gets better, he might still go to Switzerland.*

Staying away would have been easier, but John's life had become so intertwined with Sherlock's for so long that he couldn't possibly have said no to coming here. In truth, it hadn't even crossed his mind when he'd got the phone call. Every second he spent with Sherlock could be increasing the intensity of the heartbreak he was in for, but that was no longer the point. *John* wasn't the point, because his life would go on.

Staying with Harry had been a return to the way he'd felt after discharge. Pointless. Tired. Disinterested. Hopeless. Going back to that life, to return to being the person he'd been after Afghanistan was not an option. He would leave only after he'd seen this through, and the way it would change him, he would have to accept. In London with Harry, he'd constantly been torn in two: by the pull of just hailing a cab and getting back to Musgrave Court and protecting what was left of his heart by staying away. Yet now, at the very edge of disaster, things seemed so strangely and wholly clear. Sherlock needed him right now — needed him whether it was in life or in impending death.

While John was lost in thought, his thumb tracing gentle patterns on Sherlock's knuckles, Mycroft left the room. Two hours later, new lab samples were drawn, and John was grateful for the arterial line; the veins in the crooks of Sherlock's elbows didn't look like an easy stick. A nurse came in shortly after, quietly introduced herself as Ann and told John to inform her if there was anything they needed. She checked and jotted down Sherlock's vitals, and adjusted the oxygen percentage on the BiPAP — to a slightly lower setting, John noticed to his relief.

"Latest blood gases showed some improvement," she told him, then briefly studied John's expression. "Mister Holmes told us to share all medical details with you; the records he provided confirm that Sherlock permits it."

She passed him a printout, and John eagerly scanned the contents. *Carbon dioxide still elevated, but oxygen reading well above normal on 60% flow, allowing for a lower percentage.*
He gave the print back to Ann. "What's he on? Sedation, I mean."

"We've recently begun using dexmedetomidine. Helps with pain, preserves co-operation well, doesn't depress breathing."

"Sounds good for patients like him," John said, nodding towards the quiet figure on the bed. Sherlock was covered only with a sheet since he continued to be feverish.

Ann gave John a smile. "There's tea served in the family room at four."

"Thanks."

When he reluctantly left the bedside two hours later to find that tea and bring some in, he found Mycroft in the lobby, nodding off in a worn armchair. A tap on the shoulder roused the older Holmes, and for a moment, he looked uncharacteristically disoriented and openly exhausted.

"Tea?" John asked.

"Is there any change?"

"His oxygen requirements are a bit lower. It's not a major improvement yet, but it's something. He's asleep now, which is good; they had to increase sedation with some midazolam boluses an hour ago because he got restless."

"Good, that's... good." Mycroft stood up, straightened his lapels and buttoned up the jacket atop his vest. He always wore a three-piece, it seemed. His thinning hair was standing up from where it had been resting against the back of the worn armchair.

John knew better than to suggest that Mycroft go home and wait for news there. Sherlock was his only relative who lived in the area — the only close family Mycroft had, really. He didn't have a sister to run to, didn't have anywhere he could escape from the reality of Sherlock's decision. Mycroft would have to see this to the end, to deal with the aftermath, including the potential criminal proceedings back in the UK over assisting with a suicide plan. Judging by the kind of work the man did, John suddenly wondered if it might be destructive to his career. Regardless, Mycroft never seemed to falter the way John had. Once again, he felt terribly guilty for trying to remove himself from the situation, from wanting to spare his own feelings even though he was hardly the one suffering the most. Rarely had he felt empathy as deep for anyone as he did for Mycroft Holmes right now, yet all John could offer was a mug of cheap, bagged tea and to relieve the man from sitting vigil by Sherlock's side.

Soon, they sat across from each other in the small conference table in the family room. The space didn't feel very homely, and the knowledge that this was a place used often for the delivery of devastating news added to the bland gloom.

"I remember the call about the accident like it was yesterday," Mycroft broke the silence. "When the triage nurse introduced herself, I assumed he'd had another overdose. I never quite found out how many of them were deliberate. As you may know, Sherlock was — is — a graduate chemist. He didn't make mistakes in such matters, except when he didn't care."

"Do you think he was depressed before the accident?" John asked. He thought he knew the answer but wanted to hear Mycroft's take on it. John had already learned from Mrs Hudson that not all of Sherlock's mood issues seemed to be a consequence of an injury to which he hadn't adjusted.

"He had his... dark periods. Disappeared, at times, for a few days, week, months. Only after he discovered solving crimes did those periods get shorter and then disappear altogether. His use of
illicit substances did not entirely cease, but the nature of it did seem to change. I did assume his longer periods of sobriety were indicative of remission rather than a cure." Mycroft's eyes were downcast. "Once, I thought... When he was hospitalised after the overdose eight months ago, I must admit I considered whether it was a good thing on that specific occasion that help reached him in time. And I had a similar thought again when he told me about Switzerland. Before the accident, he could have easily ended his life whenever he wanted."

"He could have, but he didn't," John offered.

"Now, he is almost completely robbed of that option. I hoped that having the possibility of Switzerland within his grasp might be enough of a failsafe, a last resort. Hearing that he had been granted a date for the act was..." Mycroft shook his head in disbelief. "I tried to fight for him, yet again and again, he was my greatest adversary in that very battle. If his life was difficult even before the accident, John, then who are we to say when it may be too difficult? What is reasonable for someone to endure and what is not? We've not often seen eye to eye, Sherlock and I, but I know who he is, what he is like, how much he has lost. I just don't sometimes know whether what I have done has been kind and beneficial or cruel."

"You know I could never be impartial enough to answer that," John replied. "If it weren't for you, I wouldn't have met him."

"Hiring you is something I have never regretted. You are — were — his best chance."

'Were?' Does that word choice confirm that Sherlock hasn't changed his mind?

John expected the pain to flood in. Yet, what filled him was something he didn't expect: a resigned calm the likes of which he hadn't felt. Instead of desperation, he felt a novel acceptance which cut through some of the sorrow he knew was still premature. It needs to be his choice, John realised. That's all he wanted — all he still wants: that he gets to choose. And if I tell him that I will only accept one option, then I'm taking that choice away from him. I have to see this through with him. I can't walk away just because I'm too much of a self-absorbed coward to face what's about to happen.

"He made me a promise," Mycroft said. "Six months. For six months, he would live at Musgrave Court. For six months, he would accept all necessary medical care and not attempt suicide again. For six months, I would be allowed to try to make his life bearable."

So that's why he's been accepting antibiotics and hospital stays when he gets ill. "Even when it meant having to go against his will, you did what you had to — the best anyone could have done," John promised. "But now, I think we have to let him make the decisions."

If only he'd understood earlier that he didn't have to get crushed under carrying all the responsibility — that he should have worked harder to allow Sherlock to share it with him right from the start. John had to be ready, now, to let Sherlock define what he wanted, and the thought now scared John less than losing the one he loved to some infection without having the chance to say goodbye.

This time, I will listen. And I won't run.
The next twenty-four hours were a blur. As much as John wanted the hauntingly motionless, ailing Sherlock to wake up and talk to him, he knew that the best thing was the opposite: to let him rest so that every bit of reserve left went to battling the bacteria ravaging his lungs.

Every round, every corridor conference John had with one of the HDU physicians during that long day provided both hope and dread: Sherlock was not worsening but not better. John studied the x-rays and the lab printouts until they gave him a tension headache; he knew that changes would happen with a delay and that the ever-changing, nerve-racking results of the frequent blood gases drawn were the only thing that could tell him in the time frame of hours what was going on. John knew that values going back and forth between promising and disheartening was normal at this point, and he knew that a severe pneumonia — does Sherlock even get any other kind, now? — would take days to start resolving even in a best-case scenario. It still tore at him terribly just to wait.

There were two other visitors: Tallie's arrival hardly surprised John, but Harry's certainly did. He'd texted her from the train on his way to the hospital and received an 'okay' as a reply, nothing more. Suddenly, she was just there at the door, a Tesco bag with the handles all twisted and wrapped around her wrist. He beckoned her to enter.

"Not really how I wanted the two of you to meet," John said quietly, tugging at the edge of a sheet so that it covered Sherlock's feet better. It felt important that he appeared looked-after. That it appeared that John would now make sure he would be well cared for, after nearly walking away.

"Yeah," Harry said quietly.

His sister was often brusque, too direct, inadvertently offensive — now who did that remind John of? — but she now refrained from giving breath to the words that sat on both their tongues: that the reason she was here was that this might be her only chance to meet Sherlock Holmes.

She came to stand beside the bed and gave John's arm a squeeze, then put down the plastic bag and crossed her bare arms so that she could give them a vigorous rub. "God, it's freezing in here."

"Aircon's on a high setting since he's got a fever."

"What's he got?" Harry asked, and John was relieved for a chance to slip into a doctor's role.

"Pneumonia. Lung infection," he explained needlessly. "He gets them pretty easily."

Sherlock chose that moment to stir: his brows knit together, and his right hand crept up to the ventilator mask, fingers fumbling as he attempted to rid himself of the contraption feebly. The control unit emitted a warning sound of a leak when he managed to dislodge the soft pad keeping his nose from getting abraded. His eyes remained closed, and it was hard to tell how aware he was of what he was doing. John pried his hand away and held it, gently stroking his arm with his other palm down the side of his face and plucked free a curl trapped under a mask strap. The ventilator, once again content, ceased its incessant beeping and settled back into delivering enough pressure to ensure that every breath Sherlock took was close to the designated half a litre.

"Just sleep," John murmured close to his ear. "Everything's fine."

As though the words had registered, Sherlock drew in a deeper breath, the tight lines of his forehead smoothing as he drifted back into sleep. John was glad that an extra bolus of sedative wouldn't be needed; every dose tended to make the blood gas values worse since the drugs
depressed Sherlock's breathing even further.

He replaced Sherlock's hand on top of the sheet beside his thigh and took a step back. "He needs his rest," he said, mostly to himself, but Harry seemed to take it as her cue to retreat.

"I better go. Call me when you know. Regardless," she said simply but pointedly.

John thought of Mycroft, alone at Musgrave Court. He didn't have a sister to go to once they had seen this to the end.

"I will," he promised and accepted a rare hug from his fellow Watson before she slipped out into the corridor.

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The next morning, Sherlock's room was bathed in the warm, orange and pink hues of the rising sun. Early summer had painted the hospital lawns green, and a late-night rain shower had brightened the colours even further. John had opened the blinds just after midnight, wanting to watch the patterns drawn by the meandering droplets on the glass instead of continuing to squint at the changing digits on the vitals monitor and the screen of the BiPAP unit.

After waking up on the still-unoccupied second HDU bed in the room, grateful that no one had attempted to evict him in the two nights he'd now spent there, John had a cursory look at the readings on the monitor before taking a seat again in the chair beside the bed. A quiet hiss came from Sherlock's mattress — an air pump kept changing the pressure inside it to prevent sores. Not all HDU patients were given one, but as a tetraplegic, Sherlock was at particular risk for such complications. He still looked pale, his hair was a sweaty mess, and the skin on the delicate bones on his hand appeared nearly translucent in the early morning light as John picked it up again. His eyes shifted a bit under his lids, signalling either REM sleep or tentative wakefulness.

John noticed that the settings on the BiPAP had been reduced further during the night: now, only a low, constant end-expiratory pressure was helping Sherlock keep his lungs open. The sedation infusion rate had also been turned down to a minimum.

That was why it wasn't entirely surprising when long lashes began to flutter before revealing the strangely coloured pair of irises by which John had always been so mesmerised. Sherlock's gaze took some time to focus, but when it did, it firmly settled on John. He muttered something, but the sound of the ventilator drowned it out.

John leaned forward, laced his fingers with Sherlock's and pressed his lips to the knuckles. "Hi," he said with a smile framed by the tears in his eyes. "Love you, you madman. Been waiting for you to get better and wake up."

"John?" Quiet, groggy, confused and nearly impossible to hear from underneath the hiss of the tight mask.

"I'm here. You need to breathe, not talk," John told him gently.

The mask once again made it hard to make out what the reply was, but John was almost certain he could make out the word 'boring'. As if to appease him, Sherlock focused on a set of deep, calm inhalations and exhalations, then began determinedly prying open one of the Velcro straps close to his temple with his free hand.
Not caring whether he was technically authorised to make that decision, John put the ventilator beside the bed on standby and gently loosened the straps so that he could lift the mask off Sherlock's face.

"Is that really all you've got when it comes to clever retorts, then? That breathing is boring?" John joked. "We've got to get you off that sedation juice."

"Don't think… I can manage clever right now," Sherlock replied quietly and pinched his eyes shut before a coughing fit overtook him.

"It's fine," John said, reaching for the regular oxygen mask hanging from a hook on the wall. He turned on the flow in the rotameter to five litres per minute and arranged the mask on Sherlock's face. "It's all fine, I promise. Whatever you need. I'm here now, and I'll stay as long as you'll have me."

He meant every word.

Sherlock returned home on the twenty-third of May and spent the next two days mostly napping. Save for sleeping in his own bedroom at night and the times when Tallie relieved him three times a day for an hour, John did not leave his side. Slowly, the initial relief over Sherlock's return — which had seemed to lift the spirits of the entire house — shifted away. It was replaced by the heaviness and sense of isolation to which John had grown accustomed. He felt each minute that ticked by as though it was a feint by the sword of Damocles, knowing that eventually, the wait might well shred him to pieces once again. He could only hope that when he crumbled again, it would happen after the inevitable. This is what he hadn't understood before: that the pain would come anyway, that he couldn't escape it even by removing himself from the picture, and the only choice left to make was whether he would stand by Sherlock's side so that they could lend strength to one another, or if he'd waste the chance to spend more time with his beloved. Would he just grieve, or be eaten hollow by guilt on top of it?

When Sherlock was awake, John's attentiveness knew no bounds: he fetched cups of tea and glasses of cold water, massaged Sherlock’s legs when the spasms flared up. He kept a careful eye on Sherlock's respiration and blood pressure. He read the newspaper aloud, changed Sherlock's catheter and his IV fluids and made sure to shift his position regularly. All this help was accepted with minimum resistance, and John refrained from analysing why.

He spoke with Tallie at length one night, voicing his anxiety and fear instead of lashing out as he'd done before. Since Sherlock hadn't spoken much willingly with her — or anyone — after Rhodes, Tallie had little advice to give beyond what she'd already told John: love him as best as you can. You got him to fight when no one else could.

So, John did all the practical things that occurred to him: concrete things, small things, big things so that he wouldn't have time to think. He tried to lose himself, disappear completely into a reality where Sherlock was still there with him and needed him.

By the fifth day home, Sherlock managed to stay awake for longer stretches, even ate a bit of Sophie’s cottage pie and asked to have his tablet so he could read. John climbed into bed next to him, talking softly about this and that and listening to the deep rumble of Sherlock's laughter as he proofread John's account of their Rhodes case for the blog. John had initially hesitated to share details of all the frustrating challenges of wheelchair air travel, but then he'd thought to wonder
how Sherlock's acerbic wit would describe such things. It appeared he had managed to lace the post with enough black humour to please his most discerning reader.

"This is good," Sherlock concluded after reading the rest. "Perhaps you're not entirely hopeless as a prosaist."

John had summarised the end of the case very circumspectly, not wanting to sensationalise Jorja's death in any way or compromise her privacy; he hadn't used her real name.

When Sherlock succumbed to the temptation of a nap again, John watched him as he dozed, tucking the duvet carefully around his shoulders and brushing stray locks of hair off of his forehead.

They did not discuss Switzerland after returning to Musgrave Court. Though the notion of such a conversation no longer made John panic, there didn’t seem to be any point. He didn't want Sherlock to think he was taking up the subject to change his mind. They would talk if that dialogue somehow became necessary. But only if Sherlock initiated it.

John wanted to believe that there was still a chance, but a part of him knew that the die was likely cast. The weight of a few days against so many months would hardly tip the scales. I did my part, John thought, then realised that maybe he'd got it all wrong: he had always seen Sherlock changing his mind as the endpoint, but whichever path he chose, it didn't really end with that decision — just like their journey had not begun from the moment John learned the suicide plan. No, it had begun at the moment when John had decided not to pen that politely worded letter to Mycroft Holmes about not accepting the job. That day, when his and Sherlock's eyes had met for the first time, John had accepted responsibility for one half of a relationship, regardless of its precise nature shifting from a working one to a very personal, intimate entity.

Before, he had always walked away from people when things got serious. Not with Sherlock. Not now.
A week after Sherlock returned home, Mycroft came to hover in the sitting room doorway, shortly after John had finished placing their takeaway order. The sun was setting and John knew it would be dark soon, but the room was bathed in such warm red and gold light that John hadn’t wanted to turn any lights on yet. Sherlock was sitting by the open window, watching a red-tailed bumblebee fly around the honeysuckles, their delicately fragrant scent drifting in on the early summer breeze.

Mycroft cleared his throat. “Sherlock. A word about your... project?”

Sherlock nodded but did not take his eyes off the buzzing insect. He never usually acquiesced to his brother's requests so readily.

Mycroft glanced pointedly in John’s direction. "John, you've been very attentive recently. Feel free to take a few minutes to yourself. We won't be long."

Stung by the blatant dismissal and upset by what couldn't have been anything but a euphemism for Switzerland, John backed out of the sitting room, flinching when Mycroft slid the door shut with a firm click.

John knew that it was fair and right that the man should have some time with his brother, but he was still unbearably jealous for even just those moments. Glancing around the annexe, he couldn’t think of a thing to do, so he wandered to his bedroom and sat down on the bed.

I need to look for a new flat, he realised. The thought came out of nowhere and felt disconnected, distant. He shook his head at it; he knew he should call Harry and ask if he could stay with her until he got his affairs in order, but having to put into words what was going to happen still felt impossible. I will talk to her... after, he decided.

When he heard Mycroft's steps in the kitchen sometime later, John was still sitting on the end of his bed, staring blankly at the rug beneath his feet. He waited until he heard the door to the main house close after the older Holmes before he made his way back to the kitchen, pausing by the window to take a deep breath and try to regain the domestic warmth he had felt earlier in the evening. The kitchen light was on now, the dark garden beyond disappearing as his haggard face reflected back at him. He looked older than his years, and he hadn't shaved in two days.

“John. Come here,” Sherlock called from the sitting room, then succumbed to a coughing fit that made John’s chest ache in sympathy.

They spent the rest of the evening watching a documentary about Colony Collapse Disorder and eating tandoori chicken and garlic naan mostly with their fingers, spreading out napkins on their laps as a makeshift picnic. When a bit of sauce dripped down John's chin, Sherlock reached
forward to swipe it off with one finger. He popped the finger in his mouth with a sly look, then busied himself with tearing off another piece of his naan. John grinned towards the telly, feeling like he could actually breathe for the first time in days. This is what he needed to do: keep his head in the present, and only in the present.

When he finished cleaning up their dinner mess after the documentary had ended, he noticed Sherlock rolling his head on his neck.

“Sore?” John didn’t doubt it; he'd been confined to bed for weeks.

Sherlock hummed affirmatively.

“Want a massage?” John hadn't suggested this before and wasn't sure if he'd be any good at it, but he no longer felt awkward offering such a thing. The pneumonia had provided a temporary respite to all hang-ups about physical proximity, and it seemed as though they had both stopped pretending they didn't enjoy such attention.

“I— Yes. Please?” Sherlock asked, the last word hesitant.

Pushing with his hands against the seat, he managed to shift so that he was sitting slightly sideways on the sofa. John climbed carefully behind him, sliding Sherlock’s hips forward so that his back rested comfortably against John’s chest. He was reminded suddenly of the pool in Greece — all those moments, in fact, when Sherlock had trusted him with his body and plucked up the courage to do something like this in public even though people might then see evidence of his limitations. John hoped that Sherlock could feel his awe at being allowed to see the man so relaxed, so unguarded, so human.

He has seemed so happy these past few days, John thought. Is it because it'll all be over, soon? As much as he clung to the moment at hand to preserve his sanity, the logical side of John knew he should rehearse these kinds of thoughts, hoping they’d hurt a little bit less each time.

The dress shirt Sherlock wore was made of a thin fabric and was fitted so tight it could have been painted on. Taking it off would have given John the best access, but perhaps it would be too much. He leaned his chin lower to inhale the scent of Sherlock’s skin as he dug his thumbs into the back of his neck. Sherlock hummed low with pleasure, so John continued his ministrations, pressing his fingertips even harder in where neck muscles connected with the back of the skull. He took his time gently stroking and kneading the neck muscles before moving towards the shoulders. He tried to memorise the exact feeling of warm muscles beneath his palms, of the tiny sighs of pleasure slipping out from between Sherlock’s parted lips, of the way the light reflected in his dark curls — pillow-matted as they were since he still spent a considerable chunk of every day resting.

Peeking over Sherlock’s shoulder, John noticed him fidgeting, grabbing a decorative pillow and placing it on his lap, his right hand hidden underneath.

John stopped his ministrations and coiled his fingers around Sherlock's bony shoulder to get his attention. "You okay?"

"Fine," came the slightly dismissive reply.

John removed his hands, draping his arm on the backrest of the sofa instead. "Do you want me to stop?"

"No, it's…"

John could now see his fingers kneading into his thigh. "Spasm?" he asked carefully.
He knew that Sherlock wouldn't feel the pain from it, so embarrassment must have factored mostly into his discomfort.

"I'm not as good at this as Tallie, but I can learn," John said, trying to sound encouraging as he reached his arm forward, sliding it underneath the pillow to join Sherlock's fingers underneath. His thigh muscles were rock hard, and John could feel a slight twitch in them as they struggled against the nonsensical neural instructions issued by a spinal column disconnected from its command centre. "She told me it would be best to start with a light stretch—"

"—but that's hard to do with the quadriceps when sitting down," Sherlock said through gritted teeth. "We do things like that when she comes over. Stretching while I'm lying on my back, or whatever Leo has recommended."

"I know," John confirmed quietly. After Sherlock had been discharged from hospital, it hadn't felt as necessary to give him as much privacy for Tallie's visits as before. John wanted him to know that it was all fine, that he wasn't put off by any of it.

“May I try something?” At Sherlock’s nod, he moved the pillow out of the way so they both see what he was doing. He pressed the heel of his hand gently into Sherlock’s thigh, kneading downwards towards his knee. On the return, he squeezed and shook the tight muscle strands until he reached the starting position, feeling them loosen and soften.

Sherlock said nothing, and John worried he'd resorted to his usual distance, disappeared into his Mind Palace. Still, John let him. Sherlock still very rarely talked about these things and doing so may have created a need to regroup and retreat. Once the spasm subsided, John returned to what he'd been doing higher up without another word, and after a moment, felt Sherlock relax, even sag against him. Eventually, the rigidity in his shoulders softened as knots gave way to pliant muscle, and John slipped out from behind his back, already missing the closeness.

It was quite late, now, he realised, planting his feet on the floor and stretching his back after standing up. "Where's the agency nurse?"

The past few days, Sherlock had been attended to by a rota of three nurses sent by the locum agency Mycroft used when Tallie wasn't available. John hadn't seen her since Sherlock had returned home from hospital, which puzzled him. She always seemed at peace with Sherlock's plan. Maybe they've said what they need to say, and she found it harder than she had assumed to be around him so close to—

"I told Mycroft one wouldn't be needed tonight. If you don't mind?" Sherlock asked shyly. John studied his expression. He looked tense again; his mouth a tight line, his eyes skittering around the room, anywhere but at John.

"It's only fair that Tallie should get a break," Sherlock suddenly hastened to argue. "She has put in a lot of extra hours lately, and—"

"Shut it, you," John chided with a fond smile. "You know she doesn't mind, and I mind even less." Do better. Talk! "I'm not here because I have to be. Not because Mycroft hired me, or because I need to look after someone to feel better about myself. I hope you know that by now. I hope you know by now… why."

Sherlock swallowed. "Yes. It's… okay?" He asked, and suddenly John had an intense feeling he wasn't talking about evening routines.

"Or… it's not okay," John countered. "But it is what it is."
"It is what… it is?" Sherlock repeated, the words slow and confused, every syllable carefully weighed as he clearly feared he was saying the wrong thing.

"It's whatever you need it to be," John promised.

*We're still so bad at this, but we're trying.*

Forty minutes later, he settled Sherlock gently against the pillows in the middle of the bed. The lights were dimmed, and the large bed looked almost irresistibly inviting. John made to back out and drop onto the floor, but Sherlock’s hand slipped over his on the duvet.

"Stay?"

Their eyes met, and John recognised the barely hidden hope that he would say yes. *Anything you need,* he thought. Sleeping next to Sherlock was the easiest thing in the world which to agree. After helping Sherlock shift to the right side of the bed, John laid down on the opposite side, conscientiously staying on top of the bedding. They were facing each other, and John was pleased to see a soft smile curving Sherlock's perfect, full lips.

During the wash-up in the bathroom, John had battled his heavy eyelids, but suddenly, he was able to cast aside his tiredness. "Is this alright?" He asked and received a nod in reply.

It didn't take long for Sherlock to succumb to sleep; the pneumonia had drained his reserves. In the quiet of the room, watching Sherlock's eyes drift closed and his breathing deepen made it difficult for John to keep at bay the thoughts he'd battled all day. He bit his lip hard, struggling to control his breathing and smother the fear that time was running out.

*Stay in the present. Stay with him.*

No longer able to resist giving in to what he'd been terribly tempted to do before, he stroked Sherlock's hair with a shaky hand and kissed his forehead. He murmured to Sherlock quietly the things he found so hard to say when they were both awake: how much he was loved, how sorry John for all that had happened to him even if it had brought him such an amazing man. He tried to tell Sherlock how much he'd be missed, but those words stuck in his throat, tasting like ashes against his palate.

Overwhelmed, spent and lost, John finally climbed out of bed with one last press of his lips to Sherlock’s cheek. He knew he wouldn’t sleep tonight and didn't want to toss and turn next to Sherlock and risk waking him. The thought of the cold, empty bed in his own room felt repellent, so he made his way to the main house, wandering aimlessly from room to room like a restive spirit. After a while, he found himself in the parlour where he'd been interviewed upon arriving at Musgrave Court. He poured himself a generous glass of whisky and sank down into a chair by the fireplace. He thought briefly about lighting a fire, but the chill of the cavernous room seemed fitting for his cold, hollow chest.

He allowed the thoughts free rein, then.

It was past midnight on the thirty-first of May, and he couldn't escape that fact any longer.

*How will it be done? Will he be alone, or is Mycroft going to be with him?*
John wondered if he should have offered to travel with Sherlock. He supposed he could still present the idea in the morning. Though travel arrangements must have been done well in advance and the itinerary for the day hadn’t been shared with him, surely the omnipotence of Mycroft would extend to a third plane ticket. Would Sherlock want him there, or would the inevitability of John getting very emotional upset him too much? Had he not been invited because Sherlock wanted to remember the two of them like this, peacefully together at home, instead of their last words being exchanged in a hospice room?

**Is Sherlock scared? Will it hurt? Does he really know how much he is loved?**

The sense of failure now flooded over with full tidal force. Nothing he had done, nothing he had said had made a difference. After Sherlock was gone, he would have all the time in the world to try somehow to come to terms with that. Maybe Sherlock had been trying to help him with that by refraining from a second attempt at talking about his decision.

**Should I have told him I understand, now, why he's going, even if I could never fully accept it?**

Did Sherlock still think John couldn't talk about it, couldn't let him go, and that's why he hadn't tried to talk about Dignitas again? I don't want him to go thinking I'm still angry with him. He hoped that the recent days at home had proven to Sherlock that wasn't the case.

They needed to talk, even if it would be the hardest thing John had ever done. There would be time for that in the morning. There **had** to be.

John poured himself another drink and sank his head into his hands, finally allowing the tears to come. When he had wrung himself dry, he fell asleep, the empty tumbler slipping out of his hand to land softly on the oriental rug beneath his armchair.

When John woke the next morning, it was with an alarming sense of disorientation and a very sore neck. His tongue was dry, sticking to the roof of his mouth as he smacked his lips a few times, peeling his eyes open to the unexpected sight of the parlour fireplace. With a jolt, he remembered the date and scrambled to his feet, dislodging a blanket that had been spread on him sometime during the night. He stumbled through the corridor, desperate to get to the annexe. His head was throbbing in unison with the hammering of his heart as he made his way to the main corridor.

The double doors of the main entrance were open as they often were after breakfast to air the main corridor. Movement and a familiar sound from outside caught John's attention: Mycroft’s black car coming up the gravel drive, with the older Holmes visible in the back seat.

Panic set in. **Surely it couldn’t already be…? Sherlock can't have gone alone, but maybe Tallie—**

John barely made it to the nearest loo before he vomited, every muscle straining with the effort.

**I didn’t even get to say goodbye.**

Somewhere close, a mobile chirped to life. John stood up, rinsing his mouth from the faucet. The ringing continued, and he patted his pockets to find the offending item after finally realising it was his. He answered with a strangled **hello**.

"Morning, John." Mycroft’s voice didn’t waver and his words were not choked with grief.
"Come to the annexe," his employed prompted courteously. "There’s something Sherlock wants you to see." He rang off.

Steps heavy with dread, feeling detached from himself, John made his way to the door joining the annexe to the main house. For a long moment, he simply stood there, terror and indecision rooting him to the spot.

*I don’t want to see it empty. I don’t want to see him gone.*

Gritting his teeth, John coiled his fingers around the handle and pushed open the door. The annexe was cold and silent.

’Something Sherlock wants you to see’, Mycroft had said. John found that he didn’t care, couldn’t care about anything, really, not even some parting gift. But he felt obligated to go see this through. *One last time*, he told himself. *Then, it’ll be over.* Perhaps it was a note.

That’s what people do, isn’t it, leave a note? Would Sherlock thank him for the last few months? It would feel so grotesque. John swallowed painfully and grasped the back of a chair by the kitchen island. He felt an odd sense of not being alone despite the silence — as though Sherlock's presence still lingered in the spaces it had once filled so intensely.

Suddenly, he was startled, his knees nearly buckling at an auditory hallucination which seemed to be flowing from the speakers in both the kitchen and the sitting room: classical music, just like the first day. *Afghanistan or Iraq?* The smile coaxed reflexively forth by the memory was half a grimace.

The music continued, drawing louder now as John straightened his back and approached the sitting-room door. He shook his head, his chest constricting with grief and longing, every muscle in his body aching to turn and run.

*I can’t do this.*

The music stopped as abruptly as it had started, an unfinished phrase led by a lone violin left dangling. John stepped into the sitting room, his heart thudding against his ribs. He squeezed his eyes shut, freezing as a familiar whirr met his ears.

*I’ve really gone mad,* he barely had time to think; *I could feel him, and now I can still hear him.*

He turned slowly, opening his eyes and expecting to see Mycroft. His knees did buckle, then, and he groped for the wall as Sherlock came toward him, smiling shyly. His expression soon dissolved into worry, as John began hyperventilating and shaking his head.

"You—" was all John managed to wheeze out. "Oh my God." *Real, real, be real, please say something, be real—*

"John, are you alright?"

*No, no, no, no, this is a trick, and I can't take it, this is your final bloody trick!*

John had sunk down to his haunches, head tucked between his knees, black dots dancing in his vision. "I wanted you—" he growled out as he raised his head, sucking in great heaving gulps of air, "—to not be dead."
Sherlock's eyes widened, and his lips parted in alarm. Then, anger blazed into his expression, and his head whipped towards the kitchen where they could both hear the main door opening. "Mycroft!" he bellowed.

The older Holmes appeared just as John shakily dragged himself back to his feet.

"I thought you told him we weren't going!" Sherlock yelled at his brother. "You must have!"

Mycroft's brows hitched up higher than John had ever seen. "I assumed you did."

John could only barely keep up with the conversation. When he finally somehow scraped together enough composure to look at Sherlock properly, he was furious, too. "You cock!"

"John..."

"You let me think—you— you utter fucking bastard!"

John crossed the distance between them in three steps, crushing his lips against Sherlock's. His palms sliding around that delicate, long neck, he drank in the feeling of warm lips pressed against his, of a steady, strong pulse underneath his fingertips, of the exhalations of someone alive against his cheek before their mouths finally parted.

Sherlock, alive. Not in Switzerland.

Sherlock, in his arms.

"But the— the barrister—and the..." John stepped back from Sherlock with difficulty. He waved his hand around vaguely, still dizzy with relief and shock.

"Crayhill?" Sherlock looked puzzled. "He was here to discuss disbanding Mycroft's power of attorney over me and establishing that with you instead. That was one thing about which I wanted to speak with you in Greece, but you never let me finish what I was trying to say. I really thought Mycroft had filled you in afterwards. I assumed that's why you came back."

He was still glaring furiously at his brother, who gingerly retreated from the sitting room door and closed it to give them some privacy. Sherlock steered closer when John dropped himself onto the sofa, still shaking his head in disbelief, then rubbing his closed eyelids with the heels of his palms.

"I never asked him again about Crayhill or any of it, I just assumed... I thought I was ready," John muttered in disbelief. "At the hospital, after talking to Mycroft... I tried to make my peace with your plan, and I did, or at least I thought so, that if you still wanted to— to— Christ, I can't even fucking say it, not even now."

He cleared his throat, pressing his fingers into his temples to try and ease the ache in his head. "I decided that if Dignitas was what you still wanted, then I could disagree, but I would not try to define your life for you or stop you from going. If being able to make that decision was the most important thing for you, if you couldn't be you unless you did that, then I had to stand by you, instead of standing in your way. If it was what you wanted and needed the most, I had to accept it."

John's voice broke, and he cleared his throat again futilely, dropping his hands to rub at his left leg which was now aching.

"John, I—" Sherlock's tone was haunted, urgent as he struggled to find the right words.

"I was going to go with you. If you asked. But you didn't, so I thought, when Mycroft called me
here and said you had something for me, I thought it was your note."

Sherlock steered closer and reached out a hand, enclosing John's fretting fingers in his. His eyes were intense as he searched John's face. "No, John. If I ever went, there wouldn't be a note. I wouldn't sneak out like some ghost. I truly had no idea Mycroft hadn't filled you in; please forgive me for that oversight. I— I owe you so much more than that. I owe you everything, John."

John looked up, moisture gathering at the edges of his eyes. He was still overwhelmed, still incredulous that Sherlock was right there, warm and alive and… his? Dare he hope that much?

Sherlock gave his hand a weak squeeze before letting go and retreating a bit. "Ever since the accident, people have tried to impose their values on me, to placate their own discomfort by denying that anyone's life could be so terrible, so irrevocably lost that ending it would be better. I tried to talk to you on Rhodes because I needed to know how you felt if I needed to retain that option even if I never ended up taking that road — even if it would be just a failsafe. And you didn't seem to accept that notion, couldn't even discuss it rationally. When you came back, you no longer seemed to judge me or try to change my mind, and that cemented my decision. I believe a part of me had changed my mind even before Rhodes, but I couldn't let go of Dignitas until I knew that it wouldn't frighten you away if I ever felt that way again. I can't promise you that things will be much easier going forward from here; I don't think I'll ever stop struggling to accept the things I have to let others do to look after me… Some things are not going to get better or even stay the same in the long run. I couldn't give a chance for us without knowing how you'd react, whether you had considered these realities. I need to know you would help me make a decision if the time came, in a way that would be about the needs of the both of us and not just about you not wanting to lose me."

John had to clear his throat twice before he managed to scrape together some calmness. "I knew that the Switzerland option was important to you, but it took me some time to understand why. Understanding why you made such a plan was the first step, and it wasn't the same as accepting it. I won't apologise for not wanting to lose you, but if accepting that if things got really bad, you might raise the subject again down the road is what you need so that we can be together than hell, yes, absolutely, I have to accept it. I can accept it, I promise. It's the hardest thing I'll ever do, accepting that reality as a part of our lives but I have to try, because just as I told you on Rhodes: there is no other option for me than being with you," John promised.

That was the point, wasn't it, the whole point? That what they had was worth it all: worth the pain and the terrifying decisions they might have to make. And that demanding that Sherlock live just because John couldn't let go of him no matter how much he was suffering… that wasn't the kind of man John wanted to be.

"I find it hard, this sort of thing—" John started…

…just as Sherlock spoke again: "Forgive me, John. I am not good with expressing these things, sentiment—"

They both trailed out, shy smiles echoing one another's as the similarity of their statements registered.

"This is a fine case in point of not being very good at communicating," Sherlock continued, "so I thought it best to show you something, instead. Something with which Mycroft has helped me, a project I would not have had the courage to attempt without your insistence that I shouldn't give up on things just because they couldn't be precisely as before. John, you have given me my life back by showing me that only I could be the one to define how to reclaim it. And, it's not just the old Sherlock that you have brought back; you have given me so many new things, too. Things I never
"It doesn't just go one-way, this life getting better lark between us," John hurried to protest. "It never did." He would never say that getting shot was a good thing, but without it, he wouldn't be here. If tragedy hadn't struck them both, he wouldn't have just kissed someone he'd fallen hopelessly, irrevocably in love with. There was no point in counting up a tally in life because life wasn't that simple. It wasn't about counting losses and wins and seeing whether one ended up on the plus side. That's what even Ella had been talking about, at a time when John wasn't ready to hear it: about embracing the small things, about choosing to focus on the good, about redefining perspectives.

Sherlock had now made his way to a corner of the room. "The violin was the last piece of the puzzle, John. It can't be the same, just like so many things can't, but it doesn't have to be wholly lost." He beckoned John closer.

There was a new desk set up in that corner at the perfect height for Sherlock in his wheelchair, and a new set of loudspeakers had been attached to the walls on all four sides of the room. Sherlock reached out to a touchpad beside the keyboard and activated the monitor. The view that opened overwhelmed John in its complexity, but he could recognise that it had something to do with music.

"Dorico is the most advanced composing and notation software on the market," Sherlock explained proudly. "But that's not the best part. Every software like this requires what is known as a sample library. Quality ones are created in cooperation with the best musicians and instruments, recorded in high fidelity at some of the best studios. Any single instrument can be turned into its own sample library and played through the system. Creating a comprehensive library of a single instrument's sounds is time-consuming and admittedly expensive, but if it's the only way..." He pressed play again, and the room was flooded with the exquisite sound of that solo violin John had heard earlier, accompanied by a symphony orchestra.

"That's... That's your violin?" John asked slack-jawed.

"Yes, backed by a commercially available sample library created with the London Symphony Orchestra."

"But that's not... It's not you playing, is it?" John hated to rain on this particular parade, but he didn't quite yet understand the technical details.

"Approximately twenty per cent of the notes are mine. There were old recordings available from the music school I attended in my adolescence which Mycroft took to an Abbey Road Studios technician to be scrubbed and refined. Those served as the basis of the instrument sample library. The rest were created over the past week by a violinist by the name of Eos Chater."

He paused the recording again and took John's hand briefly to pull him closer, then pointed to a virtual keyboard at the top of the screen. "Try a note."

"Did always like pressing your buttons," John joked, head swimming with relief and amazement. He shifted the mouse to click on one of the white keys. A single violin note lit into bloom, held steady and finally began to waver with a delicate vibrato.

"Sherlock, this is... Amazing. Brilliant. I can't even..."

"I can adjust vibrato type, length and wavelength, adjust the type of note I want; I can compose directly on this software or create new arrangements for existing sheet music." He rambled on for a few minutes about some complicated-sounding technical details.
John listened only with half an ear, too busy staring at the wondrous creature who, moments before, he thought he’d lost forever. Instead of sitting on a plane to Switzerland, Sherlock was playing the violin for him.

And looking nervously at his lap as was his habit. "I was also wondering if you might consider…"

“Yes?” John asked. Anything, he thought. Just say it, and it's yours.

Sherlock drew in a sharp breath as though wanting to get the words out before the fear of them being rejected got too much. "I was wondering if you might consider continuing to help me with The Work on a permanent basis. I'm sure there would be time for medical work for you on the side as well, but not full-time. I believe I have narrowed down what adjustments need to be undertaken to make a full return to being a detective, and it all boils down to a singular fact: I find myself quite lost without my blogger."

“Yes!” John exclaimed without a second’s hesitation or consideration. “Yes, absolutely, yes, to all of it.” He didn't want just a working partnership, but this was a great start.

Sherlock’s smile was still tentative as he studied John’s expression; it seemed that not even such unambiguous words were enough to convince him that he’d just got what he wanted. Which meant that he wanted it terribly much.

“It won’t be easy,” Sherlock warned him.

"No, of course, it won't be, but…"

“…but we’ve managed so far, I think,” Sherlock concluded. “You, and me.”

And perhaps also Mycroft, who had now reappeared in the doorway. "There's tea in the drawing-room. And I believe Sophie has baked lemon scones."

He must have been eavesdropping on the conversation through the CCTV, John realised, but he could hardly blame the man. Mycroft wanted Sherlock to be happy and alive just as desperately as John did, and he must have sensed the gravity of the occasion, at least after getting yelled at and seeing John nearly suffer a coronary in shock.

"Starving!" Sherlock announced and made for the door adjoining the annexe to the main house.

Mycroft stepped aside with an astounded smile, the likes of which John had never before seen on the usually reserved man's features.

John burst out laughing in disbelief. "He’s composing music for his violin and he wants to have scones in the drawing-room. Fucking hell."

"Couldn't have said it better myself," Mycroft replied.
19TH JULY

The Consulting Detective Who Didn’t Quite Bounce Back but Returned to Work Anyway
(we need to talk about your terrible titles –SH)

Criminal classes of London better close down their operations: Sherlock Holmes is back in business. Those of you who followed the press before his temporary retreat from publicity may know that he suffered an accident which took some time afterwards to rearrange his life. (I despair over John's grammar, too, but do bear with us. –SH)

As you may have spotted from the press conference photos during the Brixton hostage thing, yes he’s in a wheelchair but don't let that fool you: he's still a menace who should never be underestimatwd. (Is that truly what you think of me, John? I'm touched. But you still desperately need a spellchecker as well as a grammar-oriented proof-reader. I'm not volunteering. –SH)

So I'm happy to announce that he’s available for work again. Private cases are also welcome. (Just make sure yours is not boring before you present it to us. Then again, I wouldn't trust the average potential customer to be able to make such an assessment. –SH). Our contact details are on the front page of both blogs, just message me or him and we'll assess your situation and get in touch. (Or ignore you. Or just solve the whole thing by email. –SH)

(Besides grammar and typos, we also need to discuss your safe password selection skills. –SH)

—

10 comments

That is such great news. I was beginning to suspect he'd died or something.

Jacob Sowersby 19 July 8:14

I still have no idea who you are.

John Watson 19 July 8:21

Are you like a detective's assistant now John? When do I get to meet him properly????

Harry Watson 19 July 11:00

Rumours of my demise are premature, indeed.

Sherlock Holmes 19 July 11:10

SHERLOCK! TOO SOON
**John Watson** 19 July 11:18

What do you mean?

**Sherlock Holmes** 19 July 11:22

John?

**Sherlock Holmes** 19 July 11:23

John?!

**Sherlock Holmes** 19 July 11:24

John; if I’ve said the wrong thing, I apologize. Publicly, I might add. That should account for something.

**Sherlock Holmes** 19 July 11:27

Stop hacking and editing my blog posts you nosy git and come have some tea

**John Watson** 19 July 11:30

The following weeks kept the two of them busy with the Met. An early morning banging on John's bedroom door turned out to be Sherlock, phone in hand, demanding that he put on trousers and deliver them both to London where a serial killer — 'it's a serial killer, John, so stop yammering on about breakfast and get ready!'— was eluding the police and had just dumped a third victim in plain sight. Once John learned the graphic details of what the culprit did to the bodies, he wouldn't have wanted breakfast, anyway. The case turned out to be more complicated than anything they'd worked on together before, and John could barely keep up with its twists and turns. His role was to help make sure nothing important escaped Sherlock’s notice when there was somewhere he couldn't get to with his chair: John Skyped, took photos, used the video chat on his phone. He crawled into skips, recorded every sordid detail of a drug den in Plaistow and even sniffed around three oddly coloured puddles that Sherlock insisted were vital to the investigation.

And he loved every minute of it.

Not only was the case fascinating as it was morbid, but he could now relax a bit and enjoy the ride since he and Sherlock had agreed on a game plan to make sure Sherlock's health was not compromised during the Work and that John wouldn't feel the need to distract him by fussing. It entailed setting up regular alarms on Sherlock's phone about his meds, and on John's phone about rest and food and checking for the risk of pressure sores and catheter malfunction. When that alarm rang, John was allowed to demand that they take a timeout but between those occasions, he was not
to hover or fret or ask about such things unless he had good reason to believe there was an acute problem — and not even then was he allowed to raise the issue in front of others. In return, Sherlock would take his meds, tell John — or text him — about potential AD symptoms, and acquiesce to eating and resting the minimum viable amount during cases. John promised to keep his day pack stocked with everything they might need on the go.

Knowing Sherlock might occasionally work with Lestrade without him, John had wanted to give the DI a crash course in the most pressing issues that might arise, but Sherlock had adamantly refused, insisting, instead, that they’d organise things so that he could always reach John if need be. He hadn't yet signed up with a locum agency, but whichever he picked would have to allow him only to accept shifts at very short notice when detective work was slow.

Now, it had delivered them to St Bartholomew's Hospital, where a sweet-looking young woman in a white coat went wide-eyed at the sight of Sherlock when they entered. Suddenly, she was wiping tears and despite Sherlock's acrobatic eye roll, delivered a crushing hug to the once-again consulting detective.

"Enough," Sherlock said after she'd clung to him for quite a long time, but there was no bark in his tone. If anything, it was tinted with tolerant exasperation.

“Right, right. I’m sorry. These are happy tears, I promise! I heard from Gr— Lestrade that you were back, and I’m just so glad to see you… It’s been so long that I thought…” She swiped at her brimming eyes, her face practically splitting with her sunny smile.

John couldn’t help but grin back. Sherlock sighed, but John could see a slight smile creeping onto his features before he arranged his chair beside the autopsy table.

"I'm Molly," the white-coated woman extended her hand eagerly in John’s direction. When he told her his name, recognition dawned on her features. "So you did call Lestrade after we spoke on the phone," she said.

"Yeah," John admitted, glancing sideways towards Sherlock who was preoccupied with sticking a gloved finger into the corpse's armpit and then sniffing his fingers since he couldn't reach far enough from his chair to put his nose there.

One of the detectives, a woman whom John recognised from their first case together — the one he’d dubbed *The Monozygotic Murderers* on his revived blog — was shaking her head in disbelief. "Still a damned freak," she muttered under her breath.

John blinked and spun around at such mean words. "What the hell—"

"That's Donovan," Molly whispered. "She's always called him that. Um, before."

Sherlock must have heard it but didn't even turn to look at her as he replied before John had a chance to give the woman a piece of his mind.

"And a very good morning to you, too, Sally, though the state of your knees and the bags under your eyes point to it having been an even better one for Anderson. Scrubbed his floors, did you?" Sherlock asked pointedly.

John glanced around, mildly disappointed that the forensic technician wasn’t present.

Spluttering, Sergeant Donovan threw up her hands in deepening disbelief and marched out, leaving the mortuary doors swinging like those of a saloon. John snickered, strolling over to where Sherlock was parked next to the lab table.
"Tired, John?" Sherlock asked, eyes now fixed on his fingers which were sliding along the hem of the victim's jacket, which he had just pulled out of an evidence bag. "The same detergent," he muttered.

John shook his head. "Why'd you ask?"

"You've shifted your weight three times in the last two minutes. Either your stance changed due to a desire to confront the good Sergeant Donovan or your leg is troubling you, though I can't fathom why it would. You've not limped visibly in weeks."

It had been seven weeks since John had been delivered the double shock of thinking he'd lost his best friend, but instead gaining… what? A lover? A partner? The semantics of the change to their relationship hadn’t yet been discussed, but that didn’t mean John hadn’t give it plenty of thought. What he did know was that an enormous weight had been lifted from his chest, only to be replaced with a giant question mark. His future, their future, together, was suddenly bursting with possibilities, and the thought made him feel equally thrilled and terrified.

John had kissed him. They had kissed. But had it just been John reacting to shock and relief, or something fully reciprocal? He couldn't have imagined all the lingering touches and looks in the days before the 1st of June; Switzerland hadn't given up its grip on the two of them yet. Now... it was all uncharted territory. Yes, John absolutely wanted to kiss him again, to do much more, in fact, but did Sherlock want that, too? And if not, was it because he wasn't drawn to John in that way, because sex and romance and all that wasn't his thing, or because there was still a lot he needed to process before he could explore his new life fully? Was John someone he could have fancied even before the accident? Could they negotiate the inevitable partial caregiver role John now had with dating? How did one even date someone they already lived with? Sherlock liked him and wanted him around, of that John was certain, but what did John have to offer? Sherlock certainly needed an assistant for his cases, but that didn't have to be John, did it? He hardly had the brains to be a consulting partner, but Sherlock kept insisting that his questions and suggestions and occasional medical opinions were invaluable to The Work. That was flattering, but John couldn't quite understand how his presence could provide much more than, well, necessary maintenance of what Sherlock referred to as his Transport. According to Mycroft, that's how he'd referred to his body before, and the term seemed morbidly apt now that he was forced to rely on a wheelchair to haul his corporeal form around. He seems to hate everything connected to it, so what about se——

"John? Why aren't you focusing? Are you... alright?"

John merely grunted, realising only then that he'd never heard the man ask such a thing. Sherlock rarely paid attention to how other people felt or what they thought — except for John. He ignored Lestrade and insulted the other Met team members to put them off from bothering him. John was the only one allowed comments and opinions, and occasionally, Sherlock deferred to him when he couldn't decide how to interact with people. 'A bit not good?' he'd asked John apprehensively after bringing an eyewitness to tears yesterday. 'Yeah', John had confirmed; 'maybe be a bit more restraint about the graphic details next time?'

Remembering that made John feel more confident. Maybe he really had a role beyond being
Sherlock's welfare agent, after all. He still felt more at ease with Sherlock at Musgrave Court since that's where their friendship had started and there he knew where he stood, how things worked. At crime scenes, at the Met and at other places where The Work took them, Sherlock mostly acted as though he was in his element, but there were moments when John could see he was caught off guard by his new limitations, and John was learning to sit on his proverbial hands not to try to smooth everything out, to cushion things for him, to help him too much. At the Court, they were practically joined at the hip, and John missed them when they were with other people, but he knew he had to let Sherlock draw the boundaries.

Lestrade strode in through the doors, attention instantly fixed on Sherlock who was now snapping off his gloves. Molly had already explained her post-mortem findings while John was lost in thought.

"We're done here," Sherlock announced. "I need a list of all ethnic food stores and laundromats in the areas where victims were found. They use the same deodorant, one that's not any brand commonly sold in Britain so it must be a small imported batch of a cheap brand. We need to cross-check those with laundromats selling single sachets of Power Wash."

"Right," Lestrade replied, looking a bit whiplashed. "If you say so."

"I did just say so, weren't you listening?"

John chuckled.

Six hours later, John raised a sly brow at Sherlock over the candle which had just been placed on their restaurant table.

"When you kicked Anderson, you didn't really have a spasm, did you?"

"That's classified," Sherlock replied deadpan.

"I wasn't exaggerating, then, when I called you a menace," John teased with a smirk.

"Candles were originally delivered to the tables of couples to prevent them from leaning over and doing anything indecent. Now, they serve the opposite purpose — to underline a romantic effect," Sherlock mused, gaze wandering from table to table. Nobody was paying them any attention, and he let out a breath, the lines of his shoulders relaxing.

John wasn't done recounting the funniest events of the past few days: "Oh and God, Greg's face when you rode in like the bloody cavalry!" He was in stitches, still enthralled by the case. What he really should have been was livid because of the risk Sherlock had taken, but instead, he felt drunk with adrenaline and damn if this hadn't been the best day in ages.

"Greg? Who's Greg?"

John's brows hitched up. "Half the time, I don't know if you're even serious. Gregory Lestrade; ring any bells?" John tore off a piece of the garlic naan just delivered and used it to sop up mint sauce from his samosa plate.

Sherlock looked like he hadn't understood a word. He hadn't ordered a starter, and his main had been delivered along with John's first course. "Nobody assumes anyone in a wheelchair could be
connected to the police or pose any kind of a threat. It was the perfect disguise for reconnaissance.

"The Met could have ended up in serious trouble if they'd let—" John suddenly realised the train wreck he was headed for with the rest of that sentence.

"—a disabled person get injured while unofficially assisting in a murder investigation?" Sherlock suggested, readjusting the fork in his fingers. He skewered a piece of lamb ghost bhuna with it. The rice was sticky enough that he was having little trouble with consuming any part of the meal on his plate, and he didn't seem self-conscious at all about eating in public.

It was the first time John had heard Sherlock use the D-word outside of trying to belittle Mycroft's attempts at looking after him.

"Yeah," he confirmed. "That."

"It is what it is," Sherlock said plainly. "And damn it if I won't use it as an asset whenever I can because it's the opposite the rest of the time."

John inhaled, catching Sherlock’s gaze across the table. His eyes were luminescent in the flickering candlelight, his cheeks rosy from residual adrenaline.

John licked his lips. "Yeah. Good on you." He smiled and the smile Sherlock returned, soft and private, settled something deep inside John's chest that felt bright and warm and solid.

"Leo wanted a word yesterday," Sherlock said, apropos of nothing.

John was used to his apropos. He loved his apropos. Life with Sherlock was anything but predictable, and John wouldn't have it any other way.

"Oh?"

"He was suggesting wrist splints for night use."

John bit his tongue before mentioning he'd discussed the subject with Leo as well. It seems that it had taken the PT some time to plan how to phrase this suggestion.

"What do you think?" Sherlock asked.

"Me? I'm not a PT."

"You're a trauma orthopaedist."

I was a trauma orthopaedist. "I'd trust Leo's expertise. He's really good."

John realised this was the first time Sherlock had initiated a discussion about anything regarding rehabilitation or assistive devices. And, he'd done so without sounding mortified or dismissive.

"I'd need your help with them. Most likely, I couldn't use my tablet while wearing them, so they'd have to be put on last thing before going to sleep." Sherlock sounded apprehensive and averted his gaze from John back to his plate.

John couldn't help being disappointed that Sherlock still assumed he'd have to ask for such help — that it would be a major inconvenience he'd have to be apologetic about. "No worries," John said, with the best imitation of Leo's accent he could manage.

This brought forth a relieved smile from Sherlock, and his eyes met John's again.
"You never have to ask," John told him. "If there's something you need, of course, we are going to do it."

"Are you still… Does Mycroft still pay you?"

"I have no idea; I haven't checked my account in some time. My contract with him ran out at six months."

Sherlock nodded.

John understood why he might have been asking these things: it seems he was seeking reassurance from John — which he shouldn't need any more — that he had stayed because he wanted to be with Sherlock. Reassurance that John didn't find it taxing to help when needed, that Sherlock wasn't a burden he was paid to shoulder. John knew these were all insecurities which would take some time to resolve after Sherlock had spent a year depressed and believing that he'd be better off gone. But it was still disheartening and made John antsy and desperate to find the perfect words right now to eradicate such notions from his partner's head for good.

"I'm not working right now," John said firmly. "We're not working right now; what we're doing is having a nice dinner. I'm not going to accept Mycroft's money anymore, and I'm going to talk to him about it to make sure we're on the same page." Should I have said 'we're having a nice date'? Probably.

"Shame. We could have split the fee," Sherlock joked but not very cheerily; he was studying John's expression carefully.

"I liked your suggestion about occasional locum medical work; I don't think I'll enjoy it as much as I enjoy The Work, so I want to put that first," John said conversationally. "I think I'm now as hooked on crime-solving as you."

"Still safer than a war zone."

John grinned. "Not so sure about that when you're chasing suspects with some mad, brilliant bastard with the poshest wheelchair in London and no sense of self-preservation."

An unadulterated smile lit Sherlock's features, and his laughter sounded relieved.

They finished their meals, stealing occasional, charged glances at each other. When the waiter brought the bill, he set it down between them, clearing his throat discreetly before disappearing. Sherlock instantly offered to pay and asked John to retrieve his wallet from the bag hanging on the back of his chair; Sherlock had explained that keeping it in his coat pocket left very little room between his thigh and the chair.

John stood up and circled the table so that he could do as requested. He then straightened his back, the leather wallet held in his fingers, but before he could set it on the table, Sherlock grabbed hold of his lapels and pulled him closer, whispering his name once before pressing their lips together. It was unexpected but not unwelcome and, after a brief moment of shock, John responded enthusiastically. His eyes closed; dropping the wallet on the table, he slipped his hand behind Sherlock's neck and pressed fully against the lush lips he had frequently stolen glances at throughout the entire evening. Sherlock tasted like the mints they'd just been given with their bill, and his lips were just as soft as John remembered. This kiss was different than the last one they'd shared; where that had been spurred by emotion and relief — a sudden desperate need to anchor himself in Sherlock’s corporeality — this was gentler but no less passionate. Just like the last one, it was slightly fumbling from Sherlock's part, as though he couldn't quite decide what to do and
how to tilt his head. John still let him take the lead, melting against his lips in pleased surrender.

When they finally drew back — John was careful not to be the first to do so — their eyes met. Sherlock’s expression was hard to read; he seemed hesitant, ready to dismiss what had just happened.

"It seemed like the right moment," he began to excuse himself, now preoccupied with the napkin he was fiddling with in his lap. "The signs were there, as far as I could tell: you licked your lips while looking at mine at least three times in the last—"

John shut him up by leaning in to press a short peck on the side of his mouth. "Yeah, I've absolutely wanted to do that since… well, longer than you probably realise. Longer than I probably realised. I did do that when you showed me your violin… thing, but after, I wasn't sure— it was a spur-of-the-moment thing because I was so happy, and I didn't know if that was something you'd—"

This didn't seem to help with the confusion that had gripped his companion. There appeared to be a question in Sherlock's eyes which he didn't voice: if you wanted it, and I wanted it, what's kept us at a distance for weeks?

"Perhaps I didn't project the sort of enthusiasm you were hoping for, that first time. It's just that I was somewhat surprised when it happened and lack the necessary experience to reciprocate skilfully."

"Don't say that; you were… great," John promised. Never in his life had he been forced to pick apart a kiss like this. Kisses were simple, spontaneous, easy. Trust Sherlock to overanalyse everything, he thought but without annoyance. In truth, he found the conscientious matter with which Sherlock approach all this quite endearing. It made John feel like he mattered a great deal and Sherlock wanted to get this right.

"Maybe I was waiting for the right time to get back to it, too," John told him. "Snogging you in the morgue would have been a bit… weird, even for us."

A sly brow slid up. "Why Doctor Watson, are you insinuating we're strange?"

"We did just spend four days running after a serial killer and having fun."

"It was fun, wasn't it?" Sherlock flashed a lopsided grin at him, his eyes sparkling.

"Can't think of anything better." John returned Sherlock’s grin as he gave him his wallet and walked back to his own chair on trembling legs, head swimming with a sense of promise and heart fluttering with nerves. Where do we go from here?

When they returned to Musgrave Court an hour and a half later, John was slightly disappointed to see Tallie waiting for them. The silence during the drive back to London had felt hopeful and exciting, but now there was a third wheel to their interactions.

She opened the garden door of the annexe to them, and Sherlock led the way inside.

"Oh, you didn’t have to wait up. We certainly could have... managed.” John told her, risking a glance at Sherlock, but the man was occupied with unbuttoning his coat, concentrating harder than seemed necessary on the task.

Tallie hesitated, her keen eyes darting between the two of them. "I can go if you'd like."
John was suddenly unsure; a line had definitely, definitively been crossed tonight but now, the old feelings of uncertainty, of not knowing what Sherlock wanted or expected, bobbed back to the surface. He had asked for John's help with his wrist splints, and in doing so, implied that John should be in the bedroom with him at night. Every night. The thought sent John's stomach fluttering, but he found himself paralysed with indecision. What should I do next? He didn't think he could bring himself to repeat the kiss under Tallie's watchful eyes.

Sherlock had gone into his bedroom, and Tallie must have taken John's silence for impartiality, so she followed him in, presumably to get him settled for bed. John lingered in the sitting room, at war with his own head until Tallie was done with her visit.

After she finally slipped out the back door with a quiet 'goodnight, John', he paced between the kitchen and the rec room, listening for any sound behind the bedroom door, desperate for any hint that Sherlock was awake and felt as restless and keen for more time together as John. Most evenings, he said goodnight to Sherlock before retiring to his own room but somehow, knocking on the door tonight felt like an intrusion, a step too hasty. John didn't want to rush this, and he didn't want to do anything that could be misinterpreted.

Misinterpreted as what? Would Sherlock want more than the kiss, and when? How would it work? Even though John had been with men before, he'd never been with someone in Sherlock's situation, and he knew Sherlock hadn't been in a relationship after his injury, possibly not even before it if Mrs Hudson was to be believed. The only certain thing was that they were both venturing into unknown territory. John was glad that it had been established that Sherlock had thought about some of the same stuff that swirled in John's head alone at bed at night, but it was probably best to take things slowly.

With a sigh, he went to his own bedroom, leaving the door wide open in case Sherlock needed something.

Two days later, John was ready to kick himself in the head. He should have known, should have guessed, should have known to expect that it wouldn't be easy to take more steps forward. He should have guessed that, since this was Sherlock, things wouldn't progress as they did with other people.

Their second kiss had found no repeat. Instead of a gradual merging of orbits, a drifting towards each other, it felt as though Sherlock was keeping his distance. Growing distant, even. John did his best to remind him that Sherlock had clearly signalled he wanted this, wanted the two of them. John needed to welcome anything and everything Sherlock was willing to give, as much or little as it would be.

He tried to offer reassurance not in words, but through actions. He casually slipped his fingers into dark curls as he walked past, rested a palm on a shoulder, invited Sherlock to join him on the sofa. He did everything he could possibly come up with to signal that it was all fine. Perfectly fine. More than fine. Except it clearly wasn't, because Sherlock kept giving him wary glances as though he'd suddenly turned into an alien creature, the behaviour of which he wasn't accustomed to at all.

One Friday afternoon, Sophie had left the annexe doors open to air the place out, so John slipped in through it without making much noise when he returned from seeing Ella. Sherlock was by the kitchen island, headphones on and tablet in his chair attachment, his back to John.

Feeling slightly guilty for inadvertently spying, John reached out a hand to alert Sherlock to his
presence… but halted his movements as he took in what was on the screen.

It was an article on the Reeve Foundation website titled 'Sex After Spinal Cord Injury'.

John skimmed it as Sherlock scrolled down. It explained erection types affected by different injury levels and detailed, among other things, ways to manage erectile dysfunction. John quickly made a mental note to read through it himself later; the text was well-written and rather encouraging but not deludedly optimistic.

Suddenly, the sleeve cover of the tablet was slammed down and, when John turned his head, he came face to face with Sherlock's furiously blazing eyes.

"Go away!" He snarled, reversing away from the kitchen island — and John.

"Sherlock, wait…" John called out but knew better than to follow the man into his bedroom.

He sighed as the electronic door closed, barricading Sherlock into his space and leaving John in the kitchen, feeling both regretful and curious. He'd begun to suspect Sherlock was having second thoughts about their kiss, even feared at his worst moments at night alone in his own bedroom that it had been a meaningless spur-of-the-moment thing borne out of triumph and the reckless high of the case. He knew better, but the lack of progress was becoming disheartening. John had tried to remind himself often that it was Sherlock's right to define the boundaries of their relationship, and that's why he was now so surprised to find the man researching ways in which those boundaries could be potentially expanded.

Could it be purely academic? Sherlock researched a lot of things, many of them wholly unrelated to cases and himself. Maybe he'd just latched on to some article he'd happened to see a link to without even sought out that information. *But why would he react so strongly if it was just random research? Why would he be this embarrassed if it wasn't about us?*

John leaned his palms on the kitchen island. He should probably apologise for breaching Sherlock’s privacy regardless of his motivations for exploring the topic. Texting him could be an option, but that seemed a bit cowardly.

Not allowing himself more time to think and spin himself up into a bundle of nerves, he knocked on the bedroom door. "Sherlock?"

"Go. AWAY!"

"I will, once you hear me out. That was private, what you were doing, and I'm sorry."

It occurred him to wonder — not for the first time — if and how Sherlock had sorted himself out after the accident. *His dexterity is probably enough for some sort of a wank, but does it… How does he…?* There was also the fact that Mycroft being able to spot a glimpse via CCTV accidentally would put off most people from even trying. John suddenly remembered, with perfect clarity, the way Sherlock had reacted to his erection in the bathtub: he had seemed almost shocked and oddly disengaged by the notion that it was his own. It seemed entirely possible that Sherlock hadn't had much of a sex drive at all after his injury. John understood that since he hadn't felt much of an urge after his own injury. Not only did he feel terribly unattractive with his scar and his limp, but the impulse to touch himself didn't really even occur to him until weeks after. In fact, the night of the bathtub incident had been the first time he'd tossed off after moving to Musgrave Hall. His few and far between wanks at the bedsit had been unsatisfactory, more a ritual rather than anything brought on by desire. Things had been so new and raw and up in the air then, and he'd felt conflicted about thinking of Sherlock as he took himself in hand, but now, he refused to see
anything problematic about it. Yes, he could understand Sherlock's hesitation and potentially low libido, but things had been better lately, hadn't they? He'd established he could get hard, and he'd kissed John. Wouldn't it be logical that they were headed somewhere further?

"Sherlock?" He tried again. "Just… just talk to me, please. Even if it's the very last thing you want to do right now." I can't bloody unsee what you were looking at, and I'm not leaving."

No reply.

"Yup. Going to stand here all day," John sing-songed. "You'll at least have to let Tallie enter in a couple of hours."

John was pretty certain he could now pick up the faint sound of the wheelchair. Soon enough, the door opened.

"What do you want?" Sherlock demanded.

"I think that's what I should be asking you."

"Nothing."

"In that case, you can stop being ridiculously embarrassed, can't you?"

"You think it's simple, don't you?" Sherlock accused. "It always has been, for you."

"Sex, you mean?"

Sherlock grunted in frustration and rolled his eyes. "Yes. Sex, John. You just go out and… have it."

"Not much of that going on lately, actually." John crossed his arms and leaned on the doorframe. "Not interested in looking for that, now." He hoped his tone would be a strong enough hint regarding the reason why he wasn't interested in casual hookups. Not anymore.

Sherlock snorted bitterly. "Obvious. Your current living arrangements are hardly… titillating in that respect."

"What are you talking about?"

"No reason to rub it in that living here is the reason you're not… getting any, as I believe the saying goes."

"Sherlock, I'm not interested in getting any from someone out there."

"Well, you'd better enjoy that celibacy, then, since you're hardly interested in me in that way, either."

"Says who? Not that article, at least." It really had been very encouraging about the possibilities of overcoming the complications brought on by a spinal injury.

"There was nothing in it about the obvious fact that someone who wasn't desirable for others to start with will hardly be turned into that by an injury."

John frowned, chin jutting forward in mock confusion. "Sorry, who are we talking about? Who wasn't desirable when?" He joked.

"Don't be obtuse. No reason to torment me about it."
"If people weren't queuing up at the door to have you, it probably had nothing to do with the way you look or sound or... You were probably just being a huge dick to them. Some people would have probably even been into that, but I guess your paths never converged."

"You're teasing me."

"A little bit, yeah," John grimaced. "You seriously have no idea about the way you looked before, in all those photos? About the way you look now?"

Sherlock spread his arms, and what now filled his expression was hurt. "I'm in a wheelchair, John."

"So? What's that got to do with anything?"

"Everything!"

"Nope."

"It puts you off."

"Have you actually asked me if it does?"

"It has to."

"Says who?" John asks in mock innocence. "Is there a bylaw?"

Clearly, humour wasn't the way to go about this. Sherlock growled with frustration, now, fingers fisting into his trousers above the knees. "You're not listening!"

"No, it's you who's not listening to me." John shifted forward, reaching one finger to tip up Sherlock's chin, but Sherlock stubbornly kept his gaze on his lap, so John let his hand drop. "There's nothing about you that puts me off. Nothing, as evidenced by the fact that I think about you a lot. And I swear to god; if you ask me in what way..."

"It puts me off!" Sherlock exclaimed. "It does, thinking about how you'll need to school yourself into ignoring things like the catheter."

"Why would we have to work so hard ignore it? It's just body stuff, Sherlock, and it's all fine! Sex isn't ever neat, it's messy and human, and that's part of what makes it so great. It's honest and yeah, a bit scary since you have to be so bare for it in lots of ways. Everyone gets nervous about showing all that to a partner, not just people in wheelchairs," he added.

"I don't like things that are messy or human, whatever that means."

"Then you don't have to have it, ever. I'm not expecting anything you don't want to do; I just don't want you to assume that we can't do any of it because I wouldn't want to." John's own head was spinning from the complexity of that fumbling explanation. "We're crap at this, this... um, talking I mean. Just... don't assume."

Sherlock drew a sharp breath. "I didn't mean that I don't want any of it." He flicked his eyes up to John's face briefly before dropping them back down to his lap.

"I was beginning to think you'd changed your mind about us," John admitted. "That you just wanted to be friends. And that would be fine. Alright, I would have been disappointed, but it would have to be fine."

"As I have said, I lack the practical knowledge in this area. What I have done with others has never
been very reciprocal. Or pleasant. And that's when I could still—" Sherlock shrugged as though shaking off unpleasant memories. "Before the accident, sex was a transaction. A currency. There was never anyone with whom I really wanted to have it. It filled a purpose, that's all."

"But now you're curious, at least?" I can work with that, John decided. I really want to work with that. The idea that he was the first person that Sherlock had ever thought of in this way was mind-boggling.

"It's just... If you're just saying these things, if you're just being polite, then stop, and we can forget about it," Sherlock said, his tone resigned.

John stepped closer, leaned on his haunches, placed his palms on the hand rests of the chair. "Listen to me, you idiot. I couldn't forget about any of it even if I tried." Say it. He needs to hear it. I want it. God, you have no idea how much. I want that with you, whatever it is, however far you want to go. You're not just this thing." He tapped the chair's hand rests to emphasize his point. "I want you, and I want there to be an us, in every meaning of the word because it's you. It's always you, Sherlock, you've kept me right when I've hesitated. I won't hesitate now. I want you, and you can have me, all of me, if that's what you want, too."

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When Sherlock decided on something, latched on to an idea, there was no stopping him. Whether it was a juicy murder, a piece of data connected to some random thing he was suddenly researching or sex, the man was made of unflappable determination.

Which is why John shouldn't have been surprised when, over tea, Sherlock informed Tallie that he required her assistance for sex. Before she'd arrived that morning, he'd stated that while John could have helped him with preparations, he wanted to have some hope of a suitable mood by asking Tallie, instead. Once John had stopped cackling with his cheeks slightly tinted with embarrassment and Tallie had mopped up the mouthful of tea she'd sprayed on the kitchen island, she informed Sherlock that her duties didn't include that sort of thing and that she couldn't become romantically involved with her patients.

"Who says it's you I'd be having it with?" Sherlock rudely corrected.

Tallie did a double-take, then burst out laughing. "Yeah, I did wonder for a moment there what the hell had happened to put you off him," she chuckled, nodding towards John. "Air's been thick as pea soup around here lately with the two of you sharing all those looks."

"What looks?" Sherlock demanded indignantly. "John, what looks?"
A Study in Stimulation

Chapter Notes

Though I am but a prim and proper, quaint Victorian of a LADY... I am pleased to give you the chapter that has been lovingly referred to as "sex boys have sex" (see also, soft idiots sexing, chapter twenty-sex, etc. We are very mature adults).

Nothin' else to say.

Sexy sad boys, comin' atcha (quite literally, hell yeahhh).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A sex date.

John sat on his bed, meditating on the absurdity of the situation. For all intents and purposes, he had a sex date. I have a booty call with Sherlock Holmes, he thought incredulously, stifling a slightly hysterical giggle. No, he corrected himself a moment later, sobering up: this is too important to degrade with humour, because he felt a need to take responsibility for how things would go. It was his most devout wish that tonight would go well enough that it would be a regular part of his life from now on, enjoying this with Sherlock.

He had tried his very best to prepare, but information sources regarding practicalities tended to be very focused on the don'ts instead of the do's, and since Sherlock was hardly Joe Bloggs in anything else, so why would he be average or standard or… predictable when it came to sex? Every person was different, of course — there could be big differences even between people with the same injury level in what functions their bodies had preserved. John knew that Sherlock was outstandingly sensitive to touch where he could feel it, which seemed promising. John had learned that many tetraplegics developed new erogenous zones outside the usual ones — their bodies compensated for the loss of sensation in the paralysed areas. John had been amused to find an online article about a man named Rafe Biggs who had developed such an area on his thumb, and now his girlfriend could bring him to orgasm by sucking on it. Another article explained the phenomenon through a term called neural plasticity — as was often seen after cerebral infarctions, the brain could train itself to compensate for lost pathways. John had bookmarked it, feeling a slight thrill at the idea of potential experimentation regarding this phenomenon. Sherlock would like that, he had thought with a smile.

Once he'd exhausted every NHS source and scientific journal he could find, John had moved on to reading blogs and discussion boards, finding a wealth of information from both individuals with disabilities and their sexual partners alike. He bookmarked several blogs run by men who didn't shy away from embarrassing or intimate topics regarding their lives after a spinal injury. He found that he appreciated their honest and straightforward approach. It's just body stuff. Nothing to be ashamed of.

Last night, John had discovered — much to his horror — that for some able-bodied people, having sex with a paralysed person was a kink. He'd quickly clicked out of that site, his eyes flitting guiltily over to Sherlock’s sleeping form, covered neatly to his waist in just a sheet. John was next to him, still clothed, lingering behind to enjoy the quiet closeness before heading to his own bedroom. Watching Sherlock’s chest rise and fall steadily John shook his head, disgusted and
incensed at the notion that anyone would fetishise and exploit disabled persons for their own sexual fulfilment. He was attracted to Sherlock because Sherlock was well... him. His attraction had nothing to do with Sherlock’s disability and everything to do with the fact that he was gorgeous and funny and brilliant and for some yet-unfathomable-reason... attracted to John as well.

Thankfully, his next online discovery was more encouraging: the story of a young, gay tetraplegic man who had fulfilled his dream of being a porn star and of bringing attention to the fact that people like him could not just have, but very much enjoy sex. Thinking that was a positive story to end the evening on, John had his phone away and leaned over the bed to press a kiss to Sherlock’s forehead before tiptoeing through the annexe to his bed. They had yet to share a bed properly, at John’s insistence. He knew that sleeping together — in its euphemistic form — could well be a big, important thing to Sherlock. John also knew that he’d be awfully tempted to hurry things along if he found himself under the covers with a gorgeous, half-naked man. He didn’t want to cross any boundaries before they’d had the chance to do it the “right way” first. Whatever that was. All in all, John believed he was now armed with enough knowledge about tetraplegia and sex in general, but there really was no online guidebook, informational leaflet or bit of porn that could tell him much about what sex with Sherlock would be like.

*What did he like... before?* John wondered half an hour later as he stepped out of the shower, so lost in thought that he couldn’t remember if he’d actually had a wash. There were so many questions, some of which John knew could only be answered through practical experimentation. He hoped that Sherlock’s scientific curiosity would keep him from getting disappointed and apprehensive if their experimentation sometimes felt too practical, or if they ran into difficulties. *Can he come? How? Can he ejaculate, or will whatever might happen be different from the usual combination of that and an orgasm?* John thought that Sherlock himself might not even knew the answer to that. John didn’t know for certain, but it seemed as though very few thoughts had been spared for that aspect of his life since his accident. John also wondered if they might need toys, or other special equipment in order for Sherlock to fully enjoy the experience. Many of the articles John had read said that such extra stimulation was often necessary. There was definitely risk of chafing; John would have to be the one to keep an eye on sufficient lubrication, even just for a handjob. His greatest worry, however, was autonomic dysreflexia. Such powerful neural forces were at work during arousal and orgasm that they might bring on something like arrhythmias or even a full-on AD episode. Then again, some tetraplegics' blogs had said that sex could actually help with spasticity. John wasn’t surprised by this — *everyone feels pretty great after a good shag, don’t they?*

The last time John had had sex was during the last furlough of his final Afghanistan deployment; he’d hooked up with a woman he’d met at a bar in Soho. The sex had been alright, nothing particularly memorable. John hadn’t been with a bloke in years, and most of those encounters had been brief and secretive, anyway. Nothing romantic or drawn-out, nothing borne out of a friendship turned into love. *That's why the stakes are so high with Sherlock.* John cared about Sherlock more than he ever had about anyone. He loved him. John knew he would have been nervous to start something like this even with an able-bodied Sherlock Holmes but now, there were so many other factors to consider, so many ways this could go wrong before it ever really started. Even the ghost of Switzerland still lingered: *fuck this up, and he might change his mind.* Sex and relationships hadn’t seemed like the deciding factor, but they certainly couldn't be insignificant, could they?

John knew he was probably making this too complicated, thinking too much. He chuckled. *Nothing new there.* He knew that no matter how carefully they planned, he could never anticipate everything that could happen, everything that could go wrong, just like in every aspect of their life. Then again, Sherlock’s unpredictability was one of the things John loved about him, especially
since its re-emergence was a clear sign that bits and pieces of the Sherlock he'd been before the accident were breaking through to the surface.

*It's just us, John told himself. Nothing to be afraid of.*

He went to the mirror and splashed on a tiny bit of aftershave. He'd brushed his teeth twice already. John felt a little thrill knowing he wasn't the only one getting ready for the evening. He knew Sherlock was also preparing, but he had help in the form of Tallie. John chuckled at the image of him acting like a member of royalty being primmed up and clothed — or perhaps de-clothed — by a footman.

Just as John was about to leave his room, there was a polite knock on the door. Expecting Tallie, his eyes were aimed high when he opened it, and he was momentarily confused when he heard a throat being cleared much lower.

Sherlock was looking at him expectantly, hands primly arranged on his lap. He was barefoot, wearing the blue dressing gown John had once left out for him, the tips of his curls looking slightly damp, presumably from a quick shower. John wondered if he had anything on beneath the sheer garment. He felt a familiar need stir as he fervently hoped not.

"Sherlock? Oh— I thought we'd be in your bedroom." No words had been exchanged on the subject, so it had been purely conjecture.

"I'd prefer here. If you don't mind."

When Sherlock got polite it meant that there was a crisis, or that he was just generally very apprehensive and assumed he had no idea how to function in a situation and that everyone could see it.

John glanced over his shoulder. His bedroom was not in very neat order at the moment, but would it matter? At least Sophie had been by with a hoover and fresh sheets that morning — a lucky coincidence. He glanced at his watch. Eight o'clock is what they'd agreed on, and it was now one minute past.

Tallie walked into John's visual field then, pausing behind Sherlock to flash John a sunny smile, and to rest a hand briefly on Sherlock's shoulder. She gave it a squeeze and then, without a word, disappeared out the door to the main house.

John was glad for the silence; he didn't think he could have handled some cheeky 'good luck!' or any other well-meaning encouragement right now, even from her. He couldn't help but wonder what words had been exchanged behind the closed door of Sherlock's bedroom during the last hour.

"Here's fine," John told Sherlock. "Assuming you don't mind a bit of laundry lying around."

Sherlock shook his head, a soft smile on his face. "I don't mind. No surveillance," he pointed out, glancing towards the ceiling.

"Right, yeah," John replied sheepishly, deciding to talk to Mycroft about that first thing. *The kitchen camera can probably pick up on some sound even from behind the door.* His jaw set with determination, he marched into the kitchen, climbed on a chair and unplugged the damned thing. *No need for any of this now, is there?*

Sherlock was watching John with approval and mild amusement as he returned to the bedroom with a smirk.
"No need for big brother tonight. Now... where were we?" John asked, circling Sherlock’s chair, taking in the sight before him.

Between the open folds of the dressing gown, John could see a slice of Sherlock’s chest: skin pale once again, having lost its sun-kissed glow from Greece, a sparse thatch of auburn chest hair, a sprinkling of moles and freckles. It was a familiar sight, but in context — with the enticing thought of what lay hidden beneath the silk folds pooling around Sherlock’s waist, and combined with the knowledge of what they were about to do — it made John’s mouth water. He licked his lips and stepped carefully towards the vee of Sherlock’s legs, a surge of affection rushing through him as Sherlock tilted his head back to meet his gaze. His front teeth were pressed into his lower lip — God, that mouth — his eyes were wide, and his brows were raised expectantly. He looked as nervous as John felt.

"Hi", John breathed, and bent in for a kiss. He was practically dizzy with desire and love for this man — this incredible, complex, gorgeous, breath-taking man — and the touch of lips pushed aside all of his doubts about how to manage this. This was Sherlock. John would simply love him as he always had, and let that love spill out into his actions.

The kiss was chaste, simply a firm press of lips as a greeting, a confirmation, a gesture which separated them from the rest of the world. They were doing this, and they were doing it together.

"Hello," replied a baritone even deeper than usual. Sherlock’s eyes had opened, and his mouth was now tipping into an easy, lopsided smile.

John didn’t pull away but raised his hands to caress Sherlock’s cheeks, thumbs rubbing gently over delicate cheekbones. John’s eyes lifted to meet Sherlock’s and the air shifted between them, sparking his nerves and making his blood sing with anticipation. John’s thumbs drifted down to brush against the perfect dip of Sherlock’s top lip as his partner’s eyes drifted closed again. John murmured his name, unable to stand the thought of those lips being apart from his any longer. His hands slid back into lush curls, still damp at the roots as he slotted their mouths together, startling when a quiet groan sounded from deep in his throat. A bit embarrassed, and worried that he was going too fast, John pulled back, but Sherlock surged forward, their tongues tangling messily and immediately. John pressed harder against him, wanting to be closer, taste deeper, pour more of himself into every touch, every kiss. His fingers tightened reflexively, tugging at silky strands of hair to get a better angle, but Sherlock abruptly retreated, breathing hard, harder than John thought he should be. They hadn’t been going at it that frantically, had they?

Alarmed, John stepped back, gaze quickly skimming Sherlock from head to toe. His eyes were wide, head tipped back, chest heaving. His fingers were bunched tightly in the fabric of his dressing gown, pulling it away to expose even more alabaster skin. With maximum effort, John dragged his eyes from the alluring patch of coarse hair disappearing into silky secret folds, his concern winning out over arousal for the moment.

"Alright?"

Sherlock nodded slowly. "More than alright." His eyes dropped to his lap.

John’s gaze followed and was startled to see a very obvious tent in the shiny, blue fabric. He dragged his eyes back up to Sherlock’s lips, glistening and swollen from where they'd been so enthusiastically crushed against John's.

Soon, those lips parted around a single word: "More."

Sherlock’s voice was husky with arousal and John needed to taste more of it. He wound his fingers
back into Sherlock’s hair and pulled, feeling the answering groan shoot straight to his cock.

"The bed, John. Please."

John stepped back as Sherlock moved towards the bed. A quick glance out the open door reassured him that Tallie really had gone, but John shut the bedroom door anyway, inhaling deeply through his nose as he glanced across the room. Sherlock had his head tipped back against the headrest of his chair, watching as John wrestled internally with the lights situation: should I turn them off to set the mood? Was there a risk that it would give the very wrong message that he didn’t want — desperately! — to see every inch of Sherlock’s lovely body? He bit his lip, his hand hovering over the switch until Sherlock moved over to the bedside table and flicked on the lamp. Why didn’t I think of that?

"John…” Sherlock’s voice had an edge to it, a command to get moving.

"Right. Yes, coming."

He hurried over to Sherlock’s side and knelt down to fold the footrests out of the way.

"Pun intended, John?” Sherlock chuckled.

John rolled his eyes with a grin. Sherlock leaned forward in his chair and reached out his arms towards John’s neck which momentarily confused him; that wasn’t how the transfer should be done. He did lean closer to wrap his own around Sherlock’s shoulders for a quiet moment. The hug was chaste, but perhaps necessary — did Sherlock need such a thing for some kind of reassurance?

"That is rather the point, isn’t it?” John growled playfully in Sherlock’s ear after stepping back. Sherlock flashed a weary smile at the joke, but his eyes flicked down, the smile soon retreating from his features and turning into resignation.

"John… In the spirit of disclosure, before we proceed, I think you should know I’ve taken a Viagra. I did the research, and it seemed unlikely I could manage without. I had an appointment with a urologist two days ago; Tallie took me."

John knew better than to ask why Sherlock hadn’t told him before. But why was he telling him now? The appointment explained why Sherlock had insisted that they schedule this bedroom meeting several days from that first conversation about sex. John had just thought he needed time, and John certainly hadn’t complained. In the interim, they had had plenty of steamy make-out sessions on the couch, and even once — memorably — on Sherlock’s bed, before John had rolled over and excused himself to a cold shower.

"I debated whether to tell you at all. I didn’t want you to think I took it because I wasn’t sufficiently motivated by your presence."

John's heart clenched and he leaned down to embrace Sherlock again. "I didn't doubt that before, and I don't doubt it now. Don't worry so much. It's fine, Sherlock, it's all fine," he murmured into his neck, peppering each word with tiny kisses. "I've read stuff, too, so I knew it might be needed, and maybe we can experiment without it later, yeah? Nice to have a bit of… extra confidence, at first.” He suggested, pushing his palms against Sherlock's armrests to straighten up to his full height once more.

He grasped the fabric straps beneath Sherlock’s thighs and smiled, eager to get on with their evening, now that —hopefully— all the talking bits were out of the way. "Ready?"
"Wait."

John froze, tilting his head to see Sherlock’s face.

"What? What’d I do? Am I hurting you?" John bent again at the waist, arranging Sherlock against the seat once more, making sure the straps weren’t twisted.

Sherlock removed his hands from where he’d placed them on John's hips and gestured to his own chest, indicating the dressing gown. "Help me get this off? Probably easier here than once I’m lying on it?"


Sherlock was a step ahead of him, already slipping the silky fabric from his shoulders and pulling out his left arm. The rest was stuck underneath his legs and his bottom — no underwear, John confirmed with delight — but with a bit of tugging, it came free. John hung it from the back of the chair.

"I suppose I should… or…?" He gestured to himself, feeling suddenly foolishly overdressed in his trousers and shirt.

Sherlock nodded, biting his lip. He flicked his hand impatiently. "Yes. Hurry."

"We're not really on a schedule here, are we?" John joked. With a grin, he made quick work of his clothes, folding them and walking over to set them on the seat of a chair. He turned to the bed, trying not to feel awkward and exposed. He could feel Sherlock’s eyes on him as he pulled back the duvet and piled all the pillows into one mound near the headboard.

"Right," John said as he turned back to Sherlock, hunching over for a quick kiss. Sherlock leaned slightly forward in anticipation of John pulling him forward so that he'd be at the edge of the seat. In one swift movement, John straightened and slid him onto the bed. He adjusted the pillows now behind Sherlock's head, shoulders and upper back until long fingers curled around his wrist.

"John. Stop fussing."

Inhaling and nodding, John finally allowed himself a nice long look at Sherlock, sprawled on the bed, all lean limbs and creamy skin. Gorgeous. John made sure to let his face show every ounce of appreciation. Sherlock was looking at him, his gaze burning with intensity.

Climbing onto the bed, John laid down on his side, hesitating for a moment before letting his hand settle against the flat expanse of Sherlock’s stomach. Sherlock glanced down towards their toes, and John followed his gaze, studying the sight of their very hard cocks close to one another but not quite making contact. John saw — and felt — his own twitch in anticipation. From that angle John couldn't make much comparison about size or lengths and he didn't care; as far as he was concerned, Sherlock was perfect, and John couldn't wait to touch and taste and hold and—

"That's the timeframe issue we do have, besides the fact that my erection might not be as sustainable that I might hope. I decided to take it out," Sherlock explained conversationally, gesturing with one hand.

John tipped his head to give him a quizzical look. He felt as though all his blood had migrated south, only the bare minimum left for brain function. "It?"

Sherlock touched the tip of his very erect penis gingerly with one finger and John felt dizzy with
"Catheter. Tallie wanted to leave it, tape it to my thigh but I thought…" Sherlock cleared his throat. "I've limited my fluid intake today, which should give us some time."

John opened his mouth to assure him that he didn't have to worry about any of that, and who was fussing now?

But Sherlock wasn't finished. "I thought it'd be better if I removed it temporarily. At least for the first time. So that it wouldn't be there as a constant reminder. Tallie's been helping me practice."

Sherlock looked a bit shy suddenly, so John shifted onto one elbow to kiss him. He couldn't believe they had been arranging pillows and talking about catheters and not kissing or touching for this long. Unacceptable.

John was determined to end this conversation on a positive note so they could get on with it. "You managed to take it out yourself? That's amazing. Well done." He breathed the praise into the skin on Sherlock's jaw, punctuating each sentence with a press of his lips. Sherlock rolled his eyes, but he was smiling. John kissed across his cheekbone, featherlight, until he reached his ear.

"I'll still need help re-inserting it but — ohhh." John had pulled Sherlock’s earlobe into his mouth and was experimentally nibbling on it with his front teeth. He let his tongue drift out and pressed it into the soft space behind his ear, eliciting another breathy moan. Sherlock’s eyelids slipped nearly closed, his eyes quicksilver in the dim light.

"You’ll have to talk me through this," John whispered, "Tell me what you want to do. What feels good, Love?"

He could feel the pull of Sherlock’s frown ripple across his skin. John smiled. Not a fan of endearments, then.

"Love? " Sherlock’s voice cracked on the word as John ran his tongue along the outer ridge of his ear.

"Just sort of slipped out."

"Can’t say I… oh, that’s… good." Sherlock tilted his head away from John to give him better access. "Can’t say I’ve ever given it… m-m-much thought. But it’s never been… ahhhh… relevant. But perhaps… just Sherlock. For now."

John pulled back and smiled at Sherlock’s whimper of protest.

"You’ll never be just anything."

John shifted so his weight was still firmly on the bed, but he could continue his ministrations on the other ear. Sherlock tipped his head to the side, but he seemed distracted now and John could see his hands moving in his peripheral vision. Dragging his lips along the side of Sherlock’s neck, he shifted so he could see what Sherlock was doing. One was resting on his stomach, but the other had drifted lower and was wrapped loosely around his cock, dusky red and still very erect. Sherlock’s gaze was fixed on it as though he was keeping a close eye that it was still doing what it was supposed to.

When he realised John's attention was now focused on the same, Sherlock's hand stilled as though caught doing something wrong. John smiled against his skin, grazing his teeth against Sherlock’s collarbone and nipping playfully. "Give you a hand with that?" He kept his voice low, wanting to
sound like he was offering arousing foreplay instead of clinical help.

Sherlock hesitated for a moment before nodding, so John wrapped his fingers around his noticeable length and tried not to moan in delight at the feel of the soft, smooth, warm skin. Sherlock's hand crept up to his cheek as though looking for more connection to ground himself. He was studying John's expression carefully, expectantly, as he slowly let his fingers trace the contours of John's upper lip. John turned his head slightly, kissing his palm as he let his other hand drift down the gentle curves of Sherlock's pectorals. His hand was still wrapped around Sherlock's cock, holding on firmly rather than stroking, and John decided that it should be getting more attention. Sherlock was being very quiet, though, and looking down at his hand with an expression that was less lustful than it was apprehensive. As keen as John was to advance things, his need to make sure Sherlock was alright took over; he couldn't help but fear that discomfort or disappointment were suddenly muddying the waters.

"How does it — this… feel?" John asked, wanting to bite his tongue. He'd always prided himself on being a considerate lover, and he was certainly not going to stop now, but neither of them seemed to have the right words to talk about this. It had been easier to talk about when fully clothed and a little bit confrontational.

Sherlock's brows descended, forming that V that crunched up his nose and gathered his laugh lines into an expression of focus of almost comedic proportions. "I don't know. Warm. Not…" He slid his hand down from his stomach to his thigh, where the muscles rested quite relaxed, lax even, on the bed. "Seems to have helped with the—."

He didn't finish the sentence, and John wondered if it was because he didn't want to remind John of such unsexy words like spasms. Not exactly the stuff of romance, are they? Yet, they couldn't be shoved out the door. They just were, and John didn't want those things to come between them. He had been honest when he'd told Sherlock that it was just body stuff and it doesn't put me off. He suddenly realised that, apart from touching Sherlock's cock, he'd been steering clear of the areas in which he knew sensation was absent. He'd simply thought it best to focus on those with normal feeling, but could that be giving the wrong signal — that he didn't want to touch those other areas? He quickly remedied this by sliding his hand from the hard prick to Sherlock's thigh and giving it a caress. He stroked his hand up to Sherlock's hip, then took Sherlock's hand, still resting on his thigh, into his own. He could still sense the man's hesitation in surveying the results of his ministrations; maybe his eyes were now pinched shut tightly so that he could categorise all the sensations — or lack thereof.

"The only thing stiff right now…" John drawled with a smile. "…is this," he finished, gently prying Sherlock's palm open and curling their hands together to wrap around Sherlock's cock. "Perfect," John told him, stroking his thumb down a softer ridge on the side. "Never seen a more gorgeous thing," he hinted, hoping Sherlock would open his eyes to watch. Sherlock's upper body was propped up on pillows so that he wouldn't have to crane his neck to see what was going on down low.

"God, I want you," John told him with conviction. "Wanted you months ago, when I still thought it would have been really unprofessional to do anything about it."

Sherlock's eyes cracked open, first settling on John's face. Whatever he read there seemed to give him some confidence, and he shifted his gaze down finally. His fingers curled around the bottom of his shaft, and John moved his own slightly higher, brushing the tip of his thumb across the frenulum in the process.

"It feels… I can't really feel your fingers, but there's a pressure. I know I want… things, and I want
"Just tell me what you want me to do," John encouraged. He didn't want to admit how blind he was sailing — how completely inexperienced they both were in this strange landscape of arousal with very little physical feedback as to taking it further. John had delivered his fair share of handjobs during which he couldn't know precisely how the other person had experienced what he had done, but nothing he'd learned during those seemed to be useful, now.

"I don't know." Sherlock's tone was frustrated. "I don't want it to be just you doing things."

"Yeah, no, of course not," John rushed to assure him. He'd said the wrong thing, again — insinuated that the way this would go was that Sherlock would just lie back and be the subject of whatever John decided was the best course of action.

Sherlock swallowed. "I haven't... Not since the accident." He leaned his head back deeper into the pillows with an exhalation. He loosened his grip around his cock, let his hand drop next to his thigh.

*Don't let him slip away,* John chided himself. "Then we just improvise. You can just watch what I'm doing if you want, I liked that. We don't need to be both doing stuff; just... it's good if you want to focus on finding out what works."

John slid his hand lower, now, cupping Sherlock balls and relishing the feel of the skin retracting, of a tightness pulling them upwards as he ever so gently enclosed them inside his fingers. Sherlock shifted his gaze back and began observing John's actions with rapt interest. John wondered if every bit of visual, every sensation was being categorised for future reference. Perhaps emboldened by what he was seeing, Sherlock's hand now found John's cock, proudly jutting up against his lower stomach.

It had been difficult for John to refrain from touching himself; the sight of Sherlock like this, responding to him, flushed and wanting, was doing more than a solitary hand ever could have. He groaned as Sherlock's hand — larger than his, with long, lithe fingers — curled around the middle of his shaft. Sherlock's dexterity was plenty enough for a gentle stroke up which conscientiously brought John's foreskin as far as possible over the tip without too much stretch. The specificity of the technique made John wonder if this was something Sherlock liked — *had once liked* — too? Did technique matter, now, or would any touch elicit the same response? John made a decision never to make it look like he wasn't giving Sherlock the same attention, the same detail, the same variety he would give himself.

Sherlock's hand picked up speed, and John squeezed a bit of lube into his own hand, sliding his fingers between Sherlock's on his own cock. As Sherlock spread his fingers wider to make room, the friction lessened to just the perfect level, and John couldn't help but let out a long groan.

Sherlock's eyes were flitting between what John was doing to him and what his own hand was up to. John worried about having to split concentration like that, and thankfully, an idea emerged. He turned completely to his side again, facing Sherlock. Scooting closer, he slid a hand around Sherlock's neck, placed another on a delicate hip and, pulling Sherlock close, managed to turn him to his side as well. Keeping a steadying hand on the pale skin covering his hipbone, John sat up briefly to shove a few pillows behind Sherlock's back. Flopping backwards would put a serious damper on what he had in mind.

Now, their cocks were pressed close, lined up, and Sherlock's hand was still curled around John's almost possessively. John shoved his lower hand back under Sherlock's neck to keep him in place and then gently pried Sherlock's fingers off. Sherlock was looking down again, peeking past what
John was doing. He must have been checking if they were both still hard.

"Nothing to worry about there," John whispered. He rearranged their hands so that both their cocks were pressed together, encircled by their fingers. "Together, yeah?"

It took some time to find a good rhythm and a grip that spread evenly around both of them. It helped that Sherlock had such long fingers; the best position seemed to be to have John's hand at the base, and his own up top since Sherlock could still reach around their full girths. A bit more lube to make up for what had already cooled and dried on Sherlock's skin, and John soon felt his own climax approach. The last thing he wanted was to leave Sherlock in the dust, so he gritted his teeth and resisted the intense urge to thrust up into their joined hands. Sherlock's gaze was intently focused on what they were doing and being watched like that, being the subject of such attention, did things to John. A surge of affection overcame him, transforming into desperation to do just the right thing, to be the one to prove to Sherlock that they could do this, that it could be a part of their life. Everyone had hang-ups and limitations; nobody's body was the same as their partners. So what if they had to get more creative than other couples? He leaned in to give Sherlock a kiss, trying to pour everything he was feeling into it.

John let his lips linger against Sherlock’s, soft and warm and pliant beneath his. Sherlock’s hand drifted up again and rested on John’s cheek. John had an idea suddenly. Pulling away from Sherlock’s delicious mouth, he leant forward to kiss each finger in turn before opening his mouth and sliding Sherlock’s entire middle finger in, sucking gently. Sherlock’s breath hitched, then remained suspended, his eyes fixed on John's mouth. When John swirled his tongue around the fleshy pad of his middle fingertip, imagining that he could feel every whorl and ridge that made up the most basic mark of Sherlock’s individuality, he let out all of his breath at once, the hint of vocalisation making John’s cock throb in their joined hands. Thinking about fingerprints during sex. Sherlock would be proud.

With a spark of amusement, John realised he no longer had to keep such strange thoughts to himself. He pulled Sherlock’s finger out of his mouth with a pop, not failing to notice the way Sherlock’s pupils had dilated so much they nearly eclipsed his irises. With a wicked grin, John leaned in and ghosted his lips over Sherlock’s, whispering, “Did you know that John Dillinger burned off his own fingerprints with acid?”

“Of course I di—” With a growl, Sherlock cut himself off, opting instead to slide his fingers into John's hair and pull him close, opening his mouth immediately to tangle their tongues roughly together.

You're a quick study, John thought with a smirk. He pulled away to catch his breath, tilting his head to trail more small kisses down the side of Sherlock’s long neck, thrilling at the deep-throated moan it elicited, finally resting them gently where he could feel a pulse throbbing hard and fast close to his collarbone. As he let both of them catch their breath, he tried to push away all of his worry, tried not to think about whether that could be a sign of a sympathetic nervous system going haywire — a wildfire spreading with no one to control it. He was asking Sherlock to trust him, and to keep things even, he would need to return the favour and believe that Sherlock would tell him if anything felt wrong.

"John, I— I need…." Sherlock's baritone dipped down into a gravelly, deep rumble that seemed to come from very deep in his chest. The blotchy flush across his skin had deepened and spread onto his belly, sweat made his arms glisten in the dim lighting in the room.

"Anything," John told him breathlessly. "Just tell me."

"I don’t know." Sherlock replied, frustration tinting his tone. "This is good; that was really
good, better than I’d hoped, but..." Sherlock’s eyes flicked to John’s mouth, then down to his fingers, laying lax on the pillow between their heads.

"But you need more," John concluded, determined. He shifted his hand under the pillows, splaying his fingers on the back of Sherlock’s head. His fingers tightened into the curls at the nape of his neck, rebalancing so he could plant a kiss on Sherlock's forehead. "We'll work it out. Don't worry."

When John gently lowered his head back on the pillow, Sherlock's eyes narrowed. John knew that look — it materialised when a deduction had been made, a puzzle solved.


"Yeah. Um. What?" John couldn't quite follow. Their joined strokes had slowed but still continued, languorous and lovely; they were keeping John deliciously on the edge. But, he doubted that was what Sherlock was referring to.

"Your other hand," Sherlock said and suddenly sounded a bit hesitant to voice the rest of his explanation.

Desperate to understand, John almost let their strokes halt, but only just before picking up the pace again. He knew Sherlock's arousal might be a bit fickle in its longevity, though the evidence so far had been... *solid* that he could maintain a good erection for quite some time.

"What you just did," Sherlock repeated. "I have sensitive follicles. Always did. I read that sometimes there's overcompensation in areas where sensation is preserved. It certainly worked earlier when we were kissing, and that thing you did with your mouth and my fingers..."

*God, yes.* John was on board. He was *so* on board with this. He had long resisted the temptation to dig his fingers into those ringlets, to bury his nose in those luscious Renaissance curls, and if that could be used to their advantage... He wasted no time in pushing himself slightly backwards so that he could more easily move his palm back under Sherlock's neck. He dug his fingertips into the messy curls, trailed them up into his scalp, relishing the shudder he could feel run through all of Sherlock, his eyes fluttering almost closed.

"Harder." Not a plea, a command.

And hell, John knew how to obey orders. He curled his fingers into a fist, leaned the heel of his palm in so that he could pull upwards with a force he was certain wouldn't hurt but would definitely feel very tight.

Sherlock’s grip on their cocks tightened, and his breathing turned into desperate, heaving gasps. Suddenly, his eyes pinched tight, and a long, torturous groan slipped from between his lips. The sound of it, combined with the sudden tightness of Sherlock's hand around his cock, pushed John over the edge, too. His grip slipped, and he ended up burying his face into Sherlock's neck as he gasped and grunted his way through an orgasm almost painful in its intensity. His thighs shook as he spent himself, lost and oblivious to the world for a few utterly blissful moments. Once the haze cleared, he struggled to draw enough oxygen into his heaving lungs as he collapsed onto his back.


"Acceptable?" Sherlock asked, and John loved, loved, *loved* the smug undertone in his voice.

"I should be asking you," John countered, breathlessly. He looked down at their
cocks, both covered with the effects of his spectacular orgasm. "Did you…? I mean, was it good for you?"

Sherlock nodded as he reached out his top arm towards John's shoulder; it wasn't difficult to interpret what he wanted. Scooting closer, John slid his arm under Sherlock's neck, shifting them both until they were comfortable. With a soft sigh, Sherlock rested his forehead against John's cheek and let his eyes drift shut. John pressed his nose against his skin and inhaled, breathing in the essence of his scent, mixed with salty sweat and heady arousal. It was so tempting to drift to sleep, but he first needed to make sure Sherlock was alright.

"It seems that with this," Sherlock pulled back a little and nodded down his torso. "Education never ends. We balance probabilities and choose the most likely; it's the scientific use of imagination. With my history with… people, I hardly could assume that the way I am now would bring experiences that weren't part of my life before. I should have realised it's a capital mistake to theorise in advance of the facts."

John smiled. "And those facts are?"

"That I don't quite know what to do with you. But I find that I simply cannot wait to explore this more. I'm tempted to parrot your words back to you: that was amazing."

They took their time resting together, John pulling up his duvet for warmth over both their still naked forms. Sherlock eventually got restless, perhaps worrying about his bladder so, with the help of a warm, wet flannel, John made sure neither of them would get too sticky and uncomfortable. To his great relief, Sherlock endured the reinsertion of his catheter with no visible embarrassment. What they'd just done was even more intimate and had probably knocked down a few remaining hurdles, but it was still a delicate thing to shift from a romantic thing to medical practicalities.

After John arranged the catheter bag onto the floor next to the bed, he allowed himself a long look at Sherlock. Still naked, arms dragged up and tucked under his pillow, he was a picture to behold. Yes, he was thin and pale, sinewy and in desperate need of more muscle mass, but he had probably always been some of those things. The unadulterated smile he was awarding John lit his features in a way that made it hard to believe this was the same man who had greeted John's arrival in his life with nothing but the abnegated disdain he had held for the entire universe after his accident. John felt criminal considering covering even just a part of the novel sight of a thoroughly sexed, naked Sherlock with a blanket, but he didn't want his lover to get cold. A shine of sweat made Sherlock's chest glow even in the dimmed lighting, and his hair was a delicious mess; debauched evidence of both of them having enjoyed their time together.

But, John couldn't just stand there like a grinning idiot all night. He circled the bed, slipping under the duvet and top sheet.

"Lights," Sherlock commanded, and soon only the dim safety lighting along the skirting remained.

John breathed deep, acutely aware and longing for the presence right next to him but not close enough. After sleeping alone for so long, how would Sherlock want to do this?

"I've been considering a suprapubic catheter," Sherlock suddenly said, voice bright and not at all
tinted by fatigue. "Might allow for more spontaneity."

"Yeah," John replied, feeling the urgency to agree quickly since Sherlock seemed to be referring to what they've just done. Things were still so new and delicate. John's heart skipped a beat with the deduction that a reference to the future must have meant that Sherlock wanted to do this again. Not that John had doubted it, but... *everything is still so new.* "Could be a good idea. Still need to tape it a bit, but you could probably do it yourself."

"That would be... good. Tallie was very professional today, but..."

John chuckled. "But it’s like asking your mum to buy you condoms."

"I never did that."

"That's the poi—" John almost explained, then refrained. He still occasionally forgot that sarcasm, innuendo, metaphors and other things read between the lines not only confused Sherlock but clearly upset him when he realised he'd made a mistake or missed something and others were amused about it. “No. Me neither.”

A short silence ensued, during which John desperately wondered what he should say to put them back on track of feeling as comfortable around each other as they had just a minute ago.

"John?" Sherlock's voice was now quieter and very unsure. "Can we..."

"Yeah? What is it?"

"Being in the same bed and not making use of that fact seems a bit wasteful."

"I agree a hundred per cent."

John scooted closer, stuck his hand under Sherlock's neck and grabbed hold of his hip, rolling him onto his side so that he faced John. He pulled his pillow to lean against Sherlock's, shifting onto his back and draping Sherlock's arm across his torso so that he could be well-supported, half on his stomach against John's side. Hooking his ankle behind Sherlock's knee, John trapped the long, pale leg between his own. He could feel a muscle quivering in Sherlock’s thigh and reached down to rub it for a moment until it stilled. Tonight, both of them must have worked muscle groups long left unused.

"How did it feel?" John asked. "When you came?"

There was a thoughtful hum as Sherlock took his time to formulate the answer. Whatever the topic, whatever the puzzle to be solved, he always went all in, and John loved him so much for it.

"Soft."

John tipped his head down, humming inquisitively. "But you weren't—"

"I don't mean my penis. I mean... all over. It seems I lack better words to describe it, maybe due to my limited experience in..." He trailed off, sounding embarrassed. "...not just having sex the way I am now but having this sort of sex with anyone."

John had an idea of what 'this sort of sex' meant. In all likelihood, it wasn't a reference to the precise acts Sherlock had participated in but the fact that he was now making love to someone he liked. Loved. Wanted.
"Go on," John prompted. "It's not like I've been in bed with you before, either."

There was a slightly disapproving scoff. "Perhaps, before, the muscle contractions I now can't feel drowned out other, subtler sensations. I felt relaxed… Warm, all over. It's interesting, really, how orgasm and ejaculation can be such separate functions."

John hummed in affirmation, smiling into his lover's warm skin. Only Sherlock would turn this into a detailed analysis with proper physiological terms. John had done his homework — far too much, in retrospect—he knew that spontaneous ejaculation was nearly impossible with Sherlock's level of injury. What was known as a dry orgasm had also seemed unlikely according to all the sources, but perhaps the complexity of Sherlock's injury had preserved that possibility? By the grace of some deity, some vital spinal tracts had been preserved while others had snapped like burning ropes. John didn't care what the articles said about statistics: he had the evidence, now, that Sherlock was luckier than some. John knew he was the luckiest of them all and felt a tug at his heart as his arms tightened around Sherlock's shoulder.

Sherlock didn’t seem to notice; his brows were still scrunched up thoughtfully. "Muscle control was briefly lost everywhere, not just where I didn't have it to start with. All the hormonal feedback should still be the same, and some of the autonomous reactions are potentially stronger. I believe I feel…" He readjusted his shoulders so that he was even more tightly pressed against John. "…attachment. Must be the oxytocin," he dismissed quietly.

"I feel that, too, and I don't care what hormone causes it. It's got other names, you know."

"I was always of the persuasion that sentiment is a chemical defect found on the losing side."

"Was? What's the verdict now, then?"

"That perhaps it can also be one from the winning side, after all."

John laughed, and in that moment, he felt an even heavier flood of attachment. "It was good for me, too."

He leaned his chin on the curly head just underneath his chin and closed his eyes as he inhaled. He could pick up Sherlock's expensive shampoo — the current one declared itself Madagascar Vanilla, Iranian Lime and Jasmine — mingling with the lavender from the sheets and something distinctly male. He shouldn't have liked the thought of being responsible for making sure both of their positions were comfortable, of having Sherlock so pliant and vulnerable in his arms, because Sherlock would probably just take it as a sordid reminder of his state. Then again, a part of John was convinced that even if the accident had never happened, he would still feel this fierce surge of protectiveness towards the man. Not all the things that Sherlock hid underneath his icy, calculatedly human-repelling exterior were borne out of tragedy: some of it must have always been there, dented and cracked and almost irreparably damaged by his bad experiences with people.

"This okay?" John murmured.

"Yes."

"If you want to change positions, just tell me."

"Unless you're asleep."

"No. Especially then. You wake me up, and you tell me."
A noncommittal hum was his reply. Sherlock's palm trailed across the sparse hair on his chest; not teasing, not seeking to arouse, but simply caressing.

"I used to be able to do it myself. After the hospital."

"Do what?" John almost added an endearment again. They'd taken a big step tonight. *Too much could be too much.*

"Turn in bed. I was learning to sit up, transfer myself to the chair. I could have."

"But?"

"The pneumonia happened. Woke up in an intensive care unit after eight days on a respirator. Back to square one. And they were all waiting… wanting to get back to their lives. Mycroft. My parents. I saw the disappointed, and I saw the disillusionment. No pace in recovery could have satisfied them, because they realised what I should have realised myself: it wasn't going to be the way I hoped. I wasn't going to return to the way I was. I had no one because, for those watching from the side-lines, I was just an obstacle between them and their old lives. Eventually, my parents made their exit. Mycroft stayed, out of some overblown sense of duty. He stayed because someone had to."

John stiffened the impulse to deny those self-deprecating statements. He knew better than to offer false, dismissive encouragement because that's what he'd hated the most from the staff at rehab. "No one would blame you for getting discouraged."

"Before the accident, I had the Work, and it had me. Getting back to it would have required so many… adjustments, compromises, so much bloody help. It wouldn't have been the same because I never saw any other options besides getting back to my old life as it was, or giving up altogether."

"Would have been nice to have someone, at the end of the day, to talk to, after I got shot," John mused. "Someone who would have been happy with me, you know, when there was progress. But I just sat there, in my room or in that flat, wondering who the fuck I was doing all those things for. The universe doesn't care if I return to surgery. There's nobody to give me a standard to reach except myself, and maybe I realised that my standards were as unrealistic as yours were. But if I gave them up, who was I?"

"I didn't think there was anything good that could have come out of accepting things. From adjusting. From seeing what it could be like, living as… this."

John hummed in acknowledgement. He knew Sherlock had a long way to go still, negotiating between the image of who he was and what he could do prior to the accident, as opposed to someone living with a spinal injury.

"Now, I think my perspective has changed," Sherlock said, and John could *hear* the frown.

He loved the way Sherlock's always animated, always in motion features scrunched up into a look of slight bafflement and absolute focus — as though it always surprised him that he didn’t know every secret the universe held, and he was a little bit affronted by the thought.

"Lately, instead of dividing my life into *before the accident* and *after it,* I've begun to find myself considering another landmark,*" Sherlock said, "*one not defined by the chair and hospitals and everything I hate. Instead of all that, there's me, now — and me before you.*"
All of the people mentioned are real. For your reading enjoyment:

Rafe Biggs and his Penis-Thumb
Kenneth Connin, porn star
Mycroft stood by the fireplace in the parlour, close to the same spot in front of the window where John had first clapped eyes on the man.

"I am rarely tempted to repeat myself, but I told you once that I was not certain whether you'd be the making of my brother — or make him worse than ever. All I could hope for upon your first meeting was that he wouldn't frighten you away."

"I'm not sure your first impression of me was very favourable," John admitted. "But you still hired me, and I had no idea why."

"You had nothing to lose by staying. A man who is unsure whether they want to go on is afraid of very little."

It sounded as though Mycroft was referring not just to Sherlock but to John as well, and the latter was ready to admit things really had been that dire after he'd moved back to London. He thought about how staggering the contrast was between the Sherlock of then and the Sherlock of now, and between how pathetic and empty John’s life had been before, and how full and hopeful his life — their life— was now.

"You're a free man now," he pointed out as he watched Sophie clearing out Mycroft’s breakfast dishes. He thought they looked awfully lonely at the head of such a large table. "Free to spend more time in London. Free to dedicate yourself to work again."

"There are sides to the countryside which I might not have learned to appreciate, if it hadn't been for Sherlock's… predicament. I'm not opposed to Musgrave Court staying in the family. Perhaps an arrangement where it could be open to the public during the winter months might work, and the rest of the year it could be a family residence."

"I think that’s a wonderful idea." John had read that Highclere Castle of Downton Abbey fame functioned precisely like that: when the family was home it was closed, but during the summer months when they spent time at some Scottish castle or two, it was open to the public.

"I thought I'd made my peace with Sherlock's decision," Mycroft said, just as John was thinking he’d return to the annexe and check on Sherlock’s packing progress. "But you challenged that at every turn and wouldn't accept fate as Sherlock had designed it. It made me realise that I may not have been as accustomed to the idea of his death as I presumed. All lives end, all hearts are broken, but no one wants that casualty to be one of their own."

Surprised by such an emotional statement, seemingly apropos of nothing, John glanced around, spotting a nearly empty glass of whisky on the mantelpiece. Mycroft never drank at breakfast, but then again, this was a special occasion: John and Sherlock were moving out today, to Sherlock's old Baker Street flat.

Two weeks ago, the renovations overseen by Mrs Hudson had been finished. An architect had sat
with all of them — Sherlock, John, Mrs Hudson and Mycroft — and helped find solutions that would avoid visually screaming out disabled, while still being functional and creative. Sherlock had brought his tablet and explained them many of the ideas he’d designed himself.

You were brilliant… Ingenious, John had murmured to him in bed later that night. He smiled now at the memory. Sherlock would never admit it, but John knew he loved the compliments.

Mycroft cleared his throat to regain John's attention. It was hard to focus on the older Holmes’ contemplations when all John wanted to do was go see what Sherlock was up to.

"Everybody dies. It's the one thing human beings can be relied upon to do. How can it still come as a surprise to people?" Mycroft continued his musings, turning to face the window, his silhouette striking in the bright morning light.

People, or you? John wondered. Not so easy to distance yourself when it's family, is it?

This would be a big change for Mycroft. And, perhaps John hadn't quite appreciated how big, since he'd been so focused on Sherlock's needs, but now he could see exactly how Mycroft would once again need to redefine his life.

Mycroft gingerly picked up the heavy-bottomed whisky glass, raised it to eye level and sloshed the liquid around inside. "I was not certain he had changed his mind, not until he accepted the case in Greece. It was… agonising, leaving his fate in your hands, especially after I had failed to change it."

There was a sudden epiphany. "That was you," John breathed out, and it wasn't a question. "The case. The timing was too convenient, and the details were… Sherlock never said anything, especially not with the fun he was having, but it came from you, didn't it? No wonder the police were so bloody accommodating!"

"Irrelevant," Mycroft replied, but John had made his deductions. "Sherlock did always love to travel, but he was unlikely to be persuaded to try it out after his accident, at least not without a significant catalyst. He claimed the decision to cancel Switzerland was made earlier, but who knows; the results shall speak for themselves."

"Yeah, they should," John confirmed. He wanted Mycroft to keep that victory even though Sherlock had told John two nights ago in bed that it had been the night of the concert when he had emailed Dignitas to cancel his appointment.

"Did the nursing agency get in touch? They promised to forward you some CVs," Mycroft said.

John and Sherlock had agreed that, while John could plausibly do everything that Sherlock needed help with daily, it just might be better for their relationship to have regular nursing help on weekdays, at least.

'It should help retain at least some of the air of mystery and romance,' Sherlock had commented sarcastically. He'd pouted when John had told him he was touched and happy to hear that was Sherlock's first priority.

"I hope your relocation goes without trouble," Mycroft commented politely. "I suppose it's the end of an era," he added, and John was surprised at his bitter tone.

Did Mycroft feel that Sherlock moving out was part of what he still considered a failure on his part? Or was he just worried about letting Sherlock out into the world on his own? Or… would Mycroft be lonely without a housemate? Having staff was hardly the same as living with a brother,
even if that brother was cranky and recalcitrant.

"You didn't fail," John promised him. "You kept him alive. You looked after him, gave him time to consider his options and wouldn't let him reject them without thoughtful consideration. You never gave up on him even when you stopped actively trying to change his mind."

"We've always had a complicated relationship. I was not given to outbursts of brotherly compassion until I saw what the accident did to him. But he would hardly accept any consolation from me."

_Because you're both Holmeses_, John thought with a smirk.

"I was there for him before. I'll be there for him always," Mycroft stated.

"He knows. In his weird way, I'm sure he knows," John said. He could sense the well-concealed fondness behind the barbs, the connection behind the bickering. Sherlock _enjoyed_ riling Big Brother up, and he never wasted time like that on people he didn't appreciate.

"His loss—" Mycroft began and then snapped his mouth shut, emptying his glass instead. "Look after him. Please."

John nodded, clasping his hands behind his back. "I promise. It'll be my privilege."

Their methods might be different, his and Mycroft Holmes', but perhaps they really had always fought on the same side.

_________________________

——— FOURTEEN MONTHS LATER ———

It was a day they'd been planning for six months, now. There had been countless forms filled, an interview and several meetings to establish eligibility. It was a testament to how much Sherlock wanted it to happen that he breezed through the selection process with flying colours, managing to project patience, dedication and even politeness when it was required. John knew he possessed those things when suitably motivated, but witnessing it made him realise how far they'd come from two people who had been, when not actively striving for death, then at least not objecting to it much.

Today would be a testament to the resilience Sherlock had rediscovered, to the fact that they were now willing to make plans and decision together that would require commitment for over a decade. Preparations were finalised: the flat had been made safe, appropriate inductions courses taken, books read. They were ready.

It was time to meet Arthur.

It — _he_— had been Mycroft's almost inadvertent idea, at first. John and Sherlock had been visiting Musgrave Court for the weekend, and the older Holmes had made small talk over dinner about an article he'd read in _The Times_ about mobility assistance dogs. He'd appeared impressed over what the text had detailed such a canine could do for someone with tetraplegia: help with dressing and undressing, turn a person who had fallen onto their side and call for help with a specialised phone system, retrieve fallen objects, hold remote controls in their mouth so that they could be used. John had asked to see the article and had devoured it while eating the lamb casserole prepared by Sophie.
Sherlock had promised to join them once he stopped Skyping with Lestrade about some crime scene photos. John could hear his voice from down the hall; he was borrowing Mycroft’s office since the annexe had been emptied and turned into a side business of a small, fully accessible B&B which Sophie now ran. Mycroft now divided his time between London and the Court, seemed to have found a new hobby in exploring options to open the Court to the public in a way that would fund it but not make it too crowded or restless for when he was present.

Once John had studied the whole Times article, he realised that perhaps the most important detail had eluded the ever-practical and non-sentimental older Holmes: that a mobility assistance dog could make a huge difference not only in helping with concrete things, but also with the emotional support and social lubrication that one could provide for a disabled person.

An Ipswich man with a C8-T1 injury interviewed for the article had described how his Alsatian assistance dog, Oliver, made it easier for people he encountered in public to see past his injury as they admired his teamwork with the dog. He had explained to the journalist how much safer he felt being out and about with his companion and how much more secure he felt at home as well. If he fell from his chair and couldn’t get up or had one of the epileptic fits which had plagued him since his accident, Oliver would bring him his phone or even use a specially designed paw button to alert his mother that something was wrong.

Mycroft had glanced towards the hall as he chewed his own bite of lamb, obviously wondering how long it would take for Sherlock to join them for dinner.

"There's a series of murders in Bayswater with stolen Napoleon statues," John explained and then chuckled, "He thinks it's Christmas come early."

"I reside near Bayswater," Mycroft replied indignantly, as though this murdered-slash-thief was practicing their craft just to spite him.

The lord of the house sipped his Merlot, acquiring the look John knew often accompanied a bit of nostalgia. "Did you know Sherlock had a dog when he was a boy; our parents acquired it when I left for Eton, presumably to console him. He was very fond of the animal and devastated when he had to be put down because of a kidney tumour."

“Yes. Redbeard. He’s mentioned him once or twice.”

Mycroft hummed, looking thoughtful, but didn’t continue that train of thought further. Sherlock had joined them not long after, talking excitedly about the case.

After dinner, John retreated to the library, leaving Sherlock and Mycroft in the parlour bickering about the death of Otto von Bismarck of all things. His partner was completely oblivious about the comings and goings of the current politicians but seemed as well-versed in history as his brother.

Settling into an armchair, John dug out his phone and made some web searches to learn more about assistance dogs. The more he read, the more convinced he became that this could be the solution to a lot of things. He'd been delaying looking into locum medical work, because the prerequisite would be to make sure someone was home with Sherlock when he was away. It just didn't seem safe to leave Sherlock alone in case he fell and couldn't reach his phone, or something else went wrong and he needed help. John had even been putting off talking about it with Sherlock since it would be a reminder of his infirmity. On a good day, they could even joke about it but on a bad day, things felt terribly fragile, and Sherlock seemed to be unable to decide whether he wanted to be left alone or whether he wanted to cling to John like a limpet. Well, whatever kind of clinging a limpet in a power wheelchair could manage.
Mrs Hudson was always willing to help, of course, when John had taken up the subject of an occasional A&E shift to ensure he got to keep his medical licence, but John worried about her health as well. She was strong, both in will and stature, but she was getting on in years and he knew neither he nor Sherlock would ever forgive themselves if she got hurt while trying to help.

Some of the private cases Sherlock had taken recently paid handsomely, and the trust fund Sherlock had not advertised much until they'd moved in together would tide the two of them over hard times. But, John didn't want to rely solely on Sherlock for all his finances or his occupational identity. He would miss surgery terribly, but he was now less upset about moving on; if Sherlock could adjust to a different future then he could, too. If only there was a way they could both worry less about Sherlock being on his own.

As well as the transition to Baker Street had gone, the cramped flat was much less practical for Sherlock's large chair than the annexe. They didn't really use the upstairs bedroom — no need for two since they naturally now shared a bed every night, having done so after they'd made love for the first time. There had been talk of Sherlock eventually being able to graduate to a more streamlined and more easily manoeuvrable power-assist chair, but some sort of a wheelchair would always be a part of their lives.

Determined to explore every possibility, John had bookmarked a list of assistance dog trainers and breeders on his phone and presented the idea to Sherlock that very night. It was met with bafflement at first, but soon that turned into tentative interest. In a few days, interest bloomed into hope. Sherlock seemed incredulous that John was really willing to give the idea some serious thought but with a bit of coaxing and convincing, they were ready to find out whether Sherlock would be eligible.

And here they were, now, with an hour to spare before Janet — the trainer they'd had plenty of meetings with — would bring to Baker Street a 20-month old Labernard by the name of Arthur. All puppies in the litter had been named after kings of England, and John and Sherlock had fallen in love with Arthur’s floppy ears and eyes that seemed to study them with an impossible amount of intelligence, even while he tumbled and rough-housed with his siblings. They had only been able to visit Arthur at Janet's home once when the puppies had been very small; she lived in Grimsby so more frequent visits were not practical.

While waiting for a suitably trained dog, John and Sherlock had attended classes at the London offices of the organisation Janet belonged to which trained several kinds of assistance dogs. The non-profit society specialised in training larger breeds required for mobility assistance and epilepsy assistance. A large enough epilepsy dog could plant itself between the floor and a falling patient to prevent them from cracking their heads when an attack began, and mobility assistance dogs needed to be large or large-ish if they were to help with things such as changing position in bed. 'A Labernard can be the best of both breeds,' Janet had told them; 'Less slobbery and hairy than a St Bernard, clever and trainable like a Labrador.' She had trained several such puppies for tetraplegic patients before.

"Should we put the kettle on?" Sherlock asked, drawing John out of his thoughts.

John glanced at his watch. "Judging by the train schedules, they won't be here for at least another 45 minutes. A bit early, isn't it?"

"We have biscuits, don't we?"

"Yes, as I've told you three times. And the lemon drizzle cake Mrs Hudson baked. And, before you ask: no, the dog biscuits have not mysteriously evaporated from the cupboard and the dog bed is still right by your desk."
Arthur would not stay the night with them yet, but Janet had instructed that all of his future things should be available so that he could get used to seeing them in his new space. The dog would stay at a hotel with Janet to ensure a gradual transition, and she was to stay in town for a week to give Sherlock and his new companion — and John, as the effective co-owner — an intensive course in working together. John had never had a dog, so he was particularly keen on such a period of hands-on guidance.

Sherlock had parked his chair by the fireplace; it was a chilly day with a prognosis of sleet, so they'd started a fire after breakfast. Now, there were only embers giving off residual warmth and Sherlock seemed lost in thought as he watched their glow. Yesterday, he'd been downright giddy with excitement, reading out loud to John from various websites with facts about the breeds Arthur was a combination of, and about all the things other tetraplegics had managed to teach their dogs.

Now, that excitement had fizzled out. What had taken its place was a restlessness and quietude John had learned to interpret as anxiety.

After arranging the cake and the biscuit plate on the kitchen table, he went to the sitting room and gave Sherlock's shoulder a squeeze. "You okay?"

Sherlock's hand crept up to briefly rest atop his before he let it drop back to his lap. He had regained an impressive amount of strength and coordination in his upper extremities in the last six months, but it had made his shoulder blade pain issues worse. *Maybe today is a bad one with the pain, but he can't rest because Janet's coming to visit.* He smoothed his hand across the back of Sherlock's neck, hoping the warmth might ease a little of the tension he could feel in the tendons there.

"If you don't feel up to this today, we could always postpone. Janet would understand," John said.

Sherlock's brows knitted together, and he glared at John. "What are you on about? Why wouldn't I be up to this?"

John gave Sherlock's neck a gentle stroke with his fingertips; he knew better than to squeeze his shoulder when it could exacerbate the pain. "You just seem… I don't know. Lost in thought?"

"What if…” Sherlock began, and then let the rest of the sentence dissolve into an exhalation. "What if I do it all wrong?"

John removed his hand, pulled his usual armchair closer — it was the one from Sherlock's old bedroom at Musgrave Court, a gift from Mycroft — and took a seat. He reached for Sherlock’s hand, wanting to offer as much comfort as possible without being suffocating. It was a delicate dance he was still learning. "Do what wrong?"

"What if I don't get along with the dog? What if we're incompatible? What if I turn out to have no aptitude in communicating with it?"

"That's what Janet's here for. I saw you with those other dogs; I don't think you have to worry."

They had met three other Londoners with mobility assistance dogs and all of the animals had seemed to take an instant liking to Sherlock. It fit with what he'd told John about Redbeard, his Irish Setter, whom he'd described as his only best friend before adulthood. Before John.

Sherlock didn't reply, and John doubted whether his assurance had had any effect. A week earlier, he'd sensed that Sherlock was getting a bit stressed with all the training, as though he was going above and beyond to prove to both Janet and John that he could do it. A bit of coaxing had
produced the admission that Sherlock thought that John's possibilities of going back to work hinged on whether things worked out with the dog. John told him not to worry about that; the last thing he would have wanted was to remind Sherlock about the pressures he'd felt to get better, to get on with things after his accident because other people had stuff to do.

Now, John suspected that anxiety was threatening to make a comeback. "It's going to be fine. And even on the slim, very slim chance that it doesn't work out, the foundation will find us another dog. We'll manage, Sherlock. And on the off chance that they don't find a suitable one, it doesn't mean that I can't work. Mrs Hudson's here to help, and we can work something out with Mycroft. The dog is just one way to make things easier."

He expected Sherlock to grumble about the admittedly rather Mycroftian-sounding idea that it wasn't sensible to leave him alone at home for long periods. Once he would be able to do all transfers on his own, to turn in bed and fix himself a meal, things would be different, but it wasn't just about being in the flat. Getting an assistance dog could work wonders with Sherlock venturing outside of home — something Sherlock simply did not do on his own, and which John was certain must be grating on his confidence. When they were on a case, the context seemed to give Sherlock a boost of confidence, but at other times, John wouldn't even ask him to go get milk from the closest Tesco Metro. Sherlock could probably manage, but he still refused to appear in public unless he had to, or The Work called for it.

The complaint never materialised. Either their repeated earlier discussions on the subject of needing help had made Sherlock see sense and be reasonable, or there was something else going on.

Sherlock reached out to grab the photo Janet had sent them which he'd put on the mantlepiece. Floppy-eared like a Labrador, such a dark chocolate brown that he was nearly black, but with a single white patch on his chest and another on top of his nose as though a dollop of snow had fallen there. They'd agreed that Arthur had been a very adorable puppy. Now, Janet had described him as an energetic but effortlessly trainable teenager eager to start working. Even though some of Sherlock's relentless determination seemed to come from wanting to do this for John, the latter was convinced that mostly Sherlock had worked so hard because he wanted this for himself, wanted it more than he was willing to admit out loud. Meeting the two other thirty-something men with their working dogs had only stoked the fire. John had tried to keep a level head, to be the calm realist — especially since he wasn't that much of a dog person — but, witnessing the potential of what this could do to their lives had made him, too, hope intensely that this would work out.

A month ago, they had met Matt, a 38-year old riding instructor who had fractured his C7 vertebra falling off his horse during a show jumping tournament. He was riding again — though not competitively — and he had resumed teaching and training other riders. Being in a wheelchair had awoken an interest in him about how neck and core muscles functioned, and now he used the extensive knowledge he'd amassed by helping riders achieve better posture and a better seat. John and Sherlock had watched Matt's dog, Gordy, help him remove his riding boots and then place them on a shoe rack. Gordy then stood on his hind legs, leaning on a hand rest of Matt's chair to pull off his coat which he then hung off a chair in the foyer. "There are loops in the boots where I can hook a sling which Gordy pulls so that I can get the boots on, too," Matt explained as Gordy, clearly pleased with himself, wagged his tail as he munched on a treat Matt had just given him. "Before, when I was out shopping, people just sort of stared at me and then tried to pretend they weren't looking. Now, they watch Gordy instead and sometimes they come talk to us. I don't feel like my chair's making people awkward anymore," Matt had then explained.

Judging by the Youtube videos Sherlock kept watching in the evenings, it seemed that only human imagination was the limit to what these dogs could learn to do. He saw the potential and John did,
Sherlock pulled his hand free from John’s to tug at the cuffs of his dress shirt — as though the dog was going to care about whether he looked immaculate or not. John watched him glanced once more at the clock on the mantle, then at the door, his bottom lip pulled between his teeth.

"I thought we might take Janet out at the end of the week, find a nice restaurant?" John suggested, adding *with wheelchair access* in his head. He now remembered that automatically and it no longer felt like a stumbling block. This was their everyday life. "Janet did say we need to prepare to go out with the dog this week to make sure he's ready for that. To make sure the two of you are ready, I mean."

Sherlock nodded.

For the next thirty minutes they sat quietly side-by-side, John reading through a couple of chapters of a Tom Clancy book he'd left on the coffee table, Sherlock mostly just staring into the embers of the fire.

Finally, the doorbell rang downstairs. Mrs Hudson was not at home, so John jogged down to receive their visitors. Instead of hopping up and crowding John when he opened the door, the handsome, young adult Arthur stared at him expectantly, tail starting to wag so hard that his entire backside was moving.

John extended his hand for the dog to sniff, but only after Janet told Arthur that it was alright to greet did John get some licks and more wagging. He was very impressed with the restraint the young dog was showing. The dog's eyes kept flitting back and forth between Janet and John and finally, Janet called him a good boy, gave him a treat and said 'go on' to prompt him to enter. He wasted no time in slipping past John into the hall. "Wait," Janet then warned, and the dog halted immediately before the stairs, sitting down to wait for her.

Once inside, John and Janet exchanged a hug and some cheek pecks, and John then ushered their visitors upstairs. Arthur seemed keen to explore these new surroundings, but he was constantly looking to Janet for permission and cues on what to do. He was wearing a mobility assistance dog signal harness which Janet had explained signified that he was working. It meant that he had to behave himself.

Upstairs, Sherlock was waiting for them in the middle of the sitting room. Once divested of her coat, Janet said hello to Sherlock who only hummed in reply, eyes fixed on Arthur. Arthur was busy sniffing around the collection of shoes beside the door. As requested, John and Sherlock had sent Janet some of Sherlock's old clothes to acclimatise him to their scents.

'Good riddance,' Sherlock had said when they'd packaged some of the old easy-wear baggy cotton clothing he'd worn at Musgrave Hall. Janet told them that the assistants working with her had worn them when Arthur was being taught the basics of assisting in emergencies. It was important that the dog knew the scent belonged to someone particularly important.

Bumping enthusiastically against Janet's legs as he waited for instructions, Arthur gave an impatient bark. John chuckled as he made a tactical retreat into the kitchen, wanting to give his partner and their guests some space. Impatience was something Arthur and his owner certainly had in common.

Janet led Arthur to Sherlock's chair, and then said in the same business-like voice, "Go on! Say hello to Sherlock."
Tension stiffening his shoulders, Sherlock sat stock still, gaze glued to the dog which now hurried towards him. Arthur sniffed his trouser leg and glanced at Janet, but without waiting for further instructions, hopped up, landing his front paws in Sherlock's lap. His face was tipped up and his tail was a blur against the rug.

Sherlock stared. Then, carefully, slowly, he raised his hand and placed his palm on the soft fur atop the dog's head, bowing his head down to study the animal.

Arthur licked his nose, glanced at Janet, then shoved his snout eagerly into Sherlock's belly as though wanting to curl up on his lap. Sherlock's fingers curled into the soft, dark brown fur on the dog's neck, and he stroked his hand slowly down his back.

"He's had an exciting morning; never been on the train before. Got some of his excess energy off, at least, making friends with half the passengers," Janet laughed.

When Sherlock's hand halted, Arthur nudged his wrist, looking up at him to ask for more petting. Sherlock looked hesitant still, utterly focused on the dog.

John came closer, because something was worrying him. Call it my sixth Sherlock sense. His partner was being very quiet; Sherlock and the dog were still exchanging a very intense look as though each was studying the other, trying to make sense of what they should do next. Sherlock's hand slid off the dog's fur and he hid it between his thigh and his chair but not fast enough — John could see that it was shaking.

"Sherlock?" he called out quietly.

Arthur slid down from Sherlock's lap, sitting obediently just in front of his chair, attention firmly fixed on the new, interesting human with a familiar scent he had just met.

Janet had sat down in John's usual chair and was watching the proceedings.

Sherlock inhaled sharply, ragged and audible. Then, he whipped his head towards the fireplace, lips parted. Soon, he swiped his eyes and swallowed hard.

John's chest felt heavy as the signs finally made sense, and Arthur — perhaps having sensed that something strange was going on — politely stepped aside to let John close to the chair. He leaned on his haunches, then wrapped his arms around Sherlock. Hesitantly, Sherlock returned the gesture, letting out a ragged breath as he leaned his cheek on John's shoulder. Through his plaid dress shirt, John felt a fleck of moisture near his collarbone.

After taking a moment, during which he just breathed heavily, fingers gripping hard the back of John's shirt as he fought to calm down, Sherlock extricated from the embrace, eyes red-rimmed but breathing easier.

John gave him a relieved smile, reading from his gaze what had just happened. You wanted this so much, and now it's real. "Bit overwhelming, yeah?" John asked quietly. "I bet Arthur was nervous, too."

Sherlock stumbled into a quiet, wet chuckle. "Maybe."

John stepped aside as Sherlock turned his chair towards the middle of the room where Arthur was waiting with his tail wagging warily. John wondered what sort of a reception the dog had expected — if any. Do dogs expect emotional things like humans do, or do they just react? He wondered and made a mental note to ask Janet.
Sherlock steered his chair closer to the dog, and then removed his hand from the joystick to reach it out instead.

"Arthur," he called out quietly. The dog instantly scrambled to him, licking his hand and nudging his fingers. His head was soon firmly parked on Sherlock's lap again and this time, he received a vigorous scratching behind his ears.

"Hello," Sherlock said. "Would you like to move in?"

——- THREE MONTHS LATER ———

"Christ," John uttered, trying not to laugh because words needed to be had. It had been enough to have one unruly consulting detective in his life, but now that detective was accompanied with an equally mischievous dog. "Wasn't it enough to teach him a covert hand signal to bark at Anderson? Did you really have to teach him that shoelace thing?!"

Arthur's new trick of stealthily pulling open shoelaces had been funny the first time he'd done it to Greg, but not the fourth time. They were standing in front of a second-storey window at a shipping yard, waiting to see if their suspect would rendezvous with their ship contact who helped them smuggle endangered reptiles into the country to be kept as pets. It was just the two of them present; Lestrade had volunteered to do a coffee acquisition round.

"You'll never know when it'll be a vital skill in ensuring us a head start in a daring escape," Sherlock countered, crossing his arms petulantly. "And he'll need it every night at home, of course."

"But not the secret version. Greg wasn't impressed."

Dismissive flick of the wrist. "He'll be plenty enough impressed when we solve the case."

"If we do that, it'll be no thanks to you," John chuckled at Arthur, whose tail was wagging as hard as always.

Sherlock shrugged. "He needs to practice."

"He can practice on your laces if you think it's so bloody important. It's bad enough when he insists that we've dropped clothes which he needs to fetch and deliver when we're trying to have sex."

"It's the first time you've been consistently calling Arthur a he. You used to say 'it', which was terribly demeaning."

"He doesn't look all that demeaned," John pointed out. He'd just sat down, and Arthur had promptly planted his chin on John's knee, looking at him with that mixture of vigilant excitement and contentment which only a dog could manage.

Lestrade soon returned with his Costa loot.

"Four shots of espresso, three sugars, right?" He asked Sherlock and stuck the cup in the holder of his chair.

"You shouldn't have to ask."

"John: Americano. Milk, no sugar."
Lestrade was about to raise the remaining cup to his lips, when his brows rose up. "John, your laces are untied."

"Oh, for fuck's sake!"

——— TWO MONTHS LATER ———

The first rays of dawn told John it was still very early when he stirred awake. He fumbled for his phone on the bedside cabinet and nearly dropped it as he tried to activate the screen. 7:20 a.m. They never woke up this early, so something must have dragged him out of slumber.

The mattress shifted as Sherlock readjusted himself; he could now change position without needing help, sit up by pushing with his arms and even transfer himself to his chair or from chair to the bed. John could tell from his breathing that he was awake, so he used the app for the remote control system installed on both their phones to open the curtains a little bit so that he could see better.

They were lying on their sides, facing each other. Sherlock's eyes were closed, the lines around his nose pinched taut. The pallor and the slight sheen of sweat on his forehead told John the origin of the fitful sleep which must have woken them both: pain.

John wasn't surprised. He'd tried to tell his partner that trying to wean himself off the neuropathic pain meds completely might exacerbate his shoulder blade and arm issues at least temporarily and, in the long run, it might be better to stick to taking a low-dose nortriptyline regularly as opposed to sporadic doses of more effective — and more addictive — painkillers. Their exploration of this new life together, with Sherlock back to work and John taking the occasional locum A&E shift, was still a push-and-pull, trial-and-error thing. John had not stopped worrying about every setback and every bad day and imagined that he'd do so until the end of their joint existence, but it was a small price to pay for what they had built.

His phone vibrated softly with a text message. It was the locum agency, asking him to step in for a shift at King's College Hospital's A&E for the trauma team. Tempting, but his decision was made instantly: not today.

All these small noises must have alerted the flat's third occupant — the one with the keenest hearing. Arthur padded to the bedroom door from where he had presumably been sleeping in the kitchen. Once his paws had halted beside the bed, he tilted his head slightly and inquisitively at John.

He leaned up on his elbows. "It's fine, Arthur, nothing to worry about," he whispered.

The dog watched him for a moment, then decided that he was happy with the performance of the current minder of his assigned human ward, so he returned to the kitchen.

John dropped his head back onto the pillow. Sherlock's hand reached out, then perched on his waist, finding that familiar spot even with his eyes still closed. His breathing was a bit shallow, and he was concentrating hard; John could tell from watching the shifting of the frown lines on his forehead. John's shoulder gave a sympathetic twinge as he scooted closer and towards the head of
the bed so that he could slip a hand behind Sherlock's neck and press his head against his own chest. He'd have to be what Sherlock often described as 'irritatingly doctorly' to assess what was going on, what interventions — such as perhaps a warm bath — would be needed, what medications should be administered. But that could and should wait for some time. Right now, just this, just being close, was more important. Before they became lovers, Sherlock had had to wake up alone on bad mornings such as this, and he'd have to wait for Tallie to arrive or swallow his pride and call Mycroft for company.

Before Musgrave Court, John's routine had been to wake up after hours of nightmares, in that crappy bedsit, fighting the thought that the best parts of his life were over. Not anymore. They both had someone, now, and John wanted to be as helpful as Sherlock was every time he had a nightmare, which often turned into a PTSD flare-up.

"John?" A quiet, strained word was spoken from somewhere close to John's right armpit.

He pressed a kiss into the pillow-flattened, messy, sweaty curls on the pillow beneath his chin. "I'm here. I've got you."

Chapter End Notes

As the end of this story draws near, it's a good time to share some reassuring news: there will be more — at least in the form of a couple of shorter stories in the POVs of characters we haven't heard from yet.

We'll also be doing a more extensive author's notes/Q&A thing for which we would be delighted to receive more questions than what we currently have collected. Whatever you'd like to know about the conception of this story, feel free to pose your questions here in the comments section or PM us through Tumblr!

And don't forget to check out our #sadboypoint Tumblr tag which features moodboards and other graphics connected to each chapter.
John glances at his watch for the third time in ten minutes. He’d just got off a locum night shift and was supposed to meet Sherlock for a buffet brunch at the Burr & co. restaurant of the Kimpton Fitzroy Hotel. They had barely an hour to spare before Sherlock’s appointment at the Pain Management Centre of the National Hospital for Neurology and Neurosurgery. He was being considered for spinal dorsal nerve root stimulator therapy to help with the shoulder blade pain, which had so far proven rather resistant to drug therapies.

And now, Sherlock was late, and John was beginning to worry. It was a relief when the phone in his pocket pinged with a text.

DELAYED. LIFT AT RUSSELL SQ STATION VANDALISED. ARTHUR IS UNIMPRESSED WITH STATION ATTENDANT. SH

John stared at the message. He would have assumed it was London traffic which had delayed his partner, but instead—

YOU WENT ON THE TUBE?

Sherlock and Arthur now regularly ventured outside the house, even doing case work with the Met without John always coming along, but they hadn’t even talked about the Tube. John had assumed Sherlock would avoid it like the plague due to the masses of people there who might get curious about him. This was new, and unexpected.

WHY ELSE WOULD I HAVE MEMORISED THE MAPS LAST WEEK? SH

I THOUGHT IT WAS CASE RESEARCH, John replied. It wasn’t unusual to see Sherlock poring over ancient maps of London’s underground rivers, memorising obscure chemical lists or making notes of the randomest things online.

KEEP UP, JOHN. I OBVIOUSLY NEED TO KNOW WHICH STATIONS ARE STEP-FREE. REROUTING TO FARRINGDON, BETTER RESCHEDULE THAT BRUNCH AS A LUNCH. SH

MEET UP AT THE NATIONAL? John asked, unable to resist adding, JUST BE CAREFUL.

It was difficult sometimes, not getting protective. John didn’t worry so much about accidents as he did about Sherlock getting frustrated and self-conscious, as he had to struggle through things that didn’t require a second’s thought for non-disabled Londoners. If John encountered a lift out of order, it would bring forth some cursing but then he’d just reroute to the stairs. For Sherlock, even one stair would be cause for concern and could possibly derail his plans altogether. At least gaps and thresholds were no longer any trouble; Arthur could give him an extra pull if the power-assist wheelchair he’d graduated to after a year of very dedicated physical therapy wasn’t enough.

OBVIOUSLY. SEE YOU IN 35MINS. SH

John knew it wouldn’t take him longer than ten minutes to walk to the National, so there was plenty of time to sit down at the Pret A Manger across the street with the day’s paper that he
purchased from the kiosk in front of the station.

Once seated at the café, he settled in with a croissant and a cup of coffee. Leafing through the first pages, his eyes caught on to the headline: ‘Diamond sold at Sotheby's for twelve million pounds’. He and Sherlock had met the former owner, Lord Cantlemere only three weeks ago when said diamond — also known as the Mazarin Stone due to its cut resembling that of a popular Swedish pastry — had been stolen from the safe in the family's London residence just before the original auction date. The case had had some interesting twists and turns including an attempt to fool his Lordship with a replica. John had been impressed with Sherlock's gemmological expertise but then again, when was he ever not impressed by Sherlock's case-related esoteric knowledge? John hadn't typed up the case yet for his blog, but he looked forward to doing so; his writings had become rather popular after Sherlock had returned to work.

It was a constant source of disgruntlement for the star of John's stories that his own blog, The Science of Deduction, mostly languished without much public interest. John had tried to tell him once that he should maybe stop scaring people away with his snooty replies. 'It's my blog. Why should I pretend that they're not being idiotic when they are being precisely that?' Sherlock had asked him indignantly.

It was a Thursday and John hoped that the weekend might bring an interesting case with the Met since Lestrade had mentioned he would be on weekend duty for the Homicide and Major Crime division. With Arthur's help, Sherlock could often manage taking part in Met cases on his own, but John tried to be a part of it as often as he could, both because he enjoyed very few things as much, but also because he did like to look after his family — to keep an eye on signs of fatigue and needing a break, things Sherlock was not good at spotting in himself, and also make sure Arthur got enough breaks for food and rest and play. Sherlock seemed to now effortlessly accept John's quiet vigilance since it helped ensure that Sherlock could safely continue the career he loved. Sometimes he seemed to expect, maybe even hope, that John might put his foot down and demand a bit of rest. Sherlock's enthusiasm wouldn't allow him to initiate such a thing, but he acquiesced when John insisted and often it didn't require all that much use of the Captain Watson voice to get him to wind down temporarily.

Lestrade had taken steps to ensure that his consulting detective would have all the assistance he needed: the DI had recruited the know-how of the British Disabled Police Association, and together they had devised lots of ways to overcome the challenges of transport issues and lacking accessibility at many crime scenes. It didn't seem to matter to the non-profit organisation that Sherlock wasn't even formally part of the force; him being a public figure gave them good PR, and Sherlock even deigned to touch on the subject matter sometimes at post-case interviews. Plenty of journalists offered to do a profile piece on him, but he always declined those, with varying degrees of politeness, explaining to John that he preferred not to be known for anything but the casework.

As for John's work, he was more content in his current arrangements than he would have thought possible. Being a consultant-grade locum gave him lots of options for A&E work, so, although his days in the OR were over, he could employ much of his knowledge as a locum emergency physician and trauma team leader at the Accidents & Emergencies at St Mary's Hospital, one of London's four designated major trauma centres. Just as Sherlock must have anticipated when he'd presented the suggestion, John's locuming suited their schedules perfectly: when there was a case on, John could simply decline a short-notice shift offer. When things were slower, he could stack on shifts.

The rest of the Times and John's snack made time pass so fast that he had to adopt a brisk walking pace to get to the National in time. It had begun to drizzle and he'd left his umbrella at home, but as he crossed the road in front of the hospital, he was happy to see that Sherlock hadn't made the same
mistake. John joined his partner at the main entrance just as Arthur shoved Sherlock's neatly folded umbrella into the bag hanging off the back of his chair. Ducking in under the eaves of the building with a smile, he leant in for a quick kiss and an ear scratch for his favourite human and furry companion.

The stimulator helped considerably with the pain, and Sherlock was among the lucky few patients who were able to gain even more feeling and motor control in his upper limbs and torso through a course of intense physical therapy tailored for stimulator patients. The gruelling regime took all the energy he had for a few weeks, and at several points it took all of John's convincing to get him to continue since Sherlock's old pessimism still easily raised its ugly head when it came to things regarding his injury ever improving.

But, the results were certainly worth every drop of sweat: five months after the minor surgery to install the stimulator, Sherlock could transfer himself from bed to his wheelchair, between chairs and even take a bath without assistance. He had already learned to change his own catheter soon after they'd moved to Baker Street, and with Arthur's help he could now put on and remove most clothing items. The dog had become an invaluable asset at crime scenes, being able to pick things up, trace people and do dozens of other tasks which Sherlock had cleverly managed to teach him. Half of the time, John couldn't tell what sort of an assistance dog Arthur thought he even was — the canine could probably be sent to any service job from sheep herding to border control and he'd do fine. He and Sherlock were a fine team and now, when people on the street paid attention to them, it was with admiration for their teamwork rather than seeing just a man in a wheelchair. Just as John had hoped, Arthur's presence had made Sherlock nearly unself-conscious about going out in public.

The stimulator also brought back some sensory function in areas where Sherlock, post-accident, had been demoted to a mere spectator of his body's reactions. Now, with some focused effort to involve his prostate, his orgasms occasionally produced as messy and tangible results as John's did. Although his cock remained desensitised, they discovered together that Sherlock liked watching John straddling him almost as much as John enjoyed the experience. Reversing those positions remained a thing neither of them suggested nor felt they needed; lack of sensation posed a significant risk of injury if anything bigger than John's finger was used, and what they could safely do together was more than enough to keep them both satisfied. With John's experience and Sherlock's inventiveness, their sex life was never dull. And, with Sherlock now on a suprapubic catheter which could be capped and neatly taped or simply left as it was, spontaneity with sex was both possible and enthusiastically embraced in the household.

Of course, their home life was not without its occasional complications, as Sherlock battled with infections and other health concerns. His improved fitness, however, had made lung infections much less of a threat. They found a balance, a rhythm to their weeks which wasn't too frantic or so dull that Sherlock would start shooting the walls — quite literally.

John loved the frantic days of running himself ragged with the Met, and he loved the quiet days at home.

He loved.

Which is why it felt like the easiest decision in the world to ask Sherlock to marry him.
For Sherlock, however, it wasn't simple at all, for reasons which John had hoped belonged firmly in the past. Instead of a joyous occasion, the proposal kick-started a crisis. Coinciding with one of the less good periods of Sherlock's moods which had been a staple of his life even before the accident, the marriage proposal brought back serious doubts about John's motives — whether John was doing things out of pity and whether he was better off with someone else, someone whose physical abilities matched his own. It took two harrowing weeks of tantrums and sulking followed by a series of rather quiet, dark days before John managed to coax it out of Sherlock that his partner found the whole thing difficult to even process. Even before the accident, he'd never thought he could be anyone's... anything, so why would anyone want him, now? Yes, he loved John and their life, but a part of him had always thought that one day, John would leave. One day, he'd meet someone who could make him happy in all the ways Sherlock thought he never could, because he was who he was, with his perceived physical and emotional limitations.

John called him an idiot and kissed him. After a reassuring round of lovemaking, he thought it best to let the idea rest for some time. Perhaps indefinitely.

"How is that supposed to be a foxtrot?" Sherlock's voice burst out from the sitting room, where he was lounging against the sofa cushions. John shook his head with a fond smile as he divided their curry onto plates, grabbing two ice-cold Kingfishers from the fridge and tucking them under his arm before carrying everything out to the sitting room to join Sherlock. He settled their food on the desk before turning to grab two collapsible trays from where they were stored between the desk and the wall. Takeaway and crap telly or a movie was a regular occurrence; not that Sherlock tended to pay much attention to the programme selected. Usually he preferred to have his tablet handy in order to work on whatever bit of research currently held his interest or to reply to emails from prospective clients.

John cracked open the beers and handed one to Sherlock, planting a kiss on the top of his head. "What’s this? Thought we were going to watch QI reruns."

"My grandmother could do a better box step than that!" Sherlock didn’t appear to have even noticed John, so engrossed was he in scowling at the television and gesturing wildly. "And she’s dead!"

"Budge up, lanky git. I’d like to sit too." John helped Sherlock settle into a sitting position in the corner of the sofa before sliding one of the trays over his lap and setting a plate and fork on top of it. "A’right?"

Sherlock gave a distracted nod in response and took a sip of his beer. His eyes were still fixed on the screen, where a man and a woman in sequined costumes were twirling around the dance floor.

"Wouldn’t have pegged you for a Strictly fan." John said, settling in next to his partner with his own tray. The Tikka Masala smelled heavenly and John wasted no time tucking in. The bitter tang of the beer balanced out the spice of the dish beautifully, and John relished in the coolness against his tongue. It had been a long, hot summer so far, and it was only the end of June.

Sherlock took a bite of his own dinner when the programme switched to an advert, seemingly surprised to see that it had magically appeared on his lap. "Strictly what, John? You know I despise when you speak in riddles." He paused, fork suspended halfway to his mouth, and squinted at John.

Swallowing his chuckle — John knew Sherlock also hated it when he thought he was being laughed at, even if he was impossibly endearing sometimes — he tipped his head at the screen.
"Strictly Come Dancing. That’s what you’re watching. And getting awfully worked up about. How do you know so much about this stuff?"

"Love dancing. Always have." Sherlock swallowed and took a pull of his beer, shrugging. "Well… loved."

John's hand holding the beer bottle halted. When they'd still lived at Musgrave Court, moments like this — reminders of what Sherlock had lost — invariably soured the mood and led the man to withdraw into himself, sometimes for days. During the past year, John had been seeing signs that things were becoming less brittle and less prone to lead to days of sulking in a dark pit of depression, out of which he'd have to work hard to escort Sherlock. Lately, they had been nothing but a momentary wobble, a pause, a hurdle to sidestep together.

This was worse than the average reminder, though; it was something John doubted Sherlock could ever invent a work-around for. Dancing was likely on the same level as losing his violin.

On screen, a couple that appeared graceful enough to him in their movements were suspended in the tension of waiting for the judges' comments. In the sitting room of 221b Baker Street, the air had grown heavy as well. John held his breath, unsure how to proceed.

"John?"

He stumbled out of his thoughts to meet Sherlock's rueful smile.

"Curry's great, isn't it?" John asked with arched eyebrows.

"A bit too much cumin for my taste," was Sherlock's assessment. He rolled his eyes and shovelled in another forkful before launching into a scathing critique of the current competitors’ frame. "Oh, just look at her stretch, John. Despicable."

John drew a breath, allowing his features to arrange into a relieved smile. "If you say so."

"I did just say so; why do people never listen properly?"

A few weeks later, Sherlock came into the sitting room and tossed a flat box onto John’s lap where he was sat reading through Sherlock’s email inbox.

"Get dressed. We’re going out," Sherlock prompted just as John pried the lid off the box and discovered a black dress shirt in his measurements. He chuckled, remembering the first time he'd been gifted clothes by the Holmes brothers.

John noticed Sherlock had changed into a new shirt as well; the deep burgundy brought colour to his cheeks and the triangle of chest he could see peeking above the unbuttoned collar made John’s mouth water. He had ordered a new contraption off Amazon recently which helped him manage the small, tight buttons of dress shirts with ease.

"Out?"

"Yes, out. On a date. It’s when two people who like each other go out and do things. Now, get dressed. And then help me into my trousers."
John glanced down, chuckling at the sight of Sherlock’s worn pyjama bottoms and bare feet.

"A date? What’s the occasion?"

Sherlock didn’t answer him, instead turning and heading for their bedroom without another word.

"John," Sherlock said an hour later, between bites of Angelo’s perfect tiramisu. They’d enjoyed a delicious meal, and Sherlock had made him laugh throughout by deducing in a stage whisper all about the other patrons in the restaurant. Sherlock drew in a quivering breath, causing John to look up from his own forkful in mild alarm.

"Is everything—"

"Yes. Yes, John. Everything is fine." Sherlock waved his hand in mild irritation, but then softened, locking his eyes onto John’s across the table. "Two years ago, right around the corner from here, my life very nearly ended. For months, I was still convinced that it had. I’d lost the only thing I’d ever cared about: The Work. If anyone had asked, before, I probably would have announced that I was practically married to it and I didn’t need anything, or anyone else."

John listened quietly, sensing that this was something Sherlock had been preparing to say for a while and needed to get out.

Sherlock smiled, but that smile had a nervous, brittle quality. "I was wrong. The Work was important, it still is, but it is nothing compared to the importance of you. John, I’ve found that you have become an integral part of my life, both professionally and personally, and I cannot imagine life without you in it."

He shifted, his hands disappearing under the table for a moment. John heard a creak and tilted his head, trying to see what he was doing.

Sherlock shook his head, focussing, before his hands reappeared. In them was a small, black box. He opened it and nestled inside, John could see a silver band.

His eyes went wide at the sight before he lifted his eyes to stare at Sherlock.

"John, I’m not good at this, but I was hoping you would... wear this. Perhaps forever. If you’d be so inclined. Which I hope desperately that you are."

"Sherlock..." Words failed John, so he stood and went around the table, hoping to convey his feelings with a very different use of his mouth. His cheeks felt wet, and when he pulled back from the kiss a moment — or several moments — later, he discovered that Sherlock’s were as well.

Sherlock’s lashes were stuck together in clumps, and he huffed a pretend-irritated breath. "John, is that a yes?"

"Yes. God, yes!"

"John! John, over here!"
Molly’s now-familiar voice broke through the din of clattering cutlery against glassware and quiet conversation as John made his way from the loo, straightening his tie. He scanned the crowd, trying to find Molly’s bright yellow dress, as well hoping to catch an indulgent glimpse of a certain dark head of curls among the wedding guests. He halted when he finally picked out her petite frame from the assembled crowd, grinning in response to her sunny smile flashing from all the way across the room. He changed course and headed towards her, glancing briefly over his shoulder once more to try and spot Sherlock, who’d left their table nearly ten minutes prior, after scarfing down two pieces of chocolate and hazelnut cake.

Vows had been exchanged, dinner had been eaten, more than a few tears had been shed — neither groom would admit to having been the first — and much laughter had been shared during the speeches. Even Mycroft managed some success in his attempts at humour as he recalled events from his and Sherlock's childhood. Lestrade had everyone in stitches over tales from his and Sherlock's joint adventures, and John was glad that the DI did not shy away from looking back through the last few years as he gave his account of how he saw Sherlock's life first devastated and then salvaged — most importantly but not singularly — by love.

"John, of course, is a welcome addition on crime scenes because Sherlock behaves better and I was always rubbish at changing tires, anyway," the DI concluded. "As for Sherlock: he's still the same bloody nuisance at work and I wouldn't have him any other way. I don't think a wedding toast has ever been more warranted than it is right now for these two."

Harry, John's *groomperson* — as she had dubbed herself — had opted out of speaking which John well understood. She had met Sherlock officially only after they had moved to Baker Street, so she said she didn't feel comfortable commenting on the early stages of their relationship. She did seem to instantly get along with Sherlock; they were honest and cynical in a compatible manner.

Sherlock’s mother intercepted John as he moved towards the middle of the hall. John had not forgot her belittling words from their first meeting but he was in such a good mood that he took her attempt at the conversation for the olive branch it was.

"Mycroft speaks very highly of you, and it is apparent that you make Sherlock very happy," Isobel Holmes told John, giving him an appraising look. "Did Sherlock pick his and Mycroft's attires? They're much more contemporary than what I would ever expect Mycroft to wear. I was so happy when Sherlock chose him as the best man."

John was in his RAMC dress uniform — he had hesitated between it and a civilian suit, but Sherlock had *absolutely insisted* — while the two Holmes brothers wore matching three-piece suits with burgundy ties in a subtle houndstooth pattern and burgundy silk vests matching the highlight colours of John's dress jacket lapels and the vest underneath. Sherlock had used the measuring appointment as an opportunity to get some of his old suits refitted as well — hard work with his new PT had led to significant advances in what he could do independently, and built some very refined, visible musculature in his upper body and especially his arms. John loved the way he looked, now. He'd always loved the way Sherlock looked, of course, but in his memories he connected a lingering sense of illness and defeat with the pale, gaunt man Sherlock had been when they'd first met.

Now, he smirked at his mother-in-law's comments over his husband's wedding attire. "Is it that obvious? Yeah, he's the… He knows that stuff."

"As any Holmes should." Isobel was wearing a perfectly fitted periwinkle silk cocktail dress with matching low heels, a sky-blue paisley scarf draped artfully on her shoulders and a wide-brimmed white hat with light blue ribbons and feathers sticking out. "Enjoy your evening, John." She leaned
in to give him a courteous peck on the cheek.

His gaze sweeping around the room, John realised there were many guests he hadn't spoken to yet. The thought was exhausting; it had already been a long day, and it was a tempting through to find Sherlock and escape to bed in the suite at The Lanesborough hotel Mycroft had arranged for them for the weekend as a present.

"The Viscount Lanesborough who it was originally built for was a distant relative and I know the current owners. It was only opened as a hotel in 1990 and is fully accessible. I have enjoyed their afternoon tea service without exception. You'll be well looked after," the older Holmes had promised and John didn't doubt it.

When John was making his way past the table where Tallie was seated next to some Holmes second cousin, she rose to give him a hug. Inviting her hadn't initially occurred to John, but Sherlock had insisted. 'I wouldn't have met you if it wasn't for her,' he had admitted soberly and John had wanted to kick himself for not instantly remembering how big a part she had played in Sherlock's life before he had joined it. She'd been there since the early days, looking after Sherlock nearly daily, putting up with his moods and the abuse he hurled at everyone to vent his frustration and anger, growing to like him as much as she obviously did despite it all.

Though she no longer worked with Sherlock, she had been a godsend once when a case landed John in hospital for five days with a stab wound to the thigh. As devoted as Mrs Hudson was to her tenants, she simply could not handle the physical aspects of helping Sherlock the way John did. Tallie had just finished her degree and was enjoying a two-week holiday before starting at a new job as a mid-tier manager of a chain of private nursing homes when John called her, desperate to find someone familiar to be with Sherlock as he recovered.

The nursing agency had provided skilled help in the past, but John knew Sherlock needed someone in the aftermath that already knew him well and could handle whatever way he needed to expel his lingering panic and stress. Sherlock had been in a right state as John had been loaded onto the stretcher, his eyes wide and his mouth pressed into a nearly invisible line. John had been more worried for his fiancé’s state than his own and had insisted that the ambulance wait until Lestrade arrived to be with Sherlock. Mycroft had needed to step in while John was recovering in the hospital to ensure that Sherlock continued to sleep and eat. John called Tallie on the day he was to be discharged, barely getting the question out before she'd said yes, packed her bags and moved to 221b for a week to help out.

"Thanks for coming," John now told her. She was nearly unrecognizable in a wide-brimmed hat, which nicely complimented her mint green, frilly dress. It was so far removed from the sporty, utilitarian clothes and scrubs she wore for work.

"Wouldn't have missed it for the world," Tallie responded, raising her refilled champagne glass at John as she retook her seat. John flashed a wide smile before continuing his stroll towards the back of the hall.

"Finally!" Molly exclaimed and clasped his arm as he drew near, pulling him down to one of the tables situated near the back of the room. "John, there’s someone I’d like you to meet. My... erm, my plus one. I know you didn’t really say I could bring a date, but you didn’t really say I couldn’t, so I thought that was just because you hadn’t really gone the traditional route, what with those strange invitations and all..."

Admittedly, it had not been the best idea to task Sherlock with the guest list and the wording of the invitations.
"It’s fine, Molly, you're both absolutely welcome," John reassured her, offering his hand to the young man seated to her left. "John Watson."

Molly’s date, a wiry, ginger-bearded man in a loosely hanging navy suit eagerly took the hand offered and shook it with a smile. "Peter Ellis. Congratulations."

John chuckled, pulling out a chair across from Molly and Peter. "Yeah, s'pose you probably knew my name already. Ta."

Molly beamed at them. "Oh, John. It was all so lovely, and I’m just pleased as punch for you both. You look very handsome, and Sherlock..." she swallowed, her eyes misting with tears. "He looks so happy, John. Happier than I’ve ever seen him," she announced with conviction. "Never would have expected that after—" she trailed out, suddenly embarrassed. "Oh God, I didn't mean to—"

"Sherlock would be the first to agree with you, I think," John said soberly, glancing over his shoulder in case he might spot the man in question. Where's he disappeared off to? "It's been a long road to get here. For both of us." He reached across the table and squeezed her hand, clearing a throat that suddenly felt too tight. "He makes me..." Tipping his chin to stare at the ceiling, he sniffed, blinking rapidly against the rise of emotion. The next words came out a bit hoarse. "He makes me want to be a better man, to see beyond my own nose, and I can only hope— I can only hope that it’s enough. He’s the best thing that’s ever happened to me."

Molly beamed, her eyes glistening.

John cleared his throat. "Well, that’s enough about me; I should stop being quite so soppy. This is supposed to be a happy occasion! How’d you two meet, then?"

Peter waggled his thick eyebrows at Molly, who giggled and swatted at his arm playfully. "Oh, stop it, you. We met at work, actually. Barts replaced its IT with a new system that had quite a few hitches at first. Peter works in IT and I... found myself with suddenly a lot of technology issues requiring quite a lot of phone calls. Sometimes they were such serious issues that he had to come all the way down to the morgue, even after he was promoted and no longer really worked in that division..."

While John listened, he couldn’t help glancing around the room once more for Sherlock or even just a glimpse of a wagging tail. He was sure both Sherlock and Arthur were fine, probably held up by some relative somewhere, or deducing the wait staff still milling around collecting leftover dinner plates, but John couldn’t help but worry. Plus, he missed his partner.

He felt someone nudge his foot under the table and turned sheepishly back to the conversation to see Molly watching him, a soft and knowing smile on her face as Peter finished his story and kissed her on the cheek.

"And we’ve been together since. Never would have taken myself for a Glee fan and a cat owner, but here we are," Peter joked.

"I saw Sherlock in the corridor with his brother not more than fifteen minutes ago, John." Molly smiled as John sheepishly ducked his head, caught once again in his husband-searching. "Probably discussing… Oh, I can’t even imagine what those two talk about. Always thought the older one was a bit, well, barmy," Molly admitted. "He always seems to be watching him, even when he’s working and they just bicker constantly."

"Imagine the Christmas dinners."
As the three of them laughed, John noticed the lights beginning to dim. They hadn't planned any programming beyond the speeches, since Sherlock had adamantly insisted that he'd roll out the moment someone tried to involve him in something bourgeois and embarrassing such as some wedding-themed game. People began hurrying back to their seats nevertheless, assuming something significant was happening.

Suddenly, a spotlight illuminated a circle on the floor, where Sherlock sat in his wheelchair, eyes sweeping the crowd — searching for John? Vaguely familiar music started playing, though John didn’t spare much of a thought for it, entranced as he was by the sight of his *husband* in all of his splendour.

The beloved baritone carried a hint of tremor as Sherlock spoke, his voice carrying across the hushed room: "John Watson-Holmes, will you honour me with our first married dance?"

As if drawn by magnetic force, John was across the small, makeshift dance floor without any recollection of having moved his feet. Their guests were silent, and the waiting staff had ceased their bustling about and gathered at the edges of the room.


"I think we'll start with a bit of help," Sherlock said conspiratorially, then nodded to someone behind John.

Three figures emerged: Tallie, Lestrade and Mycroft. The two men knelt beside the chair while Tallie unbuttoned Sherlock's suit jacket, shifted his feet from the supports onto the floor and shoved her hands underneath Sherlock's belt and trouser waist; John couldn't quite see precisely what she was doing. Sherlock draped his arms around the shoulders of the two men by his side, and they grabbed hold of whatever Tallie had liberated from underneath his trousers. Tallie walked behind the chair and wrapped her arms around Sherlock's chest and together, they lifted him to a standing position. Mrs Hudson, familiar with its controls, bustled in to steer the wheelchair off to the side of the open floor area.

Arthur, who had been napping underneath the cake table, perked up at the strange manoeuvre, climbing to his feet and jogging to Sherlock, but a brisk command calmed him down and sent him back to the edge of the open floor.

John stepped closer, eyes wide and incredulous as his husband stood — *stood!* — before him.

"I'm wearing a climbing harness," Sherlock explained in a low voice. "Which I suspect will start chafing soon, so if you wouldn't mind proceeding—"

John was shaken out of his amazed reverie by the prompt. Sherlock's arms were occupied, so all John could do was stand on his toes to deliver a long, passionate kiss on his newly minted spouse's lips — *God, he's tall, I never quite realised* — before settling one hand on Sherlock's shoulder and the other on his trim waist. It took a bit of trial and error to find a synchronised sway to the music between five people, but they managed.

Soon, there was not a dry eye in the audience, and John had to pause to fish out his own handkerchief halfway through the short piece of classical music. Sherlock was concentrating hard, soon shaking slightly with the effort of having to strain his arm muscles to stay upright. He looked relieved and drained when the piece ended, and he was lowered back into the chair which had been promptly delivered by a sniffling and beaming Mrs Hudson.
To John's surprise the spotlight did not disappear, and after a short pause, the sound of a single violin filled the room. Sweat glistened on Sherlock's forehead as he patted his lap, his eyebrows raised playfully. There was a hint of a blush across his cheekbones, though whether it was due to the exertion, nerves or the two glasses of champagne they had enjoyed with dinner, John couldn't be certain, nor did he care.

"I do believe it's customary to grant one's partner two songs. Regrettably, Mycroft's idea of a stag night did not include anything as raunchy as a lap dance, which I intend to remedy right now," Sherlock joked quietly, arms outstretched in invitation.

"I thought you'd wait with all that until we get to the hotel," John replied.

Sherlock dropped his voice into that octave that sent shivers down John’s spine. "With you in that uniform? Absolutely not. Come here, now. Please."

John laughed, carefully angling himself across Sherlock’s thighs until he was moderately comfortable. Then, he wrapped his arms around Sherlock’s neck, breathing him in.

"Always loved dancing. This is... also good," Sherlock decided after a few moments of silence.

"Very good," John confirmed.

Sherlock’s smile was warm, open, and honest and John kissed him, loving him fiercely. The music swelled and John cocked his head, listening. The solo violin, swooping and dramatic and intricate, wove a delicate melody with just the barest hint of a waltz. John listened to it properly for a moment, smiling as the realisation hit. He felt his eyes fill up once more and swiped ineffectively at his cheeks with the back of his hand until Sherlock plucked the handkerchief out of his breast pocket and offered it to him.

"This is you playing, isn’t it? You made this with that thing you showed me?"

Sherlock nodded, amusement tipping up the corner of his mouth. "Yes, John. That thing, which is a very expensive and intricate piece of technology—"

John pressed their lips together to shut him up. "It’s amazing; you're brilliant!" He breathed once the kiss ended, his face mere centimetres away from Sherlock’s.

"I wrote this piece for you. More specifically, I suppose, for us."

John pressed his cheek against Sherlock’s as they turned in a slow circle. "I met Molly’s new boyfriend. He seems nice."

Sherlock hummed in response, and John felt the vibration in his own chest. "At least the two of them fulfilled their duty of keeping you occupied for ten minutes while Mycroft and I set this all up."

"I love you. Can't believe you'd do all that, in front of... people. You stood up for me."

"No, John. I believe it's always been the other way around."
Six months later, a serial killer holds London hostage for weeks until Sherlock cracks the case — their toughest one yet. John had bit his tongue when he should have been insisting on the deal they'd made about rest and food, because when there are victims involved who are still alive but kidnapped and possibly suffering terribly, it's hard to justify any delay.

The days following the case are tough. Dehydration, interruptions in their normal routine and exhaustion, both from extended mental and physical exertion, inevitably lead to a few days of increased pain, spasticity and low moods for Sherlock but they manage. For five days, the occupants of 221B Baker Street exist for no one but themselves, and do not seek or allow the company of others. They prioritize reconnecting and recovering above all else. A lot of tea is made, long baths taken, and gentle lovemaking and meds from a cabinet that isn't locked like the one at Musgrave Court was ensure that things return to normal.

There are many good days to balance the worse ones, days without much pain or spasticity or frustration. Days when they go to a concert, the cinema or a museum and there is functional disabled parking and lifts everywhere and the café counter is just the right height so that Sherlock can see what's on offer. Days when it feels like there isn't that much separating them from other couples. Days when Sherlock's limitation are barely a hindrance to the Work. John watches Sherlock with such fierce, possessive pride as he torments suspects with his intellect, makes the Met staff trip over themselves trying to follow his breakneck deductions and bickers with Anderson like schoolchildren with a triumphant glee. John watches over all this, his heart swelling with a joy so overwhelming that it was strange it could, in a way, be second-hand, as Sherlock indulges in his experiments, lectures at his brother about his seemingly random interests and treats John as an endless source of new sensations and experiences in the bedroom as they explore the limits of what he can feel and go beyond them. For so many years, sex for John had been mostly about the main event. Now, there are more nuances than he could ever have imagined. It is really rather funny how, despite large areas of his body being rather numb, Sherlock is the most sensitive and reactive partner he’s ever had. The reason for that is who Sherlock is, the way his mind and senses have always functioned a little differently, how a lack of sensory function in some parts apparently means that such a genius can reroute his erogenous zones someplace else where John can make use of them and bring him down to his proverbial knees from a well-executed tug of follicles or a gentle nibble of teeth along a long, pale neck.

For John, the greatest miracle in a universe where miracles so rarely seem to materialise when needed, is Sherlock’s determination and resilience. There is still a fear in John, rearing its Medusa’s head every time a day dawns on Sherlock full of debilitating pain, or when he is sidelined during a case because it takes them to places and situations that were inaccessible. That fear whispers to John that one day, Sherlock may stop and say enough. That one day, no effort of John’s can salvage what Sherlock might again see as a life where the grand total is not in the plus column, where the joys are scarce and the suffering too great. But, as the years pass and that day does not arrive, that fear shrinks and becomes smaller and more manageable. Often, it is Sherlock who seems to have strength to spare for both of them. Within days of being felled by an infection or pain he will drag himself up and out, and often John has to try to curb his enthusiasm to return to work before his body is up to it.

They find their way — ‘the way of John and Sherlock, sod what anybody else says’, as Sherlock tells him one night — in so many things. Though they never speak of such possibilities, both pay their quiet respects to the fact that so many things could have happened — big things or small things — to prevent their fateful meeting. Had the bullet hit John a bit lower and pierced a heart chamber, had the accident broken Sherlock’s brain instead of his spine, or had neither of these tragedies ever occurred, they would never have met. That they did is a miracle, one they both work hard not to take for granted.
I love you, he whispers into Sherlock’s hair, kissing his forehead before prying his husband’s fingers, shaking with effort and frustration, from their fumbling attempts at fastening a button-strainingly form-fitting Dolce & Gabbana dress shirt.

I’m yours, he thinks as he lowers himself onto Sherlock who watches, always as wide-eyed as he’d been the first time, as John finds them a rhythm, moving to it for the both of them.

I will always be here, he tells Sherlock when he’s ill with fever, shrouding both of them in the misery of having their normal routines replaced with days of exhaustion and hospitals and pills and oxygen masks.

I’ll never let anything happen to you, John promises as he keeps an eye on Sherlock as they do their bi-weekly swimming laps (assuming there’s no time-consuming case on) in the Seymour Leisure Centre close to their flat. John had sheepishly suggested that they scout out the place to make up for the nightmare at Frimley. Sherlock had agreed, confiding in John that the pool sessions had been one of the few things he’d marginally enjoyed at rehab, and that they were the reason he’d agreed to Frimley in the first place. Now, with the aid of some flotation devices, he no longer needs John to tow him around; he can exercise in the water on his own as long as he has someone close by to help if need be.

It could never be a chore for John, helping Sherlock, as complicated as his needs made their life. He had chosen John, just as John had chosen him and this life, and John has never felt more loved or needed or important. They look forward, not back. They’ve weathered storms before and will again if necessary; only the two of them can decide the value of what they have constructed, and the acceptable parameters of their existence. Their life will never be easy; it will never go back to the way it was before, but together they’ve learned that different is just that — different — and not inferior. Not when it arrives with the love of your life.

——— The End ————

Chapter End Notes

Dear Lord, what do we even say to thank you all for this journey? Thank-you doesn't quite seem sufficient, but it's all we've got. We're really rather kind of speechless at the reception this story has received, and we love and worship and adore you all.

Which is why we'll give you a glimpse into the nonsense, enthusiasm and madness behind the scenes through a Q&A we have posted alongside this final chapter. Have fun. Plus there will be some oneshots. Subscribe to the series — or us — if you want to make sure you'll be kept up to date.

Btw that wedding thing, a groom with a disability being helped by his loved ones to dance with his bride, it really happened. Find some tissues before you watch this.
Works inspired by this: [Podfic] Proving a Point by Podfixx

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