The Moonlight and the Frost

by CaitlinFairchild

Summary

“And once again, you think you know what’s best for me.”

John rises from the chair, the anger and frustration and hurt overwhelming him, bursting out of every pore, and he doesn’t even know for sure that it’s Sherlock he’s angry at, really, but the only reason he tied himself to Mary in the first place is because the person he really loved left him behind, and the woman he married once sat in the shadows above a darkened swimming pool and aimed a sniper rifle at his heart and later shot his best friend in cold blood and cuckolded him and just gave birth to a child that wasn’t his and right now he just can’t do this, he just fucking can’t do this anymore.

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John has to somehow rebuild his life in the wake of Mary's betrayal and Sherlock's deceptions.

Notes

Update 9/10/2014:
And now the longest piece I've ever written is complete.

When I started this fic, I had no real idea where I was going with it all; my only clear concept was writing a post-S3 story told entirely from John's point of view. It took me four chapters to even figure out the story I was trying to tell, and even longer than that for the final pieces to fall into place and the end to come into view.

I've had an amazing time creating this world, and I'm grateful for everyone who supported me along the way.

I hope you enjoy reading this story. I know I've loved telling it.

-CF

Come follow me on Tumblr if you like:

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A million thanks to everyone for reading.
When first we faced, and touching showed
How well we knew the early moves,
Behind the moonlight and the frost,
The excitement and the gratitude,
There stood how much our meeting owed
To other meetings, other loves.
The decades of a different life
That opened past your inch-close eyes
Belonged to others, lavished, lost;
Nor could I hold you hard enough
To call my years of hunger-strife
Back for your mouth to colonise.
Admitted: and the pain is real.
But when did love not try to change
The world back to itself—no cost,
No past, no people else at all—
Only what meeting made us feel,
So new, and gentle-sharp, and strange?

--Philip Larkin
When First We Faced, And Touching Showed

November

Sherlock’s been home from hospital for five days, but nothing is settled. Nothing is comfortable.

Nothing is right.

John is a conscientious, overly solicitous caretaker, making tea and food, rearranging blankets and pillows; Sherlock is well behaved and far too polite, accepting the careful ministrations without comment, both of them steering clear of the petty squabbles and teasing jibes that are their stock in trade when all is easy and well.

The elephant in the room looms large between them, casting its shadow every minute of every day.

Mary.

Tonight, the spectre of her hovers over the two tense, unhappy men as they sit in grey silence in front of a gently crackling fire.

Sherlock takes a deep, careful breath and sets his mug aside, pulls the silver memory stick out of the pocket of his blue dressing gown. John watches him flip it contemplatively between long, graceful fingers.

(John hasn’t read it, because there is nothing on it to read. It is empty, as empty a shell as the woman herself.)

“John,” Sherlock says, his voice deep and solemn. “We’ve put it off for far too long.”

John raises his eyes wearily.

“Sherlock,” he sighs. “Just. Can we not?”
“You know you have to go back to her,” Sherlock says quietly. “And soon.”

John exhales hard, shakes his head. This is not the first time they’ve had this conversation.

“I can’t. You can’t…” John suddenly feels too near tears, his heart aching, his soul exhausted. “Don’t ask this of me, Sherlock.”

Sherlock’s pale silver eyes bore holes in him. “We have to keep her close,” he says, his voice tired and resigned. “Keep her complacent. Make her think she’s safe. If she thinks you’re working against her…” his eyes drift downward to the blank drive. “She’d kill you without a moment’s hesitation to protect herself. Don’t doubt it for a second. You’ve seen what she really is.” His voice softens, almost pleading. “Don’t allow sentiment to cloud your judgment about what you must do.”

John’s head jerks up. His laugh is short, sharp, utterly lacking in humour. “You think I’m hesitating because I feel sentimental towards her?” he asks, eyebrows raised in disbelief.

“That’s not the sentiment I was referring to,” Sherlock says softly, not meeting his eyes.

Understanding washes over John, and the hollow despair in its wake is almost too much to bear. He swallows hard against the lump in his throat, pushes down the hurt. Shakes his head.

“You’re due for a dressing change and a pain pill,” he says.

“John, damn it,” Sherlock says with an edge of irritation. “Don’t change the subject.”

“It’s late, and you need to rest,” John says, getting up and moving toward the kitchen. “I’ll keep an ear out while you’re in the shower to make sure you don’t pass out and crack your head open. Let me know when you’re ready and I’ll come put on a clean dressing.”

He deliberately turns his back to Sherlock, busies himself with locating a clean glass and pulling the bottle of Macallan from the cabinet. Behind him, Sherlock is still for a long moment before sighing in resignation as he gets up and goes into the bathroom without another word.

John returns to his chair and sits down heavily, takes a generous gulp of the Macallan. The burn of the scotch does nothing to alleviate the heavy weight of dread in his chest.

He contemplates his future as he gazes into his glass, listening to the shower run, to Sherlock moving carefully in the bathroom as he steps into the tub, closes the curtain.

(He very deliberately shuts down any stray thoughts of Sherlock in the shower, pale and lean and naked under the hot spray, carefully soaping his body, scrubbing shampoo through his lank, overly long hair, closing his eyes as he rinses, sluicing water through dark curls. Not really helpful, he tells himself, especially considering the issue at hand.)

Sherlock is right. John knows this. He has known ever since the night after Sherlock woke up from his second surgery, when Mycroft sat on the other side of Sherlock’s hospital bed and laid out the details of Mary’s past, her involvement with Moriarty, the way she deliberately placed herself in John’s path after Sherlock’s fall, took advantage of his grief to insinuate herself into his life, his heart.

Mary is a threat that has to be neutralized, at least for the time being, until the brothers can cobble together a workable plan to bring her down for good. To accomplish that John must do the unthinkable, and pretend to forgive the woman who shot Sherlock in the heart.

The water stops; the shower curtain slides on metal rings. Sherlock opens the door leading into his bedroom. A drawer opens and closes.
“All right,” Sherlock calls, his voice tired and strained. Much as he endeavours not to show it, he is still gravely injured and still in considerable pain.

That is what I’m expected to forgive, thinks John. A bullet to the heart, flatlining on the table. Months of excruciating recovery.

How? For the love of God, how?

“Coming,” John answers, draining the last swallow of scotch and setting the tumbler aside. He stands, reaches for his bag behind the chair, and heads to Sherlock’s bedroom.

Sherlock is sitting on the his bed, clad only in soft cotton pyjama bottoms, frayed at the hem from many washings. His pale torso is far too thin, every rib visible. The bullet hole is healing well but still livid and draining just slightly; the thoracotomy scar starts under his right arm, follows the curve of his ribs, stretching around to his back. It looks minor, almost inconsequential, but John knows it hurts him almost as much as the hole in his chest.

John sits on on the bed to the right of Sherlock, laying out supplies, pulling on a pair of sterile gloves. He dresses the thoracotomy incision quickly and neatly, taping gauze into place, then slides to the floor, kneeling in between Sherlock’s legs as he tears open a single use packet of Bacitracin, applies the antibiotic ointment to the small, concave wound.

This is the fifth night they’ve done this, and the undeniable intimacy of it has not lessened one bit. The nearness of their bodies, John’s gloved fingers touching Sherlock so intimately as he tends to the injury-- the closeness of it all is overwhelming, almost terrifying, and John is nowhere near as observant as Sherlock but he still recognizes how the man’s heartbeat races under his hands.

John’s throat is dry, his own pulse hammering as he realizes he’s more than half-hard in his trousers. He swallows, pushing down the upwelling of confusing and overwhelming feelings. “All done,” he says, his voice sounding tight and strangled to his own ears. A moment later, he realizes belatedly his hand is still on Sherlock’s chest. He feels unable to move, unable to pull away.

Sherlock’s heartbeat thrums under his fingertips, so insistently, undeniably alive.

The moment stretches between them.

“There’s no other way,” Sherlock murmurs. “You have to see that.” His hand comes up, covers John’s smaller one. He peels the latex glove away, tosses it aside. Presses John’s bare hand over his heart. “Please know that--please know I wish it wasn’t like this.”

Sherlock’s breath is ragged, shallow. John looks up at him, at pale eyes gone wide and dark in the dim light of the bedside lamp. For a fleeting, hysterical moment he thinks (hopes) Sherlock is going to kiss him.

“Please,” Sherlock says again, his voice low and hoarse.

John turns his hand over, interlaces their fingers together. He gives in to a mad impulse, bringing the tips of Sherlock’s fingers to his mouth, brushing them across his lips. Sherlock's breath hitches just the tiniest bit.

They stay like that for several long moments, breathing together, unwilling to break the fragile spell between them.

Sherlock takes a breath. “When we get clear of all this,” he says, eyes downcast, voice shaky. “When this is done, I hope--”
He trails off, shakes his head, eyes focused on John’s mouth.

John nods, once, understanding the emotion underneath the uncertain words. “When this is done,” he murmurs. “Yes. All right.” He reluctantly releases Sherlock’s hand, stands, gathers discarded wrappings and gloves from the bedspread and drops them in his bag. Sherlock is still, unmoving, his dark curls a halo in the dim light.

John reaches out, brushes gentle fingers over damp locks. “Try to get some sleep,” he says, his voice rough with unspoken feeling.

Sherlock nods without raising his head and John retreats, closing the door behind him, dropping his bag in the sitting room, picking up his glass and returning to the kitchen for another three fingers of scotch.

The burn of expensive alcohol does nothing to soothe the ache in his heart or the sting of unshed tears in the back of his throat.

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February

“John, darling?” Mary calls up the steps. “I’m going out for a bit. Beth asked me to come over for coffee.”

John is lying on his back on the neatly-made bed. Their bed, the double bed he again shares, however unwillingly, with the woman he calls his wife. John sleeps with his back to her, clinging to the edge of the mattress, unwilling to touch her even in passing, even in sleep.

They haven’t been intimate in months, not since the night before Mary pulled the trigger and fired the bullet that pierced Sherlock’s heart.

Just the very thought of touching her makes him feel dizzy and ill with revulsion.

But he took her back. He did, in the end, give in to Sherlock, his insistence that despite her lies and deception and attempted murder, the safest place for her to be was next to John, soothed into complacency by his supposed forgiveness.

He hasn’t forgiven her, though. Of course he hasn’t. Not one single word of his Christmas Day speech made mention of forgiveness. He took her back because plans demanded it --Your way, Sherlock. Always your way-- but he will never, ever feel any kind of love for her again.

Sometimes John is almost caught by surprise at the intensity of his hatred. It’s to be expected, he supposes. He could never hate someone this much if he hadn’t believed in them before. Hadn’t trusted them. Hadn’t loved them.

And he had, once. He’s examined this from every possible angle, and he knows the truth: he did love her. It was a pale shadow of what he felt for Sherlock, a mere flicker compared to the raging fire Sherlock lit in his heart; but she was there when Sherlock wasn’t, when he died, when he left John broken and alone, and he had truly loved her for it.

John loved Mary, once upon a time. Then she betrayed him.

The betrayal, in the end, is what hurts the most. It’s lodged like a bone in his throat, something he cannot swallow down. The betrayal is what he can never forgive, no matter what carefully-crafted non-apology he may offer in words.
(The idea that some fraction of Mary’s betrayal may be John’s own doing, may be tied into his own intense and messy feelings for the man who came back from the dead...oh, he’s not unaware. Not at all unaware that in some nebulous, poorly-defined way, he has betrayed both Sherlock and Mary in the haze of his own confusion and sorrow. Interestingly, the fact of his own complicity in this current clusterfuck makes him hate Mary just that little bit more.)

His hands are folded across his belly as he stares at the ceiling, resolutely gazing at nothing in particular. Mary’s voice registers, triggers an upswelling of something thick and black and ugly in his chest. Anger? Disappointment? Despair? He doesn’t even know anymore. All he knows is the black wave will swallow him whole if he allows himself to feel it, so he doesn’t. He just stares at the ceiling. Notes a spiderweb forming in the corner. Need to take a broom to it, he thinks. Knock it down.

Dismantle the web. For some reason that thought resonates with him.

“John?” Mary calls up again, this time an edge of annoyance in her tone. “Did you hear me?”

You have to live a lie, Sherlock had said. Live a lie to get to the truth. Can you do that, John?

John closes his eyes. Swallows. Forces himself into a neutral, civil tone. “Yes. I heard you.” He sits up, swings his legs over the edge of the bed. Gets up and walks to the top of the steps. He gazes at his wife, enormously round, nine full months pregnant, looking somewhat like a child’s red balloon in her wool coat.

If things had gone just a little differently, right now John would be smiling down at her in soft, amused fondness. But that’s not how it turned out. Maybe it never could have. Maybe the lie was too huge to stay hidden. Maybe they were doomed from the very start.

As John looks at her he feels stiff, mechanical, tension in every limb. Like a marching toy with an overwound spring.

Say something normal, for God’s sake. He shoves the bad feelings down and smiles.

“Do you want me to do something about dinner?” he asks politely.

“I don’t know how late I’ll be out. Joe’s being a real git again and....” Mary shrugs, smiles, the lines by her eyes crinkling in a perfect display of cheerful bemusement. “Girl talk,” she says. “Relationship advice. You know.”

Her face is perfectly guileless, open, cheerful. She has no tells. That very lack is her tell. John is getting pretty good at this.

A vision rises, unbidden. Sherlock in the back of that ambulance, pale as death itself, blood welling from a dark round hole in his chest as his vitals crashed and John trembled with sick cold fear, absolutely certain he was going to watch his bestfriendloveofhisheartidon'tevenknowohgodsherlock die in front of him again.

Relationship advice, he thinks. From you? Make sure to tell your friend to keep it simple, with a clean head shot to solve her issues.

He says none of this aloud.
Because he has a job to do. He will do this, he will pretend, he will live this lie for as long as he can because Sherlock asked him to, because Sherlock said they needed to buy time, because Sherlock said they needed to keep her placated for just a while longer. But actual forgiveness?

Not ever, not ever, not ever.

John pastes a smile on his face. It feels like a rictus of revulsion. Sherlock is right again; John is a terrible liar. He tries to soften his lips into something more passably natural.

*I am very pissed off, and it will come out now and then. Or, maybe always, always and forevermore.*

“All right,” he says neutrally. “Have fun.”

“If I’m out past dark, I’ll text you,” she says, pulling on her gloves.

“Sure,” John says. “See you later.”

He turns and goes back into the bedroom before she can say anything else, shuts the door and resumes his corpse-like pose on the cheerful, homey starburst quilt covering the bed.

He’s silent. Still. Waiting.

He’s been waiting for two weeks.

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**Thirteen days earlier**

*The text was from a number John didn’t recognize.*

**Lunchtime walk. Hyde Park. Be in front of Wellington Museum at 12:30.**

*It was the first communication he had received from Sherlock since his plane returned to the airfield twenty-six days earlier; Sherlock had descended the steps, mumbled a vague promise to be in touch, and slid into the dark interior of a waiting car.*

*Before his dark head ducked behind the car door, his pale eyes flicked up to John’s, just for a fraction of a second.*

*As always, their silent communication rang through loud and clear.*

*Be patient, that look said. I’ll be in touch.*

*So John waited. And waited. And began to wonder if he had misunderstood, if his nonverbal connection with Sherlock had been broken by deception and betrayal and distance...so he can’t deny how his heart leaps at the ten-word message, how the muted tones of his world snap into sharp-edged brightness at the thought that Sherlock needs him. Wants him.*

*He’s not unaware of the different shades of feeling in that thought.*

*John rearranged his schedule--the front desk nurse annoyed and snappish but John could care less, it barely registered--and slipped out of the surgery just before noon. At 12:30 he’s in front of the museum, trying to look casual as a long, shiny black car pulled up next to him.*

*John opened the car door, slid across the leather seat.*
“Oh,” he said, not bothering to hide his disappointment. “It’s you.”

“Always a pleasure to see you as well, Doctor,” Mycroft replied sardonically.

“I don’t suppose you could possibly tell me where the hell Sherlock is,” John said.

(He wasn’t at Baker Street. John knew that. He had been by three times, once on a pretext of picking up some forgotten items and twice for no reason at all, his need to see Sherlock superseding his better judgment (and didn’t it always), each time feeling more and more useless and foolish, certain he wasn’t imagining Mrs Hudson’s vaguely pitying look as she poured tea and explained yet again that no, she hadn’t seen Sherlock at all since the two of them had left for Christmas dinner at the Holmesses.)

“You are correct,” Mycroft said. “I can’t. I can, however, give you back something you’ve misplaced.” He opened a sleek black case and handed John his Sig.

John looked at the gun in his hand--the gun Sherlock had used to blow a hole in Charles Augustus Magnusen’s skull--and back up to Mycroft’s serenely unconcerned visage.

“How did you…” John sputtered. “How could you…Mycroft, this is an unlicensed firearm and also, in case you’ve forgotten, evidence in a murder case.”

“Charles Magnusen died of a massive cerebral haemmorhage,” Mycroft answered smoothly. “Tragic, yes, but certainly not a crime.”

“Sherlock shot him in the head in front of twenty men.” John shook his head as if trying to clear out cobwebs. “Twenty witnesses. How can you possibly sweep that under the rug?”

“I’m sure I have no idea what you’re talking about,” replied Mycroft.

John shook his head in resigned disbelief. “A cerebral haemmorhage,” he mused aloud, a small, humourless grin forming on his lips.“That’s one way of describing what happened to him, I suppose.”

“At any rate, that’s not what we’re here to discuss,” Mycroft said dismissively.

“Then what are we here to discuss?” John said with more than a trace of annoyance.

“You’ll be needed soon,” Mycroft answered.

“By whom?”

“Don’t ask stupid questions, John.” Mycroft nodded at the gun. “Keep that close at hand, make sure your mobile is on you at all times.” He fixed him with an intent blue gaze. "And remember this word: Byzantium. Repeat it back to me, if you’d be so kind."

John’s eyebrows drew together in confusion. "I'm sorry. What?"

He saw Mycroft strain with the effort of not rolling his eyes. "Just repeat it back to me, if you please."


Mycroft nodded. "Thank you. Now from here on out, be ready."

“Ready for what?” John asked.
"You’ll know it when it happens," Mycroft said. "Until then, continue on as if everything were normal."

"Nothing about my life is fucking normal," John muttered mostly to himself, tucking the gun into the waistband of his trousers as the car came to a stop at the intersection nearest his workplace.

"Always a pleasure, Doctor Watson." Mycroft inclined his head towards the car door, a none-too-subtle indicator that John was being dismissed.

As the car pulled away John stood on the sidewalk a moment longer, pedestrians flowing around him unheeded. The butt of his gun pressed into the small of his back, a comforting presence under his tweed sport coat.

He had been called back to the battlefield. Sherlock’s battlefield.

Despite everything desperately fucked up in his life, John couldn’t deny the tiny fizzing bubble of joy deep in his heart.

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The front door opens and closes. The car starts, the engine noise rising and receding as Mary eases out of the parking space and drives away.

John lies on the bed, feeling the black waves of anger and despair cresting and breaking just below the solid, immutable surface.

Mary is lying. Wherever she is going, John knows in his bones that she is lying.

So he waits.

A few minutes later, his phone vibrates in his pocket. He pulls it out, reads the text.

Don’t be alarmed. SH

John sits up, looks around, sees...nothing.

He rises to fetch his gun from the back of the wardrobe, feeling the smile form on his face. It’s something small and sardonic and tinged with bitterness, but still. After all this time, something is finally happening, thank God.

As he opens the metal lockbox to fetch his Sig, the hairs on the back of his neck prickle unmistakably. John is suddenly certain there is someone else in the room with him.

He whirls around, gun held steady in front of him. It's not loaded, but he might be able to scare someone off--

The man in the black jacket and jeans raises his hands, backs up a step.

"Byzantium," he says.

John doesn't lower the gun but remembers the code word and Sherlock's text. "Okay," he says. "I'll play. What the hell are you doing in my house?"

"I'm here to kidnap you, sir," the man replies mildly, lowering his hands. He nods towards the gun. "And where we're going, you might want that loaded."
John wakes up, disoriented. He is lying curled on his right side, metal floor beneath him, hands bound behind his back, the smell of diesel fuel strong in his nostrils. Clearly the drugs haven't yet fully worn off because it feels like everything is rocking under his prone body.

Oh. He's on a boat.

His head clears rapidly. The dose of the drug was enough to knock him out convincingly, but light enough to recede quickly, and in another moment he fully recalls the details of the plan. His feet are bound tightly, but the rope around his wrists is loose, easy to wriggle free. The butt of his gun is still pressed reassuringly into the small of his back.

"You're awake," Mary says flatly, inspecting her cuticles, gun held loosely in her right hand.

'What the hell is going on?' John says, deliberately sounding more drowsy and disoriented then he feels.

“I had to make a deal,” Mary tells him, as casual as if they were discussing what to watch on telly. She shakes her head. “A boat,” she sighs. “Why did it have to be a boat? Not terribly considerate of my situation.”

“What kind of deal?” John asks, already knowing the answer.

“I really thought he was dead,” Mary replies. “I thought I was free of him. I can’t owe him, you see. I need to make sure he’ll leave us alone. So I cut a deal with him. A trade. One life for another.” She takes a deep breath and rests her hand on her belly, a look of vague nausea on her face. “I’m sorry, John, but I really had no choice.”

"You're not sorry," John says, not bothering to keep the hurt and disgust out of his voice.

"Okay," Mary concedes. "I'm probably not. I'm willing to do whatever it takes to settle my debt with him so I can raise my daughter in peace."

“With who?” John asks hoarsely, horror dawning on him. He had known Mary was bad, was an amoral psychopath, a murderer, but this is the first time he had seen her for what she really is, what she is truly capable of.

“You know who, John,” she says, her tone mocking. “You know who I’m dealing with.”

A deep baritone voice echoes in the gloom. “But it seems you do not, Mrs. Watson,” Sherlock emerges from the shadows of the cargo hold, eyes pale silver even in the dim light. He doesn’t spare John even a passing glance. “Really, you were very slow,” he tells Mary evenly.

"I should have known," Mary sighs with something very like annoyance. Her eyes narrow slightly but her face registers no shock or surprise, showing nothing but the flat, calculating coldness of her true nature.

"You should have," Sherlock says.

“Jim really is dead, then,” Mary says, her voice cold.

“Undeniably so.” Sherlock gives her a disdainful, condescending look. “Staging his return was such a simple job, I can’t believe you fell for it. A few phone calls and text messages? Mycroft said you would, but I admit I had my doubts. I must say, I’m curious as to whether pregnancy hormones are
making you slow, or if I overestimated Moriarty’s second in command all along.”

Mary aims her gun at Sherlock’s forehead, her face pale and damp but her hand perfectly sure and steady. “Insult me some more, and you’ll see how slow I am.”

Lying forgotten on the cold metal floor, John feels the revulsion spread through him.

This is why Sherlock kept him in the dark, lied to him, manipulated him, pushed him back to her against his will--to keep him safe from a woman who would kill him as easily as kiss him. Who would sell him to Jim Moriarty, to God knows what kind of fate, without a single blink of an eye.

John is finally, at last, beginning to truly understand why Sherlock had kept this from him. He hates it, it fills him with resentful anger that Sherlock treats him like a child that needs shielding from the harsher truths, but for the first time he does indeed understand.

He gathers his wits, remembers his role in all this, and begins to stealthily pull his hands free of the deliberately loosened rope around his wrists while neither Mary nor Sherlock are paying him any mind.

Sherlock cocks an eyebrow. “Kill me? Perhaps eventually, but I know you, Mary, and I know you’re the sort who will get as much information as you can out of me before you kill me. And you know I’m the sort who loves to hear myself talk.”

Mary shrugs and nods, conceding the truth of his words. “You brought Moriarty back from the dead just to draw me out?” she asks.

“Mycroft did,” Sherlock says, and John is fairly certain he’s not imagining a trace of something like pride in his voice, in the machinations of in his clever big brother. “I only learned of his plans after the fact.”

Mary tilts her head to the side, coldly reptilian. “But why go to the trouble?”

“Three reasons. One, get me out of exile and keep me in England. Two, keep you from gathering up the remains of Moriarty’s web and reestablishing his network under your command, which you surely would have done once you grew bored with playing housewife. You’ve already moved funds and established three alternative identities that we’re aware of. Three, keep John safe from you. You were going to sell him out at some point, for power or information or leverage or just to be rid of him.” Sherlock’s lips curve into a thin, sardonic smile as he tilts his head toward John. ”You acted on that front even quicker than I suspected you would. I thought sentiment would stay your hand for at least a few more months.”

"Sentiment," Mary sneers. "As you might say, Sherlock, not really my area."

Sherlock shrugs, quirks an eyebrow. "I overestimated your capacity, it seems. Mea culpa."

Mary tilts her head in consideration. “You know, you could have accomplished all that a lot more safely by having me arrested in my kitchen,” she points out.

“Four reasons, then. I admit, I always like a dramatic confrontation,” Sherlock replies with a shrug and a quirk of his lips. "Runs in the family."

“And of those four,” Mary sneers, “which one is most important to you, I wonder?”

“You tell me,” Sherlock replies evenly.
“Of course.” Mary rolls her eyes in contempt. “It’s all for John, isn’t it? Everything, always for John.” She laughs spitefully. “All for your faithful pet. Unfortunately for you, your obsession blinded you to the fact that there’s no way I will let you leave this stupid boat alive.” Her eyes narrow. “No, better yet.” She shifts, pivots on her heel, levels the gun at John’s prone form. “I think I’ll kill him first.”

Mary's face is calm, but John doesn’t miss the minute tremble of her hand. He’s pretty sure it’s not emotion. Her eyes narrow in her pale face as she stares Sherlock down. “You think I’m the one who’s slow? You’re the one who let your mind get clouded by your sentiment, by your desperate lovelorn pining for precious, slow, oblivious John Watson.”

John sees his chance and takes it, rolling hard to the right, going for his gun with his left hand.

“Not quite as oblivious as you think,” John says, Sig Sauer trained unwaveringly on Mary’s upper body. She turns to face him; her eyebrows twitch upwards in the barest hint of surprise.

“Oh, John,” she sighs, and he can’t quite parse the tone of her voice--is it bemusement? Annoyance? Pleading? Something of all three? “You won’t really shoot the mother of your child.”

“Good thing you’re not, then,” John says, and pulls the trigger.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

“I’m sorry, John,” Sherlock says quietly. “I truly am, but you saw tonight what she is capable of, and you are an unconvincing liar. If you had known for certain and she found out, she would have easily killed you without a moment’s hesitation. It was a huge risk involving you at all.” He looks down at the ground. “I am sorry for not being completely forthcoming, but I will never apologize for trying to keep you safe.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Mary’s right arm drops heavily, the gun clattering to the floor as she collapses with a sharp, bitten-off cry. Sherlock snatches up her weapon as John thumbs on the safety of his own gun, shoves it into his coat pocket, and struggles to untie the rope around his feet.

Sherlock briefly checks Mary and then comes to kneel next to John, produces a pocket knife and makes quick work of the ropes.

"You hit her in the forearm,” he tells John. "She'll be fine for a moment. Are you all right?"

"Just great," John replies, adrenaline still coursing through his veins. He feels calm, almost cheerful. "Kidnapper was a lovely chap. We got on quite well. May go out for a pint later."

Sherlock’s eyes crinkle in a flash of amusement as he stands, holds out his hand to assist John off the floor. John accepts, allows Sherlock to pull him to his feet. Their eyes meet for the briefest of moments before John turns toward Mary.

He rolls her onto her left side as she moans in pain. Her coat makes the injury difficult to find--the crimson wool makes blood almost impossible to see, especially in this low light-- but soon he finds the round holes in the sleeve, just below her elbow.

“You shot me,” Mary snarls between gritted teeth. “You actually tried to kill your pregnant wife, you bastard.”

“If I was trying to kill you, you’d be dead,” John informs her bluntly as he palpates the area none too gently, making her flinch and hiss in pain.

“And in point of fact,” Sherlock notes dryly, leveling Mary’s own gun at her, “I doubt a court of law would uphold the validity of your marriage license. You are not John’s legal spouse in any constructive capacity.”

“That, too,” John agrees. "Hand me that knife for a moment?” Sherlock hands over the knife, and John cuts away the sleeve of Mary’s coat. “Clipped the ulna,” he notes. “I was going for a nice clean soft tissue injury, but oh well.” He looks up at Sherlock. “Give me your scarf.”

“This is Paul Smith,” Sherlock protests, but unwinds the blue cashmere and hands it over. John wraps the fabric snugly around Mary’s arm, competently professional but not precisely gentle in his touch. He knots the makeshift bandage snugly and sits back on his heels, regards her evenly. Here, in
the aftermath of confrontation and violence, adrenaline still singing in his veins, he feels perfectly
calm and composed and at peace.

“Not only are you not my legal wife,” he says, “but the baby’s not mine, is it.” His inflection
indicates a statement, not a question.

Mary closes her eyes against John's cold, unforgiving gaze. “No,” she says with a pained sigh. "I
don’t believe so.” She takes a deep breath, releases it, and opens her eyes to meet his. “How did you
know?”

“Janine told me,” John says. “Six days ago. Well, she told me about you and David Foster. But it
only confirmed my suspicions.”

(He remembers the letter delivered to him at work, Janine's looping, feminine scrawl. She asked me
to cover for her. More than once. I checked against her due date on an online calculator and...my
conscience just can't take it. I'm sorry. I hope you don't hate me for this, but if you do I understand. I
really think there's something off about her, something not right. Please be careful. )

“I wanted it to be yours,” Mary says. “I would rather it was yours. But you were so insistent on
being careful.” She glares at him as well as she can muster through the pain. “Just one more way you
kept yourself from me, I suppose.”

The way she says it, like having another man’s child is John’s fault--it’s so utterly ridiculous, so
selfish, yet there is a grain of truth in there as well and John can’t help but laugh at the twisted
wreckage of it all, a short bitter snort devoid of humour. He’s opening his mouth to reply—*you don’t
get to blame me, not this time, not ever again*—when the reinforced door opens with a nerve-twisting
screech of metal on metal. A flood of dark-suited SIS agents pour into the cargo hold, guns drawn,
shouting at them to stand down. John’s eyes flick up to meet Sherlock’s and in unspoken agreement
the two of them back away from Mary, place their weapons on the ground, and put their hands on
their heads. A pair of EMTs cross the room towards Mary, wheeling a stretcher.

“Your brother sent the cavalry,” John observes, perhaps a bit unnecessarily.

“Of course,” Sherlock says dryly. “The whole encounter was closely monitored from the very start. I
may be reckless with my own life, but I do try to be not quite so cavalier with yours.”

"And the fake kidnapping thing?" asks John.

"Easy enough to plant undercover agents and steer Mary towards them. Mycroft did the heavy lifting
there as well."

"He's an obnoxious bastard," John notes, "but he is a *useful* obnoxious bastard, isn't he?"

"At times." Sherlock winces and blows out a breath, as if the words of almost-praise for his brother
are causing him actual physical pain.

John hears a familiar voice and looks up; behind the bevy of agents are several uniformed police
officers as well as the unmistakable silver head of DI Lestrade. His eyes widen in disbelief when he
sees Mary curled on the floor, whimpering, clutching her hastily bandaged arm.

“I thought I'd misunderstood,” Greg says in disbelief as he strides up to them.

“No misunderstanding,” Sherlock says, taking his hands off his head as John does the same. “Are we
to be arrested then?” he asks the inspector.
“Not arrested, no,” Greg answers, still looking from Mary back to the two of them as if trying to process the information his eyes are giving him. “Taken in for questioning.”

“Very well,” Sherlock replies neutrally. “John, if there’s anything you’d like to say to your wife, now is probably the time.”

But John doesn’t look at Mary, instead turning his attention to the EMTs.

“She’s primip,” he tells them, “thirty-nine weeks, advanced maternal age. Her injury shouldn’t pose a threat to the foetus, but monitor her pulse and BP closely. Stress-induced spontaneous labor is a distinct possibility.”

One of the paramedics looks up at him. Her eyes flick to his wedding band, her brow creasing just slightly in confusion.

“Are you her husband, sir?”

John’s gaze shifts over to Mary’s face and suddenly he sees her clearly, perhaps for the very first time. She stares back at him, her harshly shadowed features twisted into a grimace, her wide, coldly blue eyes holding nothing but anger and contempt.

He knows later he will keenly feel loss, and regret, but right now his heart is a stone, holding no warmth or tenderness whatsoever for her. He had loved Mary Watson, once, but she is long since gone. This woman in front of him is a complete stranger.

“No,” John says, turning away. “I’m not.”

***

The two men are ushered politely into the police cruiser; no cuffs, as they are honoured guests of the Metropolitan Police Department. Sherlock gestures with his head for John to go first, then slides into the car after him. As the car pulls into traffic John glances over at Sherlock, seated next to him, studiously avoiding his gaze.

“Goddammit, “ he sighs. “You knew, didn’t you.”

“I didn’t know for certain,” Sherlock says. “I had strong suspicions.”

“Why the hell didn’t you tell me?” John demands.

“Explain to me exactly when would have been a good time to bring this up?” Sherlock asks with an edge of tired annoyance.

“Any time in the past, I don’t know, six fucking months,” John says, the words not really coming out as angry as he intends, but more as a resigned sigh as post-crisis exhaustion begins to overtake him, leaving him feeling shaky and hollow inside.

“It was bad enough that you had to pretend to forgive her,” Sherlock says. “Add that into the mix, and there was no way you would have been able to maintain the façade.”

“Yeah, I know,” John says. “I get that. It’s just—it’s a fucking awful feeling.”

“I’m sorry, John,” Sherlock says quietly. “I truly am, but you saw tonight what she is capable of, and you are an unconvincing liar. If you had known for certain and she found out, she would have easily killed you without a moment’s hesitation. It was a huge risk involving you at all.” He looks down at
the ground. “I am sorry for not being completely forthcoming, but I will never apologize for trying to keep you safe.”

“Dammit, Sherlock,” John says with a sigh. He knows Sherlock was trying to do what’s best, keep him from harm. What’s done is done.

“All right,” he says at last. “All right.”

“I’m sorry,” Sherlock says again, looking down at his feet. “I just…I couldn’t put you at any more risk.”

“All right,” John repeats.

The two men are silent for a moment, gathering their respective thoughts.

“That was an impressive shot, especially in such low light,” Sherlock offers, tentative, seeking absolution.

“You knew I could do it,” John replies. “In fact you counted on it, otherwise you would have had her arrested in the kitchen like she said. That leads me to ask--why did you set all this up? Take such a huge risk?”

“The same reason I brought you to Leinster Gardens,” Sherlock says. “I know you feel I’ve kept you too much in the dark, but what I wanted was for you to hear the truth for yourself.”

“Well, thank you for that,” John says. “It was damned foolish of you, though. You took a huge chance, facing her armed, relying on me to get myself loose in time.”

"The choice of an abandoned cargo ship was deliberate," Sherlock says. "I took the chance that her condition would make the smells and the motion of the ship close to unbearable, and I was correct. It disabled her enough to give you plenty of time to act."

John recalls Mary's paleness, her shallow breathing, the minute tremble of her hand. "Seasickness as defensive strategy," he muses aloud. "That's brilliant."

John doesn't miss the flash of warmth in the detective's eyes at the words of praise. Then the moment passes and Sherlock exhales softly, almost a sigh. “Besides, you’ve always come through when I needed you. Always. I’ve never doubted it, and you’ve never let me down. I only--” he turns his face away from John, looks out the car window. His face is pensive, almost sad. “I only wish you could say the same of me.”

John tries to breathe past the knot in his chest, tries to find words to convey the swell of feeling at Sherlock's murmured words of self-reproach. Failing to find any, he places his fingers on a bony knee and squeezes once, gently, before bringing his fingers back to rest on his own thigh.

An odd, almost dreamy look crosses Sherlock’s features for just the briefest of moments, then is gone so quickly John almost thinks he imagined it altogether.

***

As a uniformed constable escorts an unusually compliant Sherlock toward the questioning area further down the hall, Lestrade ushers John into a small, grey, windowless room. He shuts the door behind him with a soft click.

“You hungry?” Lestrade asks. “Need the loo?”
John shakes his head. “No, I’m fine for now.” He turns to Greg, brows knitting together in confusion. “Can I ask you a question, though?”

“Sure. Not sure I can answer it, but go ahead.”

“You know I deliberately shot Mary with an unlicensed firearm,” John says. He smiles thinly, politely. At any other time Greg is a mate, but in this moment he is a cop, a good one despite everything Sherlock says, and John is undeniably wary. “Why am I not being arrested, fingerprinted, swabbed for powder residue, any of those things?”

Greg scratches the back of his neck, eyes deliberately avoiding John’s. “There are other parties involved here, parties whose purview far exceeds the Met, you could say. We need to cover our collective arses, paperwork-wise, get our stories straight. But I’m certain you won’t be arrested.” His gaze finally comes to rest on John’s face. “Is that enough to go on for now?”

John nods. “It is. Thank you, Greg.”

“You’re welcome.” Lestrade turns to leave and pauses, his hand resting on the doorknob. He turns back to John.

“I’m sorry, for what it’s worth. About Mary. It’s a hell of a thing.”


Lestrade nods once, turns the doorknob and leaves the room. John exhales a breath he didn’t know he had been holding, shrugs out of his jacket, and drapes it across the table before sagging into the battered metal folding chair.

A young, tired-looking civilian admin brings John tea a short time later. It’s overbrewed and fairly awful, but it’s hot and liquid and John drinks it gratefully.

After the tea is gone, John finds himself alone with his muddled and swirling thoughts to occupy him. He takes a slow, careful inventory of the chaos in his mind, trying to make some sense of it all.

His dreadful, misbegotten sham of marriage is truly over.

Then there’s the baby. Although he can’t help but be concerned about her, most likely she is not his biological child.

(If she’s not, is he still willing to be her father? He isn’t ready to face the answer to that question just yet.)

Moriarty is dead for real, his shadow no longer looming large, the cold greasy traces of fear John always felt at the thought of him finally gone for good.

And, perhaps most important of all, the question of what all of this means for his future with Sherlock hangs over everything, colours his every thought.

(Does he have a future with Sherlock? What does that vaguely framed thought even really entail?)

Perhaps, John thinks, when he has a chance to rest and process it all he will feel better, unencumbered, relieved, eager to face his future. But right now, in this moment, he just feels overwhelmed and exhausted and he has no idea what is going to happen next.

(And despite Greg’s reassurance, John finds himself wondering if what happens next to him will
involve being classified as a Category A prisoner.)

John gives in briefly to his exhaustion, resting his gritty eyes for just a moment, his head pillowed against his folded arms on the table. His tiredness overcomes his anxiety and confusion and he doesn’t even realize he’s fallen asleep until he awakens to the young woman gently touching his shoulder.

“Dr Watson,” she says apologetically, “sorry for waking you, sir, but the Detective Inspector asked me to come in and see if you needed anything before he comes in to take your statement.”

“Ummm…” the demands of John’s body catch up to his blurry brain, and he finds his tongue is thick and dry and he rather desperately needs a piss as well. “Could use a trip to the loo. And a glass of water, if you don’t mind.”

“Of course, sir,” the admin says with a polite smile. “Come with me, please.”

One trip to the men’s room and one plastic cup of flat tap water later, Lestrade finally comes back into the room, holding a slim manila folder. He seats himself on the opposite side of the battered metal table from John.

“Sorry for keeping you waiting, mate,” he says conversationally. “Bureaucracy, y’know.”

“It’s fine,” John says automatically. “So, we’re doing the statement now?”

“Well, in a sense.” the DI pulls a printed sheet of paper out of the folder and a pen out of his shirt pocket. “Here’s your statement,” he says. “Sign it. You can read it too, if you like. Won’t make a bit of difference, though.”

John’s eyebrows quirk up in a bit of puzzlement, but he takes the paper and reads it.

“A foreign national engaged in crimes against the Crown, wounded in the course of apprehension by an SIS intelligence officer,” he reads. He looks up at Lestrade. “So we’re pinning this all on a fabricated secret agent?”

“Well. Um, no,” Greg mutters, looking a bit confused and uncertain. “Not really a fabrication as such.”

John looks at him in confusion for a long moment before the lightbulb goes off.

“It’s Sherlock,” John says, and scrubs a hand across his face as he shakes his head in disbelief. “Sherlock is fucking MI6.”

“You didn’t know.” Greg sounds a bit surprised.

John closes his eyes and sighs. “No, I didn’t, and I’m finding the list of things I don’t know about him grows longer by the day. It’s a really delightful feeling.”

“Well, now that you know, I guess I can tell you a little more,” Greg says. “Sherlock was active in his early twenties. It wasn’t a good fit, I guess, and I think it was after he left them is when his real problems started. He was reinstated after... well, while he was gone. I was surprised to learn he went back to it.” He looks at John. “How did you think he had the resources to go hunt down Moriarty’s web overseas?”

“I guess I never really thought about it,” John says. He remembers the day at the airfield, Sherlock telling him about a six month assignment in Eastern Europe, and suddenly he feels like a right moron.
for not putting the pieces together earlier. “It makes sense, I suppose. ‘Course, it would have been
great if he had actually mentioned this at some point. Not that he ever tells me fucking anything.
Why would this be any different?” He sighs in resigned annoyance, grabbing the pen off the table
and scrawling his signature at the bottom of the page.

One more secret. One more mystery. One more part of his life Sherlock hadn’t seen fit to share with
him.

One more day gone, and one more brick in the wall that’s been growing between them over the past
eighteen months.

John wonders what will happen on the day that wall grows so high he and Sherlock can no longer
see each other anymore.

***

Sherlock is waiting for him in the lobby, looking much less the worse for wear than John feels. He’s
holding two cups of coffee, a small display of consideration the Sherlock of three years ago would
never have entertained. Despite his renewed feelings of frustration and anger at the latest round of
revelations, John can’t suppress the flicker of warmth at the sight.

Admiration and resentment. Protectiveness and annoyance. Love and anger. Complicated. His
feelings about Sherlock are always, always so goddamn complicated.

It’s exhausting.

He takes the offered coffee with a nod. “Mycroft made it all better, then.” He sips at the hot liquid.
Cream, no sugar, just how he likes it.

“He is, on occasion, useful,” Sherlock concedes. He takes a contemplative sip from his own cup,
clearly preparing to say something difficult.

“What next, then?” John prompts him.

“John…” Sherlock takes a breath. “The shock of the injury made Mary go into labor last night. She
had the baby.” At the look of concern on John’s face he places a gloved hand on his upper arm. “It’s
fine. Everyone’s fine, Mary’s arm doesn’t need surgery, and the baby’s doing well.”

“Did they do a test?” John says bluntly, not in the mood to prevaricate.

Sherlock nods. “Mycroft got... in touch with David Foster.” His eyebrow lifts a fraction, leaving
John to wonder what kind of terrifying midnight kidnapping the innocuous phrase “in touch” might
encompass. “The results were expedited.”

The look on Sherlock’s face tells John everything he needs to know about the results. He feels a
moment of vertigo, of odd swaying dizziness, but it passes quickly. Really, it was the most likely
outcome. He looks down, takes a too-large gulp of coffee, burning his tongue.

“There’s a car coming for us,” Sherlock says, and strides to the glass doors on his long legs, catching
John off guard by holding it open it for him instead of his usual style of charging through and leaving
the shorter man to catch up.

Before John’s brain can fully process the disconcerting but increasingly frequent phenomenon of
Sherlock being nice, a low black car pulls up to the kerb. Sherlock moves close to him, places a
remarkably gentle hand on his elbow as he opens the door.
“Where are we going?” John asks.


“Quite,” agrees Sherlock.

***

On the way to Chelsea and Westminster Hospital John knows he should be thinking of Mary and the baby and the upcoming difficult encounter with David, but as usual there is another person taking up all the space in his head.

“The statement I signed,” John says.

Sherlock looks straight ahead. “Yes,” he answers neutrally.

“You’re MI6.”

“Yes.” He shrugs with a studied casualness. “On an as-needed basis.”

“And you never saw fit to mention this fact.”

“Honestly John,” Sherlock sighs, “I’d thought it was rather obvious, considering the two years I spent engaged in international espionage.”

“Well, it probably should have been,” John concedes. “But the thing is, Sherlock, you should know by now that the things you think are obvious to me aren’t. I don’t ever seem to have a fucking clue, I need things explained to me like a five year old, and at any rate this is the sort of big thing that we should have had at least had one fucking direct conversation about.”

“Sitting around and having discussions about working for MI6 is generally, you know, frowned upon,” Sherlock notes with an edge of sarcasm.

John huffs in irritation. “But it’s you and me, Sherlock. You’re my best friend, and I’d like to think I’m yours--”

“I’m sorry, John,” Sherlock says, his tone softer and more sincere. “I truly am. I wasn’t working for them when we met, and I really believed the nature of my time away made it apparent, and I was far from eager to revisit that whole experience. Neither were you, I believe. I just... there was never a good time to bring it up.”

John rolls his eyes. “I think we could have carved out a minute or two.”

“I don’t…” Sherlock begins, trailing off as he uncharacteristically struggles for the right words to convey his thoughts. “You need to understand that I have no particular love for that line of work. It is what Holmeses do, by default. Some family businesses paint houses or run launderettes. We are in the intelligence industry. My brother, my mother, her father... the line stretches all the way back to the time of Victoria. For several years they left me in peace as my drug habit made me too much of a security risk, and it wasn’t until after I met you and became more stable that my abilities again outweighed my liabilities. Mycroft has insisted I retain my active status, but most of the time I try to avoid it like the plague. Occasionally, it’s a mutually beneficial arrangement, but it’s not the work or the life I want for myself.”
“You still should have told me,” John mutters sulkily.

“I’ve really never discussed it with anyone outside my family—” Sherlock begins.

John tries to not show the twist of pain he feels at those words. “Wasn’t aware I was ‘anyone’, “he says, and the words come out embarrassingly wounded and juvenile.

Sherlock looks at him with a touch of reproach. “You know that’s not what I meant.”

John shrugs and looks out the window, refusing to meet Sherlock’s gaze.

“It wouldn’t have changed anything,” Sherlock continues. “And besides, as I pointed out before, I wasn’t exactly keeping it a secret, was I? We just never sat down and discussed it explicitly. Because we don’t, do we, John?” He sighs, his normally impeccable posture slumping down just a fraction. “We never have any kinds of frank discussions about anything, because that’s just not the kind of men we are.”

John feels suddenly uncertain, as if the ground beneath them has shifted unexpectedly, and he realizes that in this moment they may be in fact talking about something altogether different. He fidgets in his seat, looks at his hands. “I just feel so left behind by you sometimes,” he says quietly. His eyes flicker up to Sherlock’s face. “Especially since… I don’t know, Sherlock. We’re just so out of touch with each other, out of sync, have been ever since... since…”

“I know,” Sherlock murmurs, and he looks so sad for a moment that John is almost overwhelmed by the impulse to take one of those gloved hands in his own. It’s not the right time, though, not with the mess and disarray his life is in right now.

It is never ever the right time for anything, John thinks. Perhaps it never will be.

John keeps his hands on his thighs, schooling himself into stillness. He turns his head away, gazing out the car window with unseeing eyes as the riot of thoughts and feelings bounces around ceaselessly in his skull.

The two men pass the rest of the trip in silence.

***

John is struck by the realization of how much he and David look alike. How had he never noticed it before?

Dressed in a rumpled tan cardigan over a dark blue buttondown and brown corduroy trousers, the pale, blue-eyed man looks stressed, overwhelmed and more than a little exhausted. His bristly blonde hair is clumped into spikes, the bags under his eyes deep enough to pack for a week’s holiday. As John closes the door of the private meeting room, David’s eyes go wide and wary. He looks a bit like a cornered hedgehog preparing to fight to the death.

Looking at those bloodshot blue eyes, he understands suddenly, viscerally that David was played by Mary, used and abandoned, just like he was. His anger melts away, and he raises a placating hand. “Look, mate,” he says. “I’m not interested in a fight. Not a bit. We’re on the same side here, from what I can see, and I’d like to have a civil conversation.”

David’s shoulders relax fractionally. “All right,” he says. “Good. Thank you.”

The two men stare at each other for a moment, both at a loss as to how to continue.
“Does she have a name yet?” John asks.

“No,” David says.

John says the next thing that comes into his mind. “Are you going to take her?”

David sighs. “That’s why I wanted to talk to you. I’ve been told Mary’s some sort of international criminal, and she’ll likely spend the rest of her life in prison and I... well, I wanted to let you know that if you wanted to take the baby, if you wanted to be named as her father... I won’t stop you. I mean, I want her, I want to be her father, but if you feel like--”

While he had been uncertain before, John sees now how things should be with a sudden piercing clarity. “No,” he said, his newfound certainty making the words come out more sharply than he intended. He takes a deep breath, speaks in a softer tone. “I mean, it makes me sad, quite a bit in fact, but I wasn’t planning on being a father, and since learning about Mary... honestly, if you’re willing to raise her it’s the best possible outcome, I think.”

“All right,” David says. “Good. It’s very unexpected but... I think it will be very good.”

“Good,” John says. “Good.”

*God, we’re even alike in our awkwardness*, he thinks.

Under different circumstances, the two of them could perhaps have been friends.

John clears his throat. “Listen, if it will help we... we have a whole nursery set up. I can have it all sent over for her. I want her to have it.”

“Thanks,” says David. “That would be very helpful.”

The two men stare at each other for another long, uncomfortable moment.

“Well, then,” John says. “I suppose we’re--”

“Mary said you were with Sherlock,” David says in a single rush of breath.

John furrows his brow, trying to parse the words. “I’m sorry, what?” he asks.

“Mary told me... well, she said you married her under false pretenses. That you were having an affair with Sherlock but you were in the closet, conflicted about the whole thing. I wouldn’t have kept seeing her, but... she said she was lonely.” David finds a bit of courage, straightens his back, looks John in the eye. “Is it true?”

John’s head echoes with ten, fifteen different indignant denials. He opens his mouth to sputter *Of course not*, but before the words come out he realizes there’s more than a shred of truth here at the heart of the matter. Of course there is, and here at the end of it all, he would be the worst kind of coward to deny it. He swallows down the protestations, tries to think of a way to distill the reality of he and Sherlock down to a few words.

He closes his mouth, looks up at the ceiling, gives himself a moment of consideration.

He and Sherlock are an endless mystery, a twisted path, a codependent disaster, an endless struggle between what is and what could be.

There are no words in the English language adequate to convey what the two of them are to each other. He sighs, scrubs a hand across his eyes.
“It’s a complicated situation,” John says at last.

David looks at him with something almost like compassion. “That’s not a no, though, is it?”

John sags against the wall, exhausted and overwhelmed by the confusion and sorrow of the past three years. It feels like it has been an eternity, a thousand seasons spent in purgatory.

“It’s not,” he finally concedes, too bone-tired to offer anything but the truth.

“I see,” says David, looking away.

A tense, awkward silence looms between the two men.

David opens his mouth, hesitates. Takes a breath. “Would you like to see her?” he finally asks.

“I don’t think…” John shakes his head. “It would only make it harder, I think.”

David nods. “Well, then. I guess there’s not much left to say.” He steps closer to John, offers his hand. Unsure what else to do, John shakes it.

“Take care of yourself, Dr Watson,” he says and moves past him to the doorway.

“David,” John says.

The man turns to look at him, his hand on the doorknob.

John’s vision blurs as tears unexpectedly spring into his eyes. He never wanted to be a father, not really, and he knows this is the absolute right thing to do, but it still hurts, oh it hurts so much more than he expected.

“Take good care of her, all right?” John says, his voice rough and thick.

David’s somber expression softens as a small smile touches his thin lips. “I will. I promise.”

***

Mary refuses to see him.

It’s probably for the best.

***

Sherlock is sitting in the large general waiting area on the ground floor, long body and billowing coat folded almost incongruously onto a cheap, flimsy-looking chair.

John crosses the lounge area and crumples into the seat next to him. He feels completely empty, drained, too tired to move.

After several minutes, Sherlock clears his throat.

“Come, John,” he says, rising. “Let’s go home.”

“You mean Baker Street,” John says flatly.

“Of course I mean Baker Street,” Sherlock says, tilting his head in silent query.

John looks up at him, at his pale expressive features creased in confusion, and it suddenly occurs to
him that once again, Sherlock is thinking he’s acting in John’s best interests by leaving him out of the decision making process entirely.

And part of him wants him to. Part of him desperately wants to let Sherlock take him home, to have Mrs Hudson fuss over him and make him tea, to crawl between the sheets of his old bed (or maybe Sherlock’s bed, the endlessly wanting part of him whispers softly) and let the gentle caress of Sherlock’s violin coax him into safe, dreamless sleep.

It would be so easy.

Your faithful pet, Mary had called him with a dismissive laugh, like his blind loyalty was some kind of private joke she and Sherlock shared. Annoyance, frustration and anger surge up inside him at the thought, threaten to boil over into something truly ugly.

“So that’s how it is,” says John, his voice sharp-edged. “Mary’s going to prison, the baby is David’s, my life is in shambles, and you just, what, assume you get me by default?”

Sherlock’s eyes flash in shocked hurt, then go carefully blank and neutral. “John. Of course not. I just wanted to--I didn’t think it wise for you to be alone right now.”

“And once again, you think you know what’s best for me.” John rises from the chair, the anger and frustration and hurt overwhelming him, bursting out of every pore, and he doesn’t even know for sure that it’s Sherlock he’s angry at, really, but the only reason he tied himself to Mary in the first place is because the person he really loved left him behind, and the woman he married once sat in the shadows above a darkened swimming pool and aimed a sniper rifle at his heart and later shot his best friend in cold blood and cuckolded him and just gave birth to a child that wasn’t his and right now he just can’t do this, he just fucking can’t do this anymore.

“Do you know how sodding sick of you I am right now?” he says, low and dangerous, and as he says it he knows it’s the solid truth. As much as Sherlock means to him, as bone-deep and terrifying his feelings run for this impossible, infuriating, gorgeous man, right this moment if he looks into those wide, wounded silver-blue eyes for one more second he’s going to punch Sherlock in the face hard and even as angry as he is he really, really doesn’t want to do that ever again.

John breathes, in through his nose and out through his mouth the way his therapist taught him, feeling his fists clench and unclench without any conscious thought.

God, he wants to hit someone so fucking badly right now.

“I’m sorry,” Sherlock says quietly. “I didn’t mean to presume.”

“Of course you did,” John spits. He grabs his jacket. “I’m going home.”

“All right,” Sherlock says, his voice far too calm to be even remotely genuine. “There’s a car waiting out front if you want it.”

John turns to leave, Sherlock watching him silently. As he is about to walk away, a tiny cold droplet of guilt trickles down his spine. He turns back around to face Sherlock.

“I’m not angry, okay?” he says, although he is, God he is, he’s been angry for so many years he doesn’t even know how not to be angry anymore. “I mean, I’m not angry specifically at you. I just need... I just need to think about what I want to do next, okay?”

Sherlock blinks. “Of course,” he says, cool and remote, the hurt now carefully tucked away behind a smooth marble mask. John knows he’s cut Sherlock deeply, wounded him to the core, but the
turmoil in his head is so loud, so insistent that he can’t find it in himself to care much about anyone else right now.

John nods once, squares his shoulders and turns away.

He walks out of the hospital, away from the wreck and ruin of the normal life he had tried and failed to carve for himself.

He ignores the black car waiting and takes the tube instead.

Mycroft’s people have already come and gone. The baby’s room is empty, nothing left to indicate its former intention except the border of fat yellow ducklings, waddling in an endless parade around the perimeter of the room.

The air in the house is warm and heavy and still.

It feels like a tomb.

John pours himself a drink, even though it’s not yet noon, and sits on an uncomfortable stiff-backed chair that he never really liked, and wonders distantly what will become of the rest of his life.

Chapter End Notes

--Primip: Primipara, a woman who is pregnant for the first time.

--SIS: Secret Intelligence Service, the current name of what is colloquially known as MI6.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Sitting alone on a park bench, his tea long since gone cold, John takes a deep breath and tries saying the truth out loud for the first time in his entire life.

“I’m bisexual,” he tells the pigeons looking up at him.

They seem remarkably unimpressed by his bravery.

The world continues to turn.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

March

What happens next is... nothing.


John drinks whiskey reflexively, never even tasting it, just to try and fill the void with something.

It never begins to touch the empty endless universe contained within his own heart.

***

John lies in bed watching as the pale sunrise creases the sky, then he gets up and makes coffee and toast. The coffee he drinks, the toast grows cold on the plate.

He sits at the kitchen table and stares into space until it’s time to get dressed for work.

He went back to work two days ago; he’s completely indifferent to the entire enterprise, but he can’t think of a compelling excuse not to go.

***

After the first week of not showing up, the office manager called and politely asked about John’s future plans.

(John suspects some sort of Mycroftian interference; after not showing up for five days in a row, there is no reason he shouldn’t be unceremoniously sacked. He has always been a bit curious why the NHS is so cavalier about the erratic attendance and frequent unavailability.)

He knows she already knows. Everyone at the surgery knew he and Mary were having problems; John was always closemouthed about their personal life, but judging from the looks some of the nurses gave him he suspects Mary wasn’t quite so discreet.

He doesn’t want to dwell on what she was probably telling them.
The woman calling him cleared her throat. John suddenly notices he’s been sitting there silently following his disjointed thoughts for well over a minute.

“My wife left me,” he finally said, voice flat.

On the other end of the line, he manager stuttered and apologised for bothering him.

“It’s fine,” he muttered. Numb and uninterested, he rang off without saying goodbye.

The following Monday, John showed up at the clinic for work unannounced and no one said a word about it; everyone acted as if he had just been there the whole time.

Undoubtedly Mycroft’s doing.

***

John Watson M.D. goes to work at the slightly down-at-the-heels clinic he’s been at for two years and treats the runny noses and strep throats of central London.

He’s soft-spoken and polite and completely indifferent toward the entire endeavour.

(Not even halfway through his first day back he realised the babies and toddlers were being deliberately shunted away from him. He supposes it’s a kindness.)

He goes home and makes tea and slices an apple. The tea he drinks, the apple slices turn brown on the plate.

The light of the setting sun tracks across the kitchen wall.

His phone buzzes. He picks it up. It’s not Sherlock. It’s his sister. He rejects the call and shoves his mobile under a stack of unopened mail.

Ten days have passed since he walked away from Sherlock Holmes, and John Watson is absolutely certain nothing will ever happen to him again.

***

John wonders what to do about Mary’s things, her dresses and cardigans and shoes, her makeup bag, her toothbrush. All of it meaningless, he thinks, the flotsam and jetsam of a fraudulent life.

Just thinking about it exhausts him to the bone, so he puts the question off to deal with another day.

***

John suspects this is all very unhealthy, that rather than running away and indulging in some kind of slow-motion mental breakdown he should have let Sherlock take him home to Baker Street, allowed the people who love him to care for him and help him heal.

He can’t bear the idea of allowing anyone close enough to love him right now. All he wants is to curl up and lick his wounds like some kind of hurt, frightened creature.

He feels like he’s failed utterly, and he can’t bring himself to admit that kind of weakness anywhere except in the most locked-away recesses of his heart.

He can vaguely sense the emotions somewhere deep down, the eddies of swirling thoughts and feelings moving below the surface, but he feels completely removed, separated from his true self by a
layer of poured concrete.

He knows he’s the one doing all this to himself, but he doesn’t yet know how to stop.

***

Three, four, ten times a day John picks up his phone, opens a text message, closes it again. He can’t even think of what to say right now. He doesn’t know how to ask for what he needs. He doesn’t even know what it is he needs.

Sherlock is at Baker Street, across town and alone and missing him, but this time John just doesn’t know how to begin to bridge that distance.

*Alone is what I have. Alone protects me.*

He understands that better, now.

***

Every evening John waits until precisely 5:01, then drinks scotch until night descends and he is finally able to succumb to a thin, restless sleep.

(On especially bad nights, he adds in 0.5 milligrams of clonazepam. Sometimes a milligram. He’s a doctor. It’s fine.)

Despite the alcohol and benzos he still dreams; disjointed visions of gunfire screaming falling and blood soaked curls and dead bodies in desert sand, images of chaos and violence that he can’t really remember after waking, though tears still stream down his face.

***

Very late one Friday night John finds himself sitting on the floor of his bedroom, half-empty bottle next to him. He’s poking through a cardboard box unearthed from the back of his wardrobe, a collection of news clippings, the entire accumulated press history of Sherlock Holmes and John Watson.

He sits crosslegged on the floor and reads the yellowing newsprint, looks at the photos of he and Sherlock in those ridiculous hats, and for some reason tonight instead of remembering the anger and turmoil and tears, he remembers all the good times, all the amazing nights of adrenaline and danger and laughter and friendship.

Tonight he thinks of his life with Sherlock and instead of feeling anger and guilt, he smiles.

It feels like progress.

He goes to bed well past two a.m., thoughts of Sherlock on his mind, and his dreams that night take on a much different texture indeed.

***

*They are running across the rain-damp moors, Sherlock’s gloved hand clutching his own as they run for their lives.*

“We have to go back,” John pants, pulling at Sherlock’s arm. “Henry... Greg... we can’t leave them. We have to save them.”
Sherlock halts suddenly, breathing hard. He turns and grabs John’s shoulders, his silver eyes alight with terror.

“He’s back there. Moriarty... I saw him. He’s back there, in Dewer’s Hollow. We can’t let him find us--”

“He’s dead,” John says. “Moriarty is dead. You saw it yourself. He blew his own brains out in front of you, he’s dead and he can’t hurt you anymore.”

“He tricked me,” Sherlock gasps, almost in tears, more afraid and undone than John has ever seen. “He’s cleverer than I am and he tricked me. He didn’t die, he changed his form. He’s not human any more. He’s the hound, John, can’t you see?” Sherlock shakes his shoulders like a child shaking a rag doll. “He’s the hound and I’m the fox and I can’t let him catch me. He’ll make me die, make me leave you again--”

“No.” John knows that whatever it takes, he can’t let Moriarty take Sherlock away from him again. “Sherlock, no. I won’t let him.” John grabs at Sherlock’s rain-soaked coat, pulls him close, the scent of wet wool and amber and cigarettes filling his nose, his brain. “Let me help you, let me stay with you, let me keep you safe, please Sherlock, let me--”

And in desperation and fear and burning desire, John threads his fingers in Sherlock’s rain-wet curls, pulls his head down and kisses him.

And then as happens in dreams, everything shifts and they’re under one of the foreboding trees of Dewer’s Hollow and they’re naked and kissing in the rain, mouths desperate, seeking, tongues sliding against each other hot and wet and demanding. Rough tree bark scratches against his naked back, large warm hands bracket his hips as as Sherlock’s lips slide down his neck.

“John,” Sherlock whispers brokenly, pleading against his skin. “Don’t make me go. Don’t make me go with him.”

I won’t, he tries to say, I won’t, not ever, but Sherlock’s needy mouth crashes into his and swallows the words away as a warm hand wraps around his heavy, needy cock and strokes, firm and insistent. John moans low in his throat as shivers of hot tingling pleasure coil up his belly and spine.

“Come for me,” Sherlock murmurs, rough and hoarse, his hand pumping harder, making John gasp as his hips buck forward, thrusting into his warm rough palm. “Yes, John, just like that, I want you to come so hard for me--”

John wakes alone in his bed to find he’s already touching himself, hand shoved in his pants, wrapped around his throbbing prick. He realises there’s no one here now, no one he needs to lie to, to hide from, so he gives in and slides his pants down under his hips to free his straining cock. He spits in his palm before taking himself in hand again and pulling roughly, thumbing across the tip as he cups his balls with the other hand. His mind is still half in dreamspace, hearing the echoes of Sherlock’s needy, breathy moans in his mind, still feeling the weight of his long lean body, miles of skin pressed up against his own.

Barely a dozen strokes later the tidal wave of bliss crests and breaks, pulses of warm seed covering his hand and stomach, his body arched and quivering as he climaxes without making a sound.

His rasping breath seems loud in the quiet dark of the bedroom.

Later, stripped bare by the aftermath of release, John finds himself drowsily acknowledging that maybe, probably, this is the heart of the problem between them; he needs to deal with the reality of
these intense feelings, these difficult emotions that have been there since the day the two of them met, the complicated tangles that have been left untended, grown up wild and weedy in the neglected places of his heart.

Before he can even begin to think about it all, however, exhaustion overtakes him and he sleeps, streaks of come still sticky on his belly. He falls asleep thinking of Sherlock, of the unnameable color of his eyes, the way his whole face changes with one of his rare true smiles, the frizzy nimbus of his hair fresh out of the shower, the damp wool and cigarette smell of him that shouldn’t be pleasant but is somehow the scent of everything right and good in John’s world.

John stays asleep, sound and dreamless, until late morning sun slants through the window.

***

The next day John doesn’t have work, so he has a lie-in for the first time in months.

He rises late, feeling more rested than he can remember being in a while. Outside it’s the first truly pleasant day of early spring, the sky bright blue and the breeze warm. He showers, dresses, and takes a long, meandering walk. He allows his feet to take him wherever they wish until his arches are aching and half-numb, and after he sits on a park bench with a paper cup of tea, staring at nothing at all in particular.

And he thinks.

For the first time in---well, in a very long time--John really thinks about who he is and what he wants.

***

*John had his first crush when he was eight years old and a new family moved into the house at the end of his street. Her name was Sabrina and she had curly, light brown hair and large blue eyes. He only got as far as a single stolen kiss on the playground before her family emigrated to America.*

*When he was fourteen, he had his first, utterly unexpected crush on a boy. Sam came to spend the summer with his father and stepmother, who lived in the house across the back alley. He was a year older than John, tall and thin with almost-but-not-quite gingery brown hair, a splash of freckles across the bridge of his nose and small, even teeth that flashed white whenever he laughed.*

*The two of them spent every single day together that summer, wandering around the neighborhood, riding bikes, hanging around the playground discussing music, watching telly when it rained.*

*John was instantly smitten, though it took him a bit to come to that understanding.*

*Not long after they met, as John lay in bed one night he surprised himself by wondering about what it would feel like to kiss Sam, to slip his fingers under his Clash T-shirt and stroke his warm naked skin.*

*John wanted so badly to touch him it was almost a physical ache. He knew he never could--he never would--but God, how he wanted to. He felt confused and so deeply ashamed.*

*Certainly if Sam ever knew he would hate him. John resolved to never act on these feelings and never, ever share these thoughts with anyone.*

*But there was one person observant enough to suss him out instantly.*

*Harry, by then eighteen and in uni, had come home for the summer hols. She saw John and Sam*
together on the couch one wet afternoon, playing videogames, and something in their body language, the way they were angled towards each other, twigged something in her intuition--perhaps that thing others jokingly called gaydar.

She came into John’s room late one night, uninvited, presumptuous in the way only older siblings can be.

“Whatcha want?” John asked, annoyed.

“You like him,” Harry said.

John felt a flash of nervous concern. God, is it that obvious? “Who?” he asked with transparently false nonchalance.

“Come off it, Sam. You like him.”

“Course I do,” John said. “We’re mates.”

Harry crossed his small room in four steps, opened the window, lit a cigarette.

“No,” Harry said, blowing smoke into the cool night air. “You like him.”

“Oh, God, Harry,” John rolled his eyes, pulled a face. “Just cos you’re gay you think everyone else is too. I like girls.”

“I know you do,” Harry said, regarding him with a cool, appraising gaze. “But I think you like boys, too.”

Cheeks burning hot with exposure and embarrassment, John looked up at her warily, feeling trapped, not knowing how to protest convincingly without giving himself away completely.

Seeing his stricken face, Harry’s hard eyes softened into something more compassionate. “I’m gonna give you some free advice, Johnny. You don’t wanna be gay. Trust me, it sucks.”

“I’m not gay,” John protested, voice sounding thin and false to his own ears.

“I’m not here to give you a hard time,” Harry said in exasperation. “I’m trying to give you advice, you bleeding moron. If you like both, if you can go both ways? Stick to girls. I’m telling you, your life will be a hell of a lot easier.”

Harry took one last drag, tossed the cigarette out the open window. She pushed herself up off the window frame, moved to the door, turned and placed a hand on the doorframe.

“You’re lucky, Johnny. You have a choice. I don’t, and it’s brought me nothing but grief. Be smart and save yourself a lot of pain.”

She disappeared into her own room; they never spoke of that conversation again but it resonated somewhere deep within John.

So that was what it all came down to: John believed he could make a choice. He chose to be interested in girls.

And it worked, after a fashion; he liked girls, liked them a lot, but still he lived for years in fear of suddenly turning gay. That was the common wisdom he heard all through secondary school and uni--bisexuality in men is a myth, a convenient fiction, a way station on the trip down the road to complete and total gayness. So he figured that logically, he must be secretly homosexual and just not
aware of it yet. He kept waiting for the day when he would woke up completely gay and uninterested in women.

It never happened.

To be sure, occasionally he had found himself undeniably drawn to a man, looking at strong hands and a bristy jaw, curious about the feel of those fingers holding him down, that stubble scraping his own chin and cheeks pink and raw.

And by the time he graduated from uni a string of furtive, alcohol-fueled experiments in darkened dorm rooms proved John was far more than merely curious.

But he still consistently liked women, was genuinely attracted to them, liked flirting with them and kissing them and fucking them.

It took a long time, but eventually John came to the conclusion that despite prevailing wisdom telling him it wasn’t a true orientation, he was honestly and completely bisexual.

That meant he was still free to choose, and here John’s pragmatic nature asserted itself fully. He didn’t like to think of himself as homophobic, merely practical. Same sex attraction was problematic. Occasional sexual relations with men seemed to define a person in the eyes of the world as gay, and John wasn’t gay. One of his similarly-closeted conquests once explained it to him like this: “You can build a hundred bridges in your lifetime and be known as a bridge-builder, but suck just one cock and the whole world will call you a cocksucker instead.”

It was true, it was all too frustratingly true. Acting on his attraction to men would make his life difficult, so he didn’t act on it. Well, didn’t act on it often, and never more than a one- or a two-night stand. He excused away these encounters as just things that happened between drunk mates in uni, or things that happened between lonely, homesick soldiers in the military.

Those stolen moments weren’t his real life. In his real life he could always choose women and be mostly satisfied, and it was fine. Just fine.

Until he met Sherlock Holmes, and fell hopelessly in love with the infuriatingly brilliant and difficult and lonely and gorgeous man by the end of their first day together. And then denied that truth to himself (and to others) every single day since.

Because it was difficult. Because it was inconvenient. Because he wasn’t about to deal with the struggles of coming out for the sake of a man who couldn’t even return the intensity of his feelings.

So he denied and denied and denied.

You’re a terrible liar, Sherlock said to him more than once. The man is seldom wrong but in this case, he was completely mistaken.

John Watson is the best liar in the world if he’s lying to himself.

***

Sitting alone on a park bench, his tea long since gone cold, John takes a deep breath and tries saying the truth out loud for the first time in his entire life.

“I’m bisexual,” he tells the pigeons looking up at him.

They seem remarkably unimpressed by his bravery.
The world continues to turn.

John had expected to feel some kind of epiphany, some kind of triumphant...something. But in fact, nothing at all is different. Saying it out loud doesn’t fix any of what is so broken in his life.

But the world doesn’t end because John Watson admitted his bisexuality, and he supposes that is something.

***

Not long after, one early evening after work John is trying to summon up a shred of interest in eating something for dinner when he receives a text from Sherlock. It’s the first he’s sent since that terrible night at the hospital.

(Later John will reflect on the fact that at this point, he had ignored his phone completely for over two weeks. What impulse, what glimmer of intuition caused him to pick up his phone the first time Sherlock texted him? He never fully embraced the idea of some kind of extracorporeal connection, some kind of psychic link between Sherlock and himself. But he could never bring himself to dismiss it entirely, either.)

**Dead history professor. Originally thought to be heart attack, autopsy shows poisoning by unknown agent. Have to admit I’m stumped. Interested? SH**

John almost says no. Almost texts back an excuse and an apology. But his body aches for adventure, for adrenaline, for mystery as much as his heart aches (yes, he can admit it now, at least to himself) for Sherlock.

He’s withering and dying here, alone in this blank and airless house.

**Absolutely.**

**Meet me at Bart’s in thirty. SH**

Grabbing his jacket, sad thoughts of dinner forgotten, John already feels more like himself than he has since Christmas Day.

***

“Fitzroy Macpherson, 61 years old,” Molly tells him, her voice politely professional but with the barest trace of coldness beneath, and John is suddenly certain he hadn’t mistaken the flash of protective anger in her brown eyes when he entered the morgue. “Professor of Chemistry at Kingston University. Presented to hospital with nausea, vomiting and tachycardia. Preliminary diagnosis was cardiac infarction, but no history of heart problems and EKG was not consistent with cardiac event. He died four hours after arrival to A&E. Autopsy shows normal heart and lungs. Preliminary toxicology negative.”

“So you’re thinking poison,” John says.

“It really doesn’t look like natural causes,” Molly says. “But looking for the standard poisoning compounds hasn’t given us a thing, and the police say they don’t have anything that points to murder. So I thought I’d give Sherlock a call, and, well.”

Sherlock hovers near the door in a nervous, fidgety, distinctly un-Sherlockian manner. “D’you think he could have done it to himself accidentally?” John asks, looking up at Sherlock’s eyes in what he hopes is friendly challenge.
“Possible, but unlikely,” Sherlock says. “Over forty years of experience handling chemicals argues against accidental poisoning, and toxicology was negative for heavy metals, as well as the classic symptoms being absent.” Sherlock straightens, advances toward the body on the table.

“No, I think it’s murder,” he continues. “I just need to figure out the how, and why, and where. Pretty much need to figure out everything other than what’s right in front of us.” He gestures at the dead man’s hairline. “Which includes Professor Macpherson’s affair with a much younger woman, judging from the hair dye, recent botox injections, and--” he indicates an area on the underside of the jaw-- “this tiny smudge of pink lip gloss right here.”


“Honestly, John,” he says, drawing himself up to his full height. “Anyone with an ounce of observational skill could have seen that.”

And just like that, Sherlock seems to take up twice as much space in the room as he did five minutes ago. He picks up his scarf from the table, loops it gracefully around his long neck, and John can’t help but let his eyes linger just a beat longer than he ought. Sherlock catches him looking, and for a moment John can see the soft fondness in his eyes. Then it’s gone, and Sherlock is back to his familiar persona, the demanding, imperious, brilliant, crime-solving detective firmly in charge.

“Come along, John,” he says, his tone crisp. “We have a murder to solve.”

“Thank you for your time, Molly,” John says as they brush past her, and he sharp-eyed look he gets in response sends a chill into his bones.

***

“And that’s when…” Lestrade prompts, not bothering to hide the amusement in his warm brown eyes.

Sherlock looks up to glare at Lestrade, hissing as the sudden movement makes him wince in pain.

“Hold still, you git,” John murmurs without heat, gently checking the bloody gash above Sherlock’s left ear.

“And that’s when Dr Murdoch assaulted me with the antique curio he kept on top of his filing cabinet,” Sherlock tells the DI flatly.

“Come on, Sherlock,” protests Lestrade. “Give me what I ask for, for once in your bloody life.”

“You’re recording this on your phone,” Sherlock observes, eyebrow arched, “which makes me strongly suspect that contrary to your words, this is not an official police statement.”

Greg sighs in cheerful exasperation. “I’ve put up with your pompous, aggravating arse for nine years without a peep of complaint--”

“You complain all the time,” counters Sherlock.

“--and all I ask is that you tell me once, for the record, what the suspect attacked you with.”

“Fine,” Sherlock huffs in irritation, “But don’t think for a second I don’t know about your ulterior motives.” He gazes levels as Lestrade records him on his mobile. “That’s when the suspect hit me with a fish. Are you happy now, Inspector?”
“Bloody ecstatic, thanks,” Lestrade replies, grinning from ear to ear as he turns away. John can’t stop the tiny chuckle that escapes him, and even Sherlock can’t help but give a twist of his lips.

“You have to admit, it’s not an everyday occurrence,” John notes.

“Fortunately not,” Sherlock murmurs. “Fish are surprisingly painful weapons.”

When the Marine Sciences professor realised he’d been uncovered as a murderer, he’d tried to bolt from his office and in a blind panic snatched up the first thing at hand to brandish as a weapon—which happened to be a stuffed and mounted Atlantic cod. Taxidermied creatures are remarkably heavy, and as Sherlock had not expected to be brained by a dead stuffed fish, his reaction time was not quick enough to keep the sharp ventral fin from slicing into his scalp just above his ear.

John had taken the professor down easily—he was handy with a codfish, but certainly no real fighter—and cuffed him to his desk, alternately sobbing and swearing at them until the police arrived.

Fortunately, the wound is superficial, and the scar will be hidden by Sherlock’s hair. “No stitches this time,” John says, dabbing the cut with gauze and applying antibiotic ointment from the first aid kit someone had unearthed out of secretary’s desk drawer. “Make sure to clean it thoroughly, later. It’s a hundred years old, but who knows what could be on that fin. Wouldn’t want you to grow scales in your sleep, or something.”

“I don’t know, John,” Sherlock says with a small smile. “I might make a fetching merman, don’t you think?”

“Or you might end up with tentacles instead,” John points out. “Let’s not take that risk.”

“That wouldn’t be so bad,” Sherlock muses. “Think of all the extra tasks I could accomplish in the same amount of time.”

“You’d have to get your coat altered to accommodate your new appendages,” John replies.


Sherlock’s pale eyes regard him with an unmistakable heat, and John is suddenly aware of two things: how unexpectedly (and embarrassingly) arousing it is to think of what Sherlock could do with eight extra appendages, and how intensely they are flirting with each other in this moment.

It’s suddenly all much too unsettling and John feels a small flare of something very like panic.

“Um. Well. Hm.” John takes his hand off Sherlock’s shoulder and gets to his feet, backs away a bit, giving himself some much-needed space.

Sherlock stands as well. His eyes leave John’s face, but his body language remains open. “Graham,” he calls over his shoulder. “Are John and I done here?”

“What?” Lestrade muttered, too distracted to correct Sherlock. “Oh. Yeah, guess so. I’ll call you if I have any questions.”

“I shan’t wait by my phone,” Sherlock turns on his heel, gestures toward the open door with a tilt of his head. John follows him down the stairs, out the door onto the rain-slicked pavement. They fall into step together easily, and for a moment it feels like old times.
“That was a nice bit of work there,” Sherlock says, making John’s cheeks flush at the unexpected praise. And it had been, indeed. While Sherlock had been the one to discover that Macpherson and Murdoch had both been having an affair with Macpherson’s young teaching assistant, John had been the one to notice the professor’s framed travel photos of Australia and consider the possibility of a unique marine-based murder weapon. Sherlock had taken that breakthrough and worked his magic, unravelling how Murdoch had used the spare key his paramour had given him to break into Macpherson’s house and slip a vial of tiny, highly lethal box jellyfish into his bathwater.

“It was the New Zealand poster that clinched it,” John tells him. “It made me remember the swimming prohibitions there, and the horror stories about killer jellyfish.” He shrugged. “Even us idiots get a lucky break sometimes.”

“You are not an idiot,” Sherlock says. “Not in the least. Compared to most people, you’re positively bright at least some of the time.”

“Faint praise, but I’ll take it,” murmurs John with a smile.

Sherlock’s mouth twitches up at the corner, then he turns his head, looks up the street as if searching for something. “Care for dinner?” he asks with a studied casualness that is so transparent it almost hurts John to watch. “There’s a Burmese place near here that has a--”

John fights the near-overwhelming impulse to say yes. He is just in the middle of figuring this out, and having Sherlock so close and warm and real fogs everything up, spins him about, makes it so hard to think...

“Sherlock, I--” John shakes his head. “--I have work in the morning,” he mutters lamely.

The flash of disappointment on Sherlock’s face is gone in the space of a single heartbeat. “Of course,” he says smoothly. “Well, then. Thank you for the assistance. As ever, you proved quite useful.” He pivots a half-step away from John, flips up his collar, an unconscious tell of self-protection.

“Um, well, you’re welcome, I suppose,” John says, and it’s so very awkward, the heat and possibility of just a few moments ago gone cold in an instant. “Well,” he says, and gestures behind himself. “I’ll just... tube’s that way, so.”

John pulls his jacket tighter around himself--it’s almost spring, but there’s still a chilly bite to the air--and turns to leave even as he wonders why he’s fighting against what he wants so very hard, what exactly it is he’s trying to prove here.

*I’m so sorry* is on the tip of his tongue as he turns away.

He’s almost to the corner when Sherlock calls his name, almost too low to hear.

“John.”

He turns. “Yes, Sherlock?”

“Are we still friends?” Sherlock blurts out, seemingly on impulse, and the fear and vulnerability in wide pale eyes breaks John’s heart more than a little.

*We were never friends, Sherlock, John* thinks sadly. *Not really. We’ve always been more than that, so much more, and now it’s all gone on too long, we’re both in too deep to back out and too stuck to move forward and I don’t know what the fuck to do anymore.*
“Course we are,” is what John says aloud as he forces himself to smile; it hangs wrong on his face, feels false and strained. “I’ll text you later on, yeah?”

Sherlock nods once, face already shuttering as he turns away to hail a cab.

***

Late that evening, alone with his third drink, John’s acquired enough liquid courage to send a text.

_I wanted to stay._

_Why didn’t you? SH_

_I don’t know._

_That doesn’t illuminate the situation at all. SH_

_I don’t want this to be something we just end up in by default._

_I want to choose you. I want you to choose me._

_According to reliable sources, the behavior you’re engaging in right now is what is known as ‘stringing me along.’ SH_

_Reliable sources? Who have you been talking to?_

_I refuse to engage in this. Either come over and talk to me in person or don’t. But don’t drunk text me at 2 in the morning. You’re a grown man. Act like one. SH_

_Fuck you._

_Well, fuck you too. SH_

John puts his phone down and presses the heels of his hands hard into his eye sockets.

He feels like he's ruined everything left between the two of them.

But he is not going to cry. He is a middle-aged man, he is a doctor, a soldier, he has endured war and death and heartbreak many, many times over and goddammit _he is not going to cry_ over a stupid quarrel via text message.

John feels small and pathetic and alone, but he doesn’t cry; it’s another pointless, Pyrrhic victory in the ongoing war he’s waging against his own heart.

***

Two nights later John is surprised by a knock on his door.

For a brief, breathless moment he thinks maybe it’s Sherlock; he is a bit taken aback by the slight figure of Molly Hooper on his front step.

“Um,” he says eloquently. “Hello.”

“Can I come in?” she asks, her tone cold and clipped, brushing past him and into the cramped sitting room.
“Um, sure,” says John. “I can put the kettle on if you’d like.”

Molly turns to face him, and John barely recognises the woman in front of him. She gazes at him levelly, her shoulders squared, her chin held high.

“You’re hurting him,” she says without preamble.

Defensive anger flares hot and bright in his chest.

“Oh, hello, John,” he says, sharp and mocking. “So sorry about your lying, cheating, murdering wife and the child that isn’t yours. How are you holding up?”

Molly doesn’t look away, doesn’t back down. “I am sorry. Really, I am. But you’re punishing him for what she’s done to you. You’re breaking his heart right now and he doesn’t understand why.”

“What are you, his emissary?” John asks derisively.

“No. He doesn’t know I’m here.”

“He’s an adult,” John snaps, “despite all evidence to the contrary. He doesn’t need you to fight his battles.”

“Why is this a battle?” Molly’s eyes soften just a fraction, her voice growing more pleading. “Honestly, John, why? You love each other, I know you do. So why are you doing this to him?”

John sighs in exasperation. “This is none of your business.”

“You’re not seeing what I’m seeing right now,” Molly says. “He’s not eating. He’s not sleeping. He doesn’t know what he’s done wrong. He’s been coming to me to talk about you. Sherlock Holmes is crying on my shoulder right now, and that’s just... it’s a violation of all that’s right in the universe, and I can’t abide it one moment longer. That’s what makes it my business.”

The idea of Sherlock being sad over him, crying over him--sorrow and guilt and defensiveness twist in his belly, make him want to lash out, to hurt, to wound. He glares at Molly and pulls up the most hurtful words he can find.

“Oh for Christ’s sake, Molly,” he sneers. “When are you going to stop being in love with him?”

Her eyes flash, wounded and dangerous.

“I don’t know,” she spits back, defiant despite the tears shining in her eyes. ”When are you?”

John’s shoulders sag a bit as shame begins to rise in him, hot and bitter as bile.

“Molly, I’m sorry. That wasn’t--”

“You have something I will never have,” Molly breathes, her voice thick and rough with tears but her eyes still bright and defiant. “And you’re throwing it away over pride and confusion and misplaced anger. You’re being a stupid, selfish man right now, John Watson, and if this is the person you’re going to be then you don’t deserve him.”

She exhales shakily and turns to leave.

“Molly,” John says, voice tight with emotion. “Wait.”

She turns back to him, tilts her head in expectation.
A long moment passes as John tries to find the words to explain the hurt and confusion in his heart.

“I’m afraid,” he finally says, the truth spilling out of him unbidden, the only defense he has. “He’s going to get bored, or restless, or something else will catch his attention and I’ll lose him again and I can’t bear it, Molly. I can’t.”

She shakes her head, sighs as her anger softens into something kinder, more compassionate.

“John,” she says. “He’s not the same man he was before he left. Everyone else can recognise that, but I think maybe you’re just too close to see it.”

“You don’t know that,” John protests. “Not for sure.”

“I do.” She steps closer to him, her voice gentle. “Look at everything he’s done for you. Everything he’s given up for you. For God’s sake, he planned your wedding to someone else and never asked for a thing for himself. That’s not the Sherlock Holmes I knew before. Of course he’s changed.” She goes silent for a moment looking into John’s eyes, lays a hand on his arm. “You don’t get any guarantees, you know,” she says softly. “No one does. But I’ve known you for a while now, and you’ve never struck me as a man so afraid of losing something you wouldn’t even try to have it.”

“I--um,” John starts, then trails off, looking down. “I’m sorry.”


She turns and leaves without another word, closing the front door softly behind her.

John sags heavily into the nearest chair and rubs his eyes, sudden exhaustion flooding every cell of his body.

The revelation creeps up on him so gradually he doesn’t even see it at first; then suddenly it’s in front of him and he sees how he has always, somewhere deep in his heart, accepted as truth that he could never be enough for someone as brilliant and easily bored as Sherlock. He has always unconsciously assumed Sherlock would tire of him eventually, that he would someday find another equal, another Moriarty, another puzzle worth his time.

And in his heart of hearts, John had always believed that when that day comes, Sherlock will leave him all over again.

He sees now that he hasn’t been angry with Sherlock about the past; he has somehow been angry this whole time over a presumed future betrayal, protecting his patched-together heart against a hurt that has not yet happened.

And maybe... maybe he’s been wrong. Maybe that defensive stance has blinded him to the Sherlock that has been right in front of him for almost two years.

This new self-awareness makes him feel dizzy, almost ill, and John realises he hasn’t eaten all day. He takes himself into the kitchen, fills the kettle and switches it on, finds a slice of bread that hasn’t yet been touched by mold and slips it into the toaster.

As he waits for the kettle to boil, his eyes light upon his mobile on the counter. Before he can stop himself he picks it up, taps out a short text and hits send.

*I’m sorry.*

The response is almost instantaneous.
So am I. SH

I'm trying to figure some things out. It's hard. Please be patient with me.

I will. SH

Thank you.

Any time. SH

A small smile touches John’s lips. I haven’t ruined everything, he thinks. It’s a tremendous relief.

He’s not any closer to figuring this mess out, not really, but as he pockets his mobile and opens the cupboard to search for a mug John realises his heart feels ten stone lighter than it did an hour ago.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

F*ck, he really does not need an ASBO right now, but if he has to take that bastard down he’ll do it without regret. He tenses, mentally preparing for a fight.

“John!” Alan calls. “John, wait.”


Alan shrugs. “Is it true?” he asks, and at least he has the decency to look ashamed while saying it.

John’s shakes his head in disbelief. “You followed me out here not to apologize for your arsehole friend, but to find out if I really do like cock.” he barks a hoarse, humorless laugh. “Jesus Christ, Al. Yes, okay? Yes. I like birds, but I also like blokes. Happy now?”

April

“I see you’ve been busy, then.” Sherlock gestures with his tumbler towards the sheet of torn notebook paper on John’s coffee table.

John glances down at the to-do list, scrawled in his messy doctor’s hand on the lined page. “Yeah. Got to start somewhere, right?”

He had made the list in a burst of determination to stop wallowing and get his life together. There are five numbered entries, written in thick black marker:

5. Interact with other human beings.
3. Get rid of her things.
2. Look for a different job.
1. Cut down on the drinking.

“That’s... yeah. That’s good.” Sherlock takes a swallow of amber liquid, then holds up the glass and lifts an eyebrow. “Haven’t got started on number one yet, I see.”

“I just wrote those down an hour ago. Give a man a chance,” John mumbles into his own glass.

“You could do something with number five right now, you know,” Sherlock says. “It’s only half seven. You could call Lestrade, ask him if he wants a pint. Or, you could go over to Baker Street and talk to the real me, instead of sitting here by yourself and holding an imaginary conversation. Because, and no offense intended, this is more than a little pathetic.”

"Just not ready yet, Sherlock." John sighs in tired resignation. “I’m just not ready to... tomorrow, maybe. I made the list, that’s my accomplishment for today. I’ll start working on it tomorrow.”
“How about number four?” Sherlock pestered him. “You had half a banana ten hours ago. Go in the kitchen. Make a cheese sandwich. Take you all of five minutes.”

“This is the difference between you and the real Sherlock,” John notes as he sips his scotch. “The actual you doesn’t give a damn if I eat or not.”

Sherlock looks at him reproachfully over the rim of his glass. “Honestly, John. Why do you absolutely insist on thinking I don’t care about you, when there is a mountain of evidence to the contrary? What exactly is the purpose of this defense mechanism?”

“Jesus, Sherlock,” John snaps, annoyed. “Even the imaginary you gives me a hard time.”

Sherlock rolls his eyes. “It might be worth pointing out that I’m not actually Sherlock, I’m your own subconscious talking to you, so in reality you’re asking yourself difficult questions.”

John groans. “For fuck’s sake, give me just a little peace and quiet. Five minutes. Please.”

But Sherlock in any form is nothing if not persistent. “Just tell me why,” he asks, his voice inquisitive but softer, more compassionate. “Why are you doing this to yourself? Instead of having pretend conversations with a pretend me, why don’t you just come to Baker Street so we can talk for real?”

“Because I don’t even know if the real you wants to talk to me,” John replies, not meeting his eyes. Sherlock says nothing, just quirks an eyebrow in gently mocking query as he sips his scotch.

“All right, fine,” John sighs. “Because I’m a stubborn bastard. It’s what got me through medical school even though I wasn’t the brightest by far. It got me through a war that seemed bound and determined to kill me at every turn. It got me through losing you, when all I wanted to do was... well. It got me through. I make a decision, I stand by it. I’ve made a decision to deal with my own life on my own terms, without using you as a crutch, and I intend to see it through.”

“I see that,” Sherlock says, not unkindly. He leans forward, fixing John with his piercing celadon gaze. “But tell me: How is being stubborn working out for you this time around?”

John doesn’t have an answer for that, so he sighs and closes his eyes. “Oh God,” John groans. “I don’t know, okay? I don’t know, Sherlock, so just... shut up. Please. Shut up and let me drink in peace.”

Sherlock does in fact shut up, goes so still and quiet that the sudden silence makes the half-napping John open his eyes, almost spilling the drink resting on his chest as he looks over at the empty wing chair by the bay window.

Of course he knows Sherlock’s not really there but even so, the emptiness of the room surprises and disappoints him just a bit.

***

John decides he wants some different scenery for his daily walks, so instead of going back to West Norwood after work he takes the Bakerloo line to Regent’s Park.

It’s just coincidence, of course, pure happenstance that out of all the many green spaces in London he just has to choose the one closest to Sherlock.

And if he shaves and brushes his teeth in the staff restroom at the clinic before he leaves... well, it’s just to help him feel more awake. Refreshed. Presentable.
John does this for three days in a row.

He never once thinks of going by Baker Street. He never once considers just dropping by and seeing if Sherlock is home, conducting an experiment or playing his violin or watching dreadful telly.

He has no intention of going to see Sherlock Holmes, none whatsoever.

Until on the fourth day he finds himself on the in front of 221B, feeling paralysed and indecisive and very very foolish indeed.

After a number of oscillations in front of the door, he sternly tells himself he’s being a sodding idiot and fishes out his key.

He shuts the front door softly behind himself, but not so softly as to escape Mrs Hudson’s freakish bat-like hearing.

“Sherlock, darling,” she calls out. “I didn’t think you’d be back for dinner, but I’ve got a lovely--” she steps into the hallway, drying her hands on her apron; her eyes widen in pleased surprise when she sees John standing there instead.

“John Watson!” she exclaims gaily, enveloping him in a surprisingly strong hug. “I knew you’d be back around eventually. Sherlock will be so happy you’ve come home, you don’t know how that man has missed you--”

“Mrs Hudson, I--” he untangles himself from her perfumed embrace, gently grasps her shoulders. “I’m not--it’s not qute--” he sighs. “I just was in the neighborhood and thought I’d drop in and say hello to Sherlock,” he finishes lamely, feeling self-conscious and more than a little foolish.

“Oh love, he’s not in,” Mrs Hudson says apologetically. “I don’t know where he is; you know he never tells me anything.”

“That’s all right,” Mrs Hudson interrupts his fumbled apologies with a motherly smile and a hand on his arm. “Why don’t you come in and have some dinner? I’ve made a nice casserole and a salad, there’s plenty for two.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Hudson, but no. I’ll just be on my way home, I think.”

Mrs Hudson’s smile dims a fraction. “Whatever you like, dear.”

It suddenly occurs to John that perhaps he is being a more than a bit self-involved in his unhappiness and complicated, conflicted pining for Sherlock; Mrs Hudson is a friend as well, and has always been kind to John, and right this moment he is being more than a little inconsiderate.

“Well,” he says, a touch hesitant, “to be honest I don’t have anything in at home, so if you’re sure--”

His former landlady’s smile returns to full blinding wattage. “Of course I’m certain! Don’t hover about like a stranger, come in, come in. We’ll have a bite and see if Himself turns up to join us.”

***

John gives the casserole a pass (she knows he doesn’t eat meat, of course, but for some reason Mrs Hudson never thinks chicken counts) but takes generous helpings of salad and potatoes and two
buttered rolls, and finds himself cleaning his plate while Mrs Hudson fills him in on the latest news about Baker Street. He listens with genuine interest as she recounts the latest chapter in Mr Chatterjee’s ongoing familial drama and the Davidson’s possible marital breakdown after 45 years together.

(Apparently 70-year-old Mr Davidson had caught been messing about with their housekeeper. “You know what I think?” says Mrs Hudson indignantly. “I think it’s those—” she drops her voice to a stage whisper—”penis pills. Old men aren’t supposed to be thinking about that all the time. It’s not natural.” John fights to keep a straight face as he nods his agreement, thoughtfully spearing a slice of cucumber.)

John doesn’t ask about Sherlock. Mrs. Hudson doesn’t offer.

He honestly has a nice time. It’s a positive change, socializing with another human being, with a friend, and he finds an hour passes quickly. He helps with the washing-up, making small talk, determinedly not listening for the sound of the front door opening.

Mrs. Hudson, bless her heart, knows exactly what John’s not listening for.

“You’re sure?” she asks with a fond smile.

She insists on bringing out the good cups and saucers and fussing over loose tea rather than bags, and an apple crumble magically appears, and between this and that it’s almost eight when Mrs Hudson clears the cups and saucers away.

“I really do have to go,” John finally says apologetically.

“I’m sorry he’s not home, love. Sherlock will be so sorry he missed you, but it will mean so much to him that you came around.”

John suddenly feels rather pathetic, hanging around Baker Street for two hours uninvited in the hopes Sherlock would show up.

*He’s probably out solving crimes without you, he thinks. He doesn’t actually need you to exist. He did fine—well, he survived, at least—for thirty four years before you turned up. And after, too. Remember how he left you behind? Doesn’t need you a bit.*

“You maybe don’t have to mention that I came around,” says John, looking away in embarrassment.

Mrs Hudson looks at him with a sad sympathy that he finds almost unbearably grating. “Are you sure?”

“I’m sure,” John answers, shrugging on his jacket and bending to kiss her warm, dry cheek. “I had a lovely time with you tonight, Mrs. Hudson. Hopefully I’ll see you soon.”

“Hopefully,” she replies, watching him with a small, fond smile as he leaves.

***

Later on, sleepless in his bed, John contemplates that going over to see Sherlock and then asking Mrs. Hudson not to tell him is in fact orders of magnitude more pathetic than going over there unannounced in the first place.

The cringing embarrassment he feels at his show of neediness isn’t enough keep his mind from lingering over the sense memories of 221B, the smell of old plaster and lemon scented cleaner, the
creak of floorboards and the dim glow of the overhead light, all sensations he so strongly associates with returning home late at night with Sherlock, giggling and hyper and overwound after a night of adrenaline and danger. Soon John finds his mind straying to an old but persistent fantasy, and soon he’s sliding a hand into his pajama bottoms and indulging in his now-nightly habit of jerking off frantically to thoughts of Sherlock, imagining him on his knees in the front hallway, gazing up at him with those wide moonlit eyes, full lips stretched obscenely around his cock while John gasps and twists his fingers in dark curls, thrusting into the wet heat of that gorgeous, willing mouth.

He moans Sherlock’s name, unheeding, as he comes.

John’s still breathing heavily, post-orgasmic lassitude just beginning to creep into his limbs, when his message notification tone beeps.

*I deduced it, you know. SH*

For a brief, unsettling moment John wonders if Sherlock somehow determined his masturbatory habits from several miles away, then shakes his head at the ridiculous thought. He takes a moment to slide off his bottoms, using them to wipe the mess off his belly, and tosses them over the side of the bed before picking up his phone.

*Deduced what?*

*Mrs. Hudson didn’t tell me you came over. SH*

*I did, however, observe the clues. SH*

*It is kind of what I do. SH*

*You should have texted me. I would have come home. SH*

*I didn’t want to impose.*

*You are never, ever an imposition. Stop thinking like that this instant. SH*

*I am sorry I missed you. Would have liked to have seen you. SH*

*Me too. Next time.*

*Next time, then. Sleep well, John. SH*

He does.

***

John has been hovering close to the breaking point for days now.

He’s dealt with the whispers and sidelong stares from the nurses. Accepted the overly polite distance of the other doctors.

But the last straw was the condescending, falsely sickly-sweet smile of the office manager this afternoon as she asked him to take the weekend rotation no one else wanted because “The other doctors have families, and you, well, you know.”

He had smiled and nodded whilst his mind grew hazy red with rage.
He has to get out of this clinic. Walking through these doors, looking at those awful beige walls, watching the clock hands crawl at a snail’s pace, enduring the questioning eyes of his coworkers, wondering what they say about him when he’s not present—it’s become absolutely unbearable.

He can’t stand it for one moment longer.

That settles it, then. He composes a short, politely-worded email, lets them know he won’t be working for them any longer. When he hits send, he lets out a breath he hadn’t known he was holding.

He drops his ID and keys on the manager’s desk and walks out without looking back.

***

“Get yoghurt,” Sherlock tells him. “Not raspberry, though. The little seeds get stuck in my teeth.”

“I don’t like yoghurt,” John says aloud, causing a tall redhead in yoga pants to look askance at the middle-aged man talking to himself in the dairy aisle of Asda. He smiles in what he hopes is a non-threatening manner and retreats to the conversation taking place entirely in his own head.

“In fact, I find it runny and disgusting,” he tells Sherlock.

“You always bought it, though,” Sherlock points out. “Why would you buy something you don’t even like?”

John rolls his eyes. “I bought them for you, you oblivious git.”

“Oh.” Sherlock goes quiet for a moment. “I should have appreciated that more, I suppose,” he says, almost apologetic.

“It’s all right,” John says, and finds he means it. “I never expected you to.”

“Well, I should have.”

“Water under the bridge,” John tells him as they make their way into the frozen foods aisle.

“You like those,” Sherlock says, pointing to a square box in the freezer case. “The sausages made by the blonde woman who died of cancer.”

“I swear, the weirdest things get stuck in your pop culture filter,” John replies, shaking his head but smiling just a bit. He opens the freezer door, takes out two packages of vegetarian sausage and puts them in his trolley.

“I find those truly repulsive, you know.” Sherlock says, crinkling his nose in the way that John can’t help but find endearing. “They’re simultaneously gritty and pasty and taste nothing at all like meat.”

“Well, then,” John says. “I’ll buy my own sausages, and you buy your own yoghurt. Or not, considering how you’re not even real.”

Something about this statement seems to upset imaginary Sherlock. He huffs and wraps his coat tighter around himself, trailing behind John as they traverse the rest of the frozen foods aisle in silence.

“Maybe I could, now,” he says quietly a few minutes later, nearly too low for John to hear.

“Maybe you could what?” John asks.
“Appreciate you more. Maybe I could do that sort of thing, now.” Sherlock looks at John through narrowed eyes, as if daring him to disagree. “You never really gave me an opportunity to show you that I could appreciate you, that I could care, not after….well, after.”

John eyes him warily. “Maybe you could,” he concedes. “Doesn’t change a thing at the moment, though, does it?”

“No,” says Sherlock softly, and lapses into a silence tinged with sadness. He follows wordlessly behind John until they reach the breakfast cereal.

“Coco Pops?” he asks in horror as John contemplates his cereal choices.

“I like Coco Pops,” John snaps defensively.

“Coco Pops are horrifying,” Sherlock counters. “They turn the milk grey. *Grey*, John. It’s an abomination. Get the Golden Grahams, we both like those.”

“Well, I’m not buying cereal for you, am I?” John snaps, sudden sharp annoyance flaring. “I’m forty-two years old and I live alone and I talk to myself and my best friend has been reduced to a figment of my imagination, and all of this is depressing as fuck but the miniscule silver lining is I can have any goddamn breakfast cereal I want, so if I want Coco Pops I’m going to *buy the fucking Coco Pops*.”

He doesn’t realize he’s said all this out loud until he looks up from the box in his hand to find Sherlock gone and several other shoppers looking at him with frankly undisguised concern.

He glares at them defiantly, silently daring them to say something as he throws the cereal into his trolley and stomps away with as much dignity as he can muster.

***

He almost bins all of Mary’s things, but in the end his pragmatic, frugal nature wins out and he spends an entire afternoon boxing her belongings for the charity shop, stacking them in neat rows against the bedroom wall.

It’s past seven when he finishes, and he’s not yet a seasoned enough driver to be comfortable driving at night in the dark, so he puts the trip to Oxfam off for another day.

***

The men’s shelter is in a spectacularly dodgy neighborhood; the carpets are threadbare and dingy and the furniture looks old and battered enough to have possibly come through the London Blitz.

The security guard at the front desk is polite and helpful, however, and the director of the shelter—a tall, rawboned older gentleman in a rumpled blue jumper—has a firm handshake and a kind, open face. John likes him instantly.

“So you’re looking for something a little different than NHS clinic work, I take it?” Mr Atherton asks.

“Well, yes. Family practice work is fine, my coworkers are lovely—*excepting the paid killers, that is, John thinks but doesn’t say aloud—*’but day in and day out I find that I maybe am looking for something a bit more, well, challenging.”

“A bit dull, perhaps. A little mundane,” Mr Atherton supplies with a small, knowing smile. “A bit
too boring, perhaps, for a former Army man and compatriot of Sherlock Holmes.”

“Well, yes,” John replies, regarding the director with curiosity. “You read the papers then, I take it.”

“And your blog,” Atherton answers. “I am a bit acquainted with your detective, as well. Not personally, but more than a few gentlemen who pass through our doors have had dealings with Mr Holmes.” He leans forward, tilts his head conspiratorily. “Your friend has kept a considerable number of homeless individuals from starving or freezing to death, you know. Helped more than a few find placement in drug treatment programs as well.”

“I know he has a good deal of interaction with the homeless community,” John tells him. “He often says he thinks higher of them than he does those in the halls of power.” John had always vaguely thought that Sherlock merely considered his homeless connections as a means to an end. He is a bit ashamed to realise he never really stopped to think about how many desperate, hungry individuals Sherlock has helped with a well-placed twenty or a name and address scribbled on the back of a coffee receipt.

“And he’s right to think so.” Atherton leans back in his ragged desk chair, regards John evenly. “They might be good people on the whole, but that doesn’t mean they don’t desperately need your help. Life on the streets is dirty, brutal and often short. The job is mostly delousing, scabies, fractures, stitching up knife wounds, amputating gangrenous toes. A lot of bites, dog and human. The occasional pneumonia or staph infection gone septic. Not glamorous by any means. But desperately needed. And not boring.”

“It sounds wonderful,” John says truthfully.

“It doesn’t pay well,” Atherton tells him.

“Not a problem,” John replies.

(It’s true. Shortly after quitting the surgery, a six-figure sum had appeared in his bank account, along with a missive hand-delivered by one of Mycoft’s minions, indicating that the funds were a reward from the Americans for the capture and return of the woman John knew as Mary Morstan. John didn’t particularly believe it, but he didn’t refuse the money either. It would have been pointless to try, anyway, as Mycroft Holmes refuses to comprehend the concept of ‘no’ as an answer.)

“Well, most doctors who come in here who don’t say that,” Atherton chuckles.

“I’m not most doctors,” John answers evenly.

Atherton tilts his head slightly, face growing thoughtful as he gives John a slow, appraising look.

“No, I don’t believe you are,” he says, then closes the file folder in front of him. “I’ve not checked your references yet, but as far as I’m concerned Sherlock Holmes is the only reference I need. He’s a good friend to my people and a good man.”

John’s lips twitch into a tiny grin. “Not everyone sees that in him, you know.”

Atherton smiles. “I like to think I see the sides of people others sometimes miss. It’s crucial to my line of work.” He stands, extends a hand to John. “I’d love to have you come work with us, Doctor Watson, if you’ll have us.”

John rises, takes his hand. “It would be my pleasure.”

***
Late that evening he texts Sherlock.

*Today I was reminded you’re a good man.*

*I have my moments. SH*

*Some people seem to think so.*

*Not that I care what people think. SH*

*Except you. I care what you think. SH*

*I should stop saying things now. SH*

*I like when you say things.*

*I like when you say things, too. SH*

*Oh God, this is inane. Forget I said that. SH*

*Said what?*

*Goodnight, John. SH*

*Goodnight, Sherlock.*

***

Despite a year filled with bad life choices, John feels certain that tonight is still a standout moment in his long history of terrible decisions.

He regretted coming here the moment he entered the hot, crowded, quasi-rustic yet somehow still blandly corporate chain pub.

Alan Turnbull, a nurse who served with John in Kandahar, is a friend of sorts but not a close one by any means. He and John texted back and forth a few times after John's return to London, had discussed meeting up for drinks but as these things happen, neither ever followed through. Yesterday, Al messaged him out of the blue and told him he was getting married shortly, girlfriend up the stump and whatnot, and invited him out to his last moment stag do. Impulsively, John had accepted the invitation, his heart still brimming with cheery, unguarded optimism over yesterday’s job offer and his tenuous reconnection with Sherlock.

Now, however sipping flat warm lager at a table with five barely-friends from his Army days, John feels anxious and annoyed and like he pushed himself far too hard far too soon. Alan is gripping the edge of the table for dear life; likely he’s been getting shots forced down his throat since he first set foot in the pub.

John looks at the young man, his cheeks flushed and his eyes bright, and he thinks of his own stag night with Sherlock, of the almosts and could-have-beens, the dark fuzzy edges of that drink-soaked evening. He sighs and takes another sip of warm beer, wrapping himself in his own thoughts, letting the conversation flow over him unheeded.

“Watson! Hey, Doc!” Derrin Stewart booms loudly at him across the table, over-enunciating in the way only the intoxicated do, jolting John abruptly from his warm cocoon of remembrance.
Oh that’s right, he remembers, looking at the man’s shaved head, his close-set eyes, the mocking
twist of his lips, his thick, once muscular shoulders now decidedly running to fat. I hate this
overbearing arsehole.

“Yeah, Stewart?” he answers, civil yet reserved, not allowing his distaste to show.

“You haven’t said a word all night, and we’re supposed to be giving Turnbull the benefit of our
collective wisdom. Quit yer woolgathering over there and tell us how married life is treating you.”

Oh, shit. This was an unbelievably bad idea. John closes his eyes, tilts the glass to his lips, finishes
his dregs of lager. He opens his eyes, meeting Stewart’s gaze.

“Not married anymore,” he says with a shrug, and swipes a hand across his lips.

Stewart’s answering smile is flinty, dangerous, and decidedly not friendly, and John begins to recall
the man never liked him much, either.

A murmur of surprise ripples around the table, along with a murmured “So sorry” from somewhere.

A man with an ounce of sensitivity would have mouthed a platitude and let the matter drop. Derrin
Stewart does not have a single drop of sensitivity in his entire thick, lumpy, oddly-shaped body.

“What happened then?” he asks with what looks to John like a bit of a sneer. “You run her off
already?”

“We just…” John fumbles for words; there is absolutely no way he can explain the entire Mary
catastrophe in a few sentences, nor does he want to. The less said, the better. “We had differences,”
he finally offers. “You know. Incompatibility. The usual.”

Most of the guys at table seem uncomfortable; poor drunk Alan looks like he wants to slide under the
table, but that may just be the alcohol. Stewart, however, fixes John with a look of undisguised
malice.

“Yeah, mate. Got it. Differences.” He looks down, takes a long pull of his drink, returns his beady
eyes to John’s. “I’d bet a twenty that ‘difference’ is that poofter cop you run around with, innit?”

John tilts his head, momentarily confused. ‘He’s not a cop,” he says, a bit stupidly, not quite
understanding the abrupt turn for the unpleasant this conversation has taken.

“Whatever. Point is, I bet your little lady dumped you when she figured out you been bumming
Sherlock Holmes the whole time.”

His brain finally catching up to his ears, John realizes two things far too late: one, this slab of
unpleasant human being holds some sort of serious grudge against him, and two, he’s wandered right
into a trap.

The whole table has gone quiet and wide eyed.

Adrenaline floods John’s system, leaving him with a deadly calm clarity. He looks evenly at the
larger man’s frankly unpleasant visage.

“Stewart, do you have a problem with me I’m not aware of?” he asks, icily polite.

“I don’t like queers,” Stewart spits, bringing his animus into the wide open. “I don’t want to live with
them, I don’t want to serve with them, and I sure as fuck don’t want to sit here and drink with them.”
“Is that what this is about?” John asks, the fight-or-flight reflex singing in his nerves, making him feel slightly unreal. He’d never had any inkling anyone from his army days knew, and what a hell of a way to find out. “My personal life is absolutely none of your goddamned business.”

“Oh, come off it, Watson,” Stewart sneers. “Everyone here knows that back in the day, you’d get on your knees in the supply room for any passing soldier who looked your way.” His eyes narrow to slits. “You disgusted me then and you disgust me now.”

Alan places a hand on the man’s meaty shoulder. “Derrin,” he says, tentatively.

“Shut up,” Derrin shakes off Alan’s hand, drains his glass, slams it on the table. He fixes John with a cold, murderous stare. “Go home and suck off your posh little boyfriend, Watson. You’re not welcome here.”

The table is deathly silent as the noise of the pub ripples and flows around them. John feels hot and ill. Denials rise to his lips but he refuses to speak them. No. He doesn’t want to be that person anymore.

John stands, looks around the table at the still, shuttered faces. “You’re all going to let this fucking bigot speak for you?” he asks.

No one will meet his eyes.

“Sod this. Sod the lot of you. Fucking cowards. And you?” He stares daggers into Derrin’s ugly, hateful visage. “It’s been five years, and you're the one still thinking about where I like to put my dick. You may want to consider that.”

“You runty little cocksucker,” the man seethes hatefully, his fists clenching as he rises out of his chair. John would dearly love to lay this bastard out flat, but there’s the new job he doesn’t want to jeopardise.

“You’re not worth the ASBO,” he spits. “But know that if I ever see your miserable fucking face again, I swear to God I will cave it in.” He pulls out his wallet, throws notes on the table.

“And just so you know,” John adds, voice low and dangerous, “Sherlock Holmes is worth ten thousand times more than all of you put together.” He pulls on his jacket and leaves the pub, heart hammering but head held high.

Yes, tonight had been a stupendously, monumentally bad decision.

***

He’s on the pavement zipping up his jacket when he hears the pub door open behind him.

Fuck, he really does not need an ASBO right now, but if he has to take that bastard down he’ll do it without regret. He tenses, mentally preparing for a fight.

“John!” Alan calls. “John, wait.”


Alan shrugs. “Is it true?” he asks, and at least he has the decency to look ashamed while saying it.

John’s shakes his head in disbelief. “You followed me out here not to apologize for your arsehole friend, but to find out if I really do like cock,” he barks a hoarse, humorless laugh. “Jesus Christ, Al.
“Yes, okay? Yes. I like birds, but I also like blokes. Happy now?”

Alan’s eyes slide away from John's face. “I’m sorry about Derrin,” he says, staring at the pavement. “I didn’t know he had a problem with you. I had no idea.”

“So everybody knew,” John says, feeling a bit like he’s having an out of body experience. “The whole time. Everyone knew.”

“Well.” Al shuffles his feet. “There were rumours. A lot of rumours. So, yeah, I guess. But hey, I don’t care, all right? You’re a good sort, even if you…” he falls silent, seemingly uncertain how to complete the sentence.

“Even if I take it up the arse,” John supplies, voice low and rough with the frustration and hurt surging up in his chest.

Jesus, this is going even worse than he ever imagined.

“You’re still a mate,” Al says. “Not everyone…not all of us feel like he does, you know. I don’t want you to think--”

John rolls his eyes, his lips curving into a thin, humourless smile. “Didn’t hear anyone say a word in there against him, did I.”

“I’m sorry,” Alan says helplessly.

John huffs out a frustrated, contemptuous noise, shakes his head. “Look. I’m trying to be honest about my life and my decisions. You and your friends in there should do the same. So, no hard feelings. Just... lose my number, okay? I mean it. I have so much to deal with, and I don’t need this particular brand of bullshit.”

“I’m sorry,” Alan repeats.

John just shakes his head. “Have a nice wedding, mate,” he says, then turns on his heel and walks away without hesitation.

***

On the train home the adrenaline ebbs away, leaving John feeling hollow and shaky inside.

The thick, black anger begins to seep in through the cracks, oozing into his body like warm sticky tar, settling into all the empty spaces deep inside.

***

Once home John takes himself into the kitchen, pours himself a generous two fingers of whisky. He swallows it without tasting, then pours another. Anger and frustration bubble hot and dangerous inside him, roiling around in his belly with the liquor.

He looks at the kitchen, at the cheery curtains and neatly folded tea towels and the ceramic salt and pepper set shaped like cows. Mary picked them out, of course. She also picked the tablecloth and the spice rack and the starburst clock and suddenly John hates it all, hates every single thing in this fucking house, hates the house itself down to the very foundation.

He briefly considers burning it down, but he doesn’t want to inconvenience the neighbors quite that much. Instead he decides to make tea, rising to get a mug out of the cupboard.
His eyes range over the plates, the saucers, the bowls. Mary bought all of them, every single one, getting rid of John’s things she didn’t like when he wasn’t around. Giving in to an impulse he doesn’t quite understand, buoyed by the constant black undercurrent of rage, he plucks a plate off the shelf and hurls it as hard as he can against the far wall. It shatters explosively.

The release, the satisfaction of destruction is enormous. John opens the cabinets and hurls mugs, bowls, tumblers against the far wall. When the dishes and glasses are reduced to shards he pulls the clock off the wall, throws appliances across the room.

He’s burning with anger, his emotions spinning dangerously out of control--but God damn it all he finally feels it, for the first time in so fucking long he can actually fucking taste it, touch it, feel it as it flows through him, a river of rage and sorrow and frustration.

It burns inside him, bright and hot, the pain clear and sharp and exhilarating as John surveys his handiwork. The kitchen is destroyed, a hurricane of ceramic and glass.

It feels marvellous.

He drains his whiskey, tips another two fingers into the tumbler--it's the only unbroken glass in the house, now--and walks into the sitting room. He pulls every single framed photograph down, smashes them against the wall, sweeps shelves of stupid trinkets to the floor and stomps them flat, grinds them into shards under his heel.

John empties his glass in a swallow, refills his drink again and takes it upstairs. He flicks on the bedroom light, and his eyes come to rest upon the boxes of Mary’s things, waiting patiently for the trip to Oxfam.

All the garbage, all the debris, all the soul-crushing goddamn burden Mary left in her wake, reduced to a stack of innocent-looking cardboard boxes.

It’s all just crushingly, sickeningly unfair.

John sets down the glass on top of the bureau, opens up the wardrobe, pulls out the metal lockbox. Inside, under the Sig, is the non-regulation, quite illegal folding knife he’d smuggled back home, a gift given to him by an American acquaintance in Kandahar.

(An acquaintance who’d plowed him senseless behind a stack of pallets in a sandy Quonset hut one hot, restless afternoon. An acquaintance who’d wanted more, could have been more if John had let himself consider it for a moment instead of reflexively shutting him down, pushing him away. You’d get on your knees in the supply room for any passing soldier who looked your way, Stewart had said with an ugly sneer, and part of the reason that hurt so much was there was truth in it. John could try to minimize it, to deny it, but deep down he knows he’d been a slag in Uni, in the Army, keeping out any risk of real emotional connection with a man by by hiding behind a wall of furtive, loveless promiscuity--ah, he sees that now, and God, that awareness stings like hell, adds fuel to his already-immense pyre of self-loathing.)

The blade is six inches long, perfectly kept, so sharp John could perform surgery with it.

He clicks the blade open, dumps the first box of clothing on the bed, and begins to methodically slice every garment into ribbons. Then he hacks the boxes into confetti before shoving the mountain of shredded fabric off the bed and stabs through the loathed sunburst quilt into the mattress, over and over and over again.

(The symbolism of that gesture does not escape him.)
The flame of anger builds into an inferno as John opens his wardrobe and pulls out his dress uniform and battle fatigues and slashes them apart, throws a wooden box of photographs and mementos across the room with such force the wood splinters apart, pictures and papers spilling down.

"I'm done," he mutters under his breath.

*Done. So fucking done with all of this.*

Momentarily out of things at hand to destroy, John sags onto the tattered bed, breathing heavily.

He doesn't feel the sting on the inside of his right arm until he looks down and sees dark red blossoming on the edges of the small slash in the sleeve of his plaid shirt.

He unbuttons his cuffs, takes off his shirt, sits on the ruined mattress in jeans and vest and examines the cut. It's really barely more than a scratch on the inside of his forearm, just north of his wrist, a little over two inches long. He must have slashed himself with the knife while shredding Mary's things. He never even felt it.

The anger is ebbing away now, quickly, and as John sits on the bed watching the blood bead up and run down his arm the rage is replaced by something lost and blank and endlessly sad.

He may be more than a little drunk.

Later on, he won't ever be able to adequately explain what he does next; maybe it's an attempt to recapture the hot, pleasurable rush of emotion he'd felt just moments earlier.

Maybe he truly does want to hurt himself, to give in to a single dark impulsive moment of self-destruction.

Whatever the reason, it takes less than three seconds to pick up the knife and draw the blade diagonally across his inner forearm, a few inches above the welling scratch.

It doesn't hurt for a split second and then it does, the pain flaring up bright and sharp as his blood pours forth. John realizes he used more pressure than he intended. The knife is still exquisitely sharp, and the wound is deep and gaping.

"Oh, fuck," he mutters hoarsely as he realizes the gravity of what he's done. "Oh bloody buggering *fuck.*"

He wraps his shirt around the lacerated arm and rises, stumbles into the ensuite, grabs for towels to wrap around his bloody arm. He sinks to the floor, resting his arm on the countertop to keep it above his heart as he applies pressure on the wound.

John absolutely does not want to go to A&E like this, with a serious self-inflicted knife wound, if it can be at all avoided. He'd be evaluated, possibly sectioned. His medical license could be jeopardised.

"And I was doing better," John says aloud to the empty room. "Goddammit. I was doing better."

He wraps another towel around his arm, watches the white cotton turn crimson as he tries to to calm his racing pulse and figure out what he should do next.

*Come off it. You know what you should do. There's only one person you trust enough to come help you. There's only one person in this world you truly want, you truly need, and if you'd only admitted that in the first place you wouldn't be in this ridiculous situation, you dumb melodramatic bastard.*
He digs out his phone--fortunatley he keeps it in this left front jeans pocket-- and dials one-handed.

Sherlock answers on the second ring. “John,” he says, deep voice tight with concern. Well, of course; odds are good that if John is calling instead of texting at 11:30 pm something isn’t right.

“Sherlock, I--” John takes a deep breath, resigns himself to making his pathetic, impulsive weakness known. “I’ve just done something really, really stupid.”
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

“John,” Sherlock breathes, low and rough and full of desperate concern.

Out of nowhere, John suddenly remembers Magnussen’s smug, unctuous voice in his ear as he watched Sherlock drag him out of a lit bonfire.

*Look how you care about John Watson.*

Chapter Notes

Many thanks to the gorgeous and talented bittergreens for keeping my characterization on point.

“What’s happened?” Sherlock asks him. His voice is outwardly calm, but a thread of something metallic and frightened runs just under the surface.

Telling Sherlock what he’s done is one of the more difficult conversations John has ever had to endure. He gets through it by distancing himself from the situation, pretending it is happening to someone else. A patient of his, perhaps.


“Were you in a fight?” Sherlock asks.

John hesitates. “Not as such,” he says, and realizes that pause has told Sherlock volumes.

“You’ve been drinking,” Sherlock says. It’s not a question. “And you’re at home. Alone.”

There’s no point in denying it. “Yes,” says John tiredly.

“I’m calling 999,” says Sherlock, the frightened edge in his tone sharpening into panic.

“No!” says John, too quickly. “No. I didn’t hit the radial artery, I’m not going to bleed out. You can’t...” He pauses, not quite able to state the situation plainly. “Sherlock,” he pleads. “You can’t.”

It takes Sherlock less than half a second to come to the same conclusions John arrived at earlier. “Okay,” he says after a beat, and John knows Sherlock is forcing himself to sound calmer, more sure of himself, his voice taking on the the not-quite-genuine placating tone one would use with a hysterical child or a desperate man standing on a ledge. “I’m on my way. Don’t move, don’t do anything.” John hears him swallow hard, forcing the fear down. “Promise me,” Sherlock says, and his voice quivers just the tiniest bit. “John. Promise me.”
“I promise,” John says. “I do. Just... just get here as quickly as you can.”

“I’ll stay on the phone with you,” Sherlock says.

“I need my hands free,” John points out.

“You can put the phone down. You don’t have to talk. Just... don’t hang up. Please, John.”

“All right,” John agrees, and puts his mobile on the corner of the sink. He applies pressure to the injury and waits, occasionally wrapping a fresh towel around the layers of thick fabric swaddling his arm. Thirsty and lightheaded, he rinses out the mug used to hold toothbrushes, fills it with tap water, and drinks it down.

It helps a bit.

Westminster to West Norwood is a forty-minute trip on a good day, but Sherlock employs some arcane, unknowable taxicab alchemy to arrive in under half an hour. By the time John hears him on the doorstep, letting himself in with his spare key, close to every towel John owns has been ruined but finally the bleeding has slowed, taking much longer to soak through each layer of cotton.

He’s sitting on the edge of the tub with his damaged arm swaddled tightly, sipping water from the rinsed-out toothbrush mug, when he hears Sherlock’s light, cautious tread in the front hallway, the kitchen, the sitting room. Sherlock climbs the stairs more purposefully; in the sound of his steps John can almost sense his increasing concern as he enters the bedroom, sees the shredded clothing, the destroyed quilt soaked with blood, the knife hastily discarded on the floor.

It wouldn’t take a consulting detective to deduce John’s actions. John is pretty sure Helen Keller herself could figure this one out.

_I’m so incredibly fucking selfish_, John thinks. He closes his his eyes against the growing swell of guilt and remorse, knowing that Sherlock will instantaneously visualize what took place tonight, will see it all unfold in his unblinking mind’s eye.

John wishes desperately he could go back in time and undo his actions, just to spare his dearest friend that pain.

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John looks up at Sherlock as he enters the ensuite, and for a moment their eyes meet, dark slate gazing into silver green. “I wasn’t trying to kill myself,” is what spills impulsively out of his mouth, and from the reflexive defensiveness in his tone John suddenly realizes he’s not at all certain he’s telling the truth.

Sherlock drops gracefully to his knees in front of him. His normally pale face is ashen, and John knows he’s not imagining the barest trembling of that deep Cupid’s bow.

“Let me see,” Sherlock says, gently but firmly, keeping his voice calm despite the worry in his eyes. It’s not a question.

John nods, allows him to peel away the sodden towels with long gentle fingers.

At the sight of the viciously opened flesh Sherlock makes the tiniest involuntary gasp, just a whispery huff of air through his teeth. He quickly plucks a fresh towel from the dwindling stack behind him and wraps it around the wound, large hands cradling his injured limb with a tenderness that cuts John to the core. Anguish is written plainly all over Sherlock’s face, in the way his full lips
thin as he presses them together hard, the way his pale eyes take on the unmistakable glitter of unshed tears as they look up at him.

“John,” Sherlock breathes, low and rough and full of desperate concern.

Out of nowhere, John suddenly remembers Magnussen’s smug, unctuous voice in his ear as he watched Sherlock drag him out of a lit bonfire.

*Look how you care about John Watson.*

The realization of what he’s done to Sherlock—what he’s doing to Sherlock right now—hits John with the force of blow to the solar plexus. As badly as John is hurting right now, emotionally as well as physically, Sherlock is hurting too. And John is the one hurting him.

“I’m sorry.” The words tumble unbidden out of John’s mouth, as raw and pained as the gash in his flesh. “I’m so sorry.” And now that he can see the toll his actions have taken on the person he loves most in all the world, the unshed tears begin to fall unchecked. The pain and regret are enormous, overwhelming, and he can’t hold it in anymore, warm wetness running down his cheeks, fat drops falling on his injured arm. “Jesus, Sherlock, I’m so fucking sorry.”

Sherlock drops his gaze, swallows thickly, shakes his head. “Don’t say that,” he mutters hoarsely. “This all happened because of me, all of it. Don’t you dare be sorry.”

John’s good left arm comes up, grabs a handful of damp wool coat. “No. I don’t want—I shouldn’t have—” he stops, unsure of what he’s even trying to say. “There are so many things I should have done differently. I’m an idiot. I’m such an idiot.”

Sherlock’s lips quirk into a tiny, sad smile at that, looking up at him mock-reproachfully through his lashes. John can see they are wet with tears. “Shut up,” he says softly. “You know the only person allowed to call you an idiot is me.”

John huffs out a shaky laugh, still gripping the sleeve of Sherlock’s coat. “You’re right. I overstepped there. That’s your area.”

Sherlock shakes his head, and the moment of attempted levity is gone, the small fleeting smile gone like the sun disappearing behind dark clouds. “John,” He opens his mouth, closes it, shakes his head again. “John. You hurt yourself.” His tone is shocked, disbelieving, sorrowful.

“I did,” John says simply, truthfully. Oh, how he wishes he had never pulled out that knife. “It was a terrible selfish thing to do and I am so, so sorry.”

“Oh, John,” Sherlock says again, calmer but still colored with something profoundly sad. "You are an idiot.”

"I know," John says quietly.

The two of them stay like that for a long moment, seemingly suspended in time, the air around them thick with unspoken emotion.

John shakes his head, collects himself. There is, after all, a pressing matter that requires their immediate attention. He releases his hold on Sherlock’s arm and swipes a hand across his wet face.

“Sherlock,” he says softly.

Sherlock’s dark head is bowed, his breathing suspiciously labored. John surprises himself by
reaching out and cupping fingers around the edge of his jaw. “Sherlock,” he repeats, tipping his chin up with gentle pressure, his voice a touch firmer. “I need you to look at me.”

Sherlock looks up, eyes red-rimmed and damp. John gives him his best wry, reassuring smile.

“We can indulge our inner fifteen-year-old girls later,” John says. "In fact, we absolutely should. But right now, I have to fix this mess I’ve created, and I can’t do it without you.” To his own surprise, he swipes a gentle thumb across Sherlock’s cheek. “I need your help, okay?”

Sherlock swallows, nods. “Of course,” he says, his voice scratchy. He sits up, scrubbing at his eyes in a manner reminiscent of a small, tired child.

John can’t help but smile in fondness; then he looks down at the crimson-soaked towels wrapped around his arm, and the seriousness of the situation returns to him. “All right, I’m going to tell you exactly what you need to collect, and then you’re going to sew up my arm.”

Sherlock looks at him with undisguised alarm. “I can’t--I don’t know how to--”

“Yes you do,” John tells him. “You practiced on those pigskin samples for days, remember?”

“That was years ago,” Sherlock protests.

“You’ve watched me do it a hundred times besides, and there’s no way I can sew myself up one-handed and half-drunk,” John says. He cocks an eyebrow, his lips curving into a rueful smile. “Face it, right now you’re the only game in town.”

Sherlock looks at him silently for a moment, considering. He nods, then stands; John can see him straighten his spine and square his shoulders, seeming decades older in a moment, wrapping himself in that uniquely Sherlockian brand of cool self-assurance he shams when he feels particularly out of his depth but still willing to resolutely commit to the task in front of him.

Sherlock exhales as he climbs to his feet. "Very well, then,” he says crisply, with a practiced detachment John knows he doesn’t feel. “Let’s get it over with.”

***

Upstairs there is no stable surface upon which to rest his arm, and the kitchen is a minefield of broken glass and viciously sharp pieces of ceramic, so the coffee table in the sitting room will have to do for an impromptu field theatre. The bleeding has finally almost stopped, so John carefully makes his way downstairs, a bit more lightheaded than he cares to admit, with Sherlock hovering directly behind him in case he stumbles or collapses.

Once in the lounge, Sherlock shrugs out of his coat and jacket, lays them carefully over the arm of the chair under the window, and unbuttons his cuffs, gracefully folds up his sleeves to just below his elbows.

(As he does so, John watches him move, all long lines and lithe grace, and remembers how many times he was so lonely he imagined Sherlock here with him, sitting in that very chair. Not for the first time, he wonders what point, exactly, he had been trying to prove? With Sherlock’s singular presence filling up the room, it’s impossible to remember.)

John directs Sherlock to the linen closet for laundered sheets to spread over the table for a semi-sterile (well, clean at least) field and has him fetch his medical bag from the hall closet, as well as a bottle of lidocaine from the box on the top shelf that he thinks of as “Sherlock supplies”--extra local anaesthetic, syringes, antibiotics, suturing supplies, and various other sundry bits and bobs he’s
pilfered from his employer over the past year.

“You’re a bit of a white collar criminal,” notes Sherlock dryly. "I’m sure the National Health Service would be thrilled to know of your larcenous habits.”

“And you’re a bit danger-prone, and I’m much more concerned about your well being than the NHS missing ten quid worth of plaster and gauze,” replies John. “Besides, I’m not in their employ any longer so they can piss right off.”

John sits on the couch, arm at the edge of the table, and when Sherlock enters with a stack of folded linens, he gestures with his good arm, guiding Sherlock to sit on the floor, perpendicular to where the injured limb is arranged. He has Sherlock place two clean folded tea towels under his arm, then has him open a single-use plastic bottle of sterile saline to irrigate the wound. John squeezes the bottle with his left hand, hissing through his teeth and trying not to flinch as the pain flares up again, bright and hot under the stream of liquid.

“Hurts, hm?” Sherlock murmurs sympathetically if a bit obviously, his eyebrows drawing together in pained concern.

John nods. “Like holy hell,” he says between gritted teeth as the last of the saline flows over the wound. “But I made this bed myself, didn’t I? Okay, look for a suture packet containing a 25 gauge needle.”

John instructs Sherlock how to draw the lidocaine up into the syringe; he follows directions to the letter, but then he looks up, face tight with anxiety. “John, I’m experienced with IV injections, but a sub-q infiltration is a bit beyond the scope of--”

“Of course not,” John replies. “I wouldn’t expect you to. Hand it over, and hold my forearm still, wrist and elbow, well away from the wound.”

John carefully infiltrates the lidocaine inside the border of the laceration. It’s extremely uncomfortable (that is to say, it fucking hurts) to stick a sharp needle into raw flesh, and the angles are a bit awkward; it’s not his best injecting work ever but it’s adequate, the anaesthesia takes hold quickly and as the wound begins to numb, the relief is more than worth the repeated bite of the needle.

While John waits for the area to become fully desensitized he sends Sherlock upstairs to scrub his hands, with the admonition not to touch anything on the way back down. Sherlock complies, though not without giving John his very best ‘I’m not a moron’ eyeroll.

“Yes, I’m the arsehole for not wanting a raging staph infection,” John calls out as Sherlock stomps up the steps, though there’s no bite to the words.

When Sherlock returns, he unfolds the packet of sterile gloves and puts them on, glowering at the repeated reminders not to touch the outside of the gloves with his fingers.

“All right, then,” John says, opening the sterile suture package and placing the kit in front of Sherlock’s gloved hands. “It’s showtime.”

Although the procedure is not perfectly sterile (the hemostat is not new, and has to make do with a quick alcohol soak) they manage a fairly clean go of it, considering. Fortunately the wound is not as deep as it initially looked, and John is able to talk Sherlock through placing the simple interrupted stitches.

Though the man has hands like cricket gloves, Sherlock's fingers are nimble and precise, and he has
observed John’s meticulous technique many times over the years, so he quickly gets the hang of
placing the sutures and tying the knots. For his part, John mostly succeeds in refraining from offering
running commentary beyond basic instruction, only once wondering aloud on if a stitch is placed
depth enough to hold properly (it is), and a single reminder to “Approximate, Sherlock, don’t
strangle. Tighter stitches are not better.”

“Yes, doctor, duly noted,” Sherlock bites out sardonically, peering down at his work. “By the by, the
light in here is terrible.”

“I’ll make a point to engage in my next self-harm episode under better lighting,” John says, trying to
make a joke of it, then immediately feels horrible when Sherlock looks up at him with green eyes full
of reproach. “I’m sorry,” he says immediately. “That was awful. I’m a dick.”

“It’s fine,” Sherlock shrugs with a deliberate, false mildness. “Trying for normalcy is all. Don’t worry
about it.” He goes back to his work without saying another word, leaving John feeling like a
complete knob about the whole thing.

With guidance Sherlock does a remarkably good job, better than many third-year students John has
mentored, and the stitches are well-tied and even. It’s very slow going, though, taking eighteen
stitches to close the wound neatly. It is just past four in the morning by the time Sherlock clips the
last stitch, applies antibiotic ointment, and tapes a square of gauze over the wound to keep it dry.

By the time the procedure is finished, John feels like a hundred kilometers of bad road. He’s
exhausted, he’s lost a bit more blood than is generally advisable, he’s dehydrated, and to top it off
he’s sobered up enough to feel the beginnings of a hangover coming on. He must look as bad as he
feels, because Sherlock, stripping off the nitrile gloves, takes one look at his face and stands abruptly.

“You need fluid,” he says, and disappears into the kitchen. John hears the crunching of broken glass
underfoot, then the low groan of the sink taps. Sherlock emerges a few moments later with a clean
jam jar filled with water.

“Pardon the fine china,” he says with a wry grin, handing the jar to John. “You didn’t leave me
much to work with.”

Suddenly ravenously thirsty, John drains the jar in three large gulps. Sherlock holds out his hand and
John gives the glass back to him.

“You could use something with some sugar in it,” Sherlock tells him. “Have you got any juice?”

“There might be apple juice,” John tells him. “Top cupboard, closest to the fridge.”

As Sherlock ducks into the kitchen to fetch his juice, John marvels at Sherlock’s ability to...well, to
care. Had he missed it before, overlooked it in his assumption that Sherlock was either incapable or
unwilling to indulge in softer emotions?

He remembers the wedding, the way Sherlock threw himself into the details, the way he wanted to
make sure everything was absolutely perfect. At the time he had chuckled a bit about it, marked it
down to Sherlock’s tendency to get obsessive about unexpected things. It had never even occurred to
him that Sherlock had sampled hors d’oeuvres and folded serviettes and agonized over seating charts
for the simplest, most direct reason: he wanted John to be happy.

Ever since he had come back from the dead, Sherlock had dedicated himself to making John happy,
no matter the cost to himself...and John hadn’t even bothered to notice.

(Maybe that’s not true. Maybe he had seen it on some level, maybe he did realize that Sherlock’s
feelings for him were deep and complicated and he chose not to see it, chose not to know—and, well, that’s even worse, isn’t it?)

John’s chest feels tight, and his eyes are wet again—Good Lord, he’s cried more in the past three hours than he has since primary school, but he can’t seem to stop this ceaseless embarrassing drip of tears—when Sherlock returns with the jam jar refilled with apple juice for John and the repurposed toothbrush mug from upstairs for himself. He crosses the room and places both on the coffee table, then picks up the knitted throw from the other end of the couch and drapes it over John’s slumped shoulders.


“I think you might be, a bit,” Sherlock says mildly, lowering himself gracefully to the couch next to him, close enough that their thighs are pressed together. He picks the jar up from the table and hands it to John. “Drink.”

John complies, allowing himself to relax into the solid nearness of Sherlock’s body, The sensation of being cared for, looked after—loved, a small voice in his mind whispers—does more to warm him than any blanket possibly could.

Sherlock takes a sip from his own mug of juice, places it back on the table, and reaches behind John to adjust a corner of the blanket. Instead of withdrawing his arm, he rests it on the couch back behind John with a studied casualness, almost but not quite touching his shoulders.

“You could tell me what happened,” he says, quietly. “If you want.”

John stares down into his juice. “It…wasn’t just the one thing,” he begins, uncertain.”It’s been coming for a while, I think. The funny thing is, I’ve been doing better. I mean, I thought I was doing better. I bought groceries, I left that bloody miserable surgery, I found a new job that I’m really looking forward to. And I was working on things. I was thinking things through, coming to terms with things I should have dealt with years ago.” He pauses, staring into the jam jar as if the answers might be found somewhere inside.

“And then something happened tonight,” Sherlock prompts gently. “Something set you off.”

“I wasn’t ready,” John says with a sigh. “I went out with some old mates from Afghanistan, except one of them wasn’t much of a mate, I guess. He has a problem with me, and he um. He said things that I didn’t much like hearing.”

“He made allegations,” Sherlock supplies. “Likely about the nature of your relationship with me.”

“How did you know that?” John says, looking up with surprise.

“The only subject you’re sensitive enough about to react to this… degree would be issues regarding your sexuality.” Sherlock looks away, takes another sip of juice. “He implied your marriage ended because of a homosexual relationship with me, or something along those lines.”

“He didn’t imply,” John says bluntly. “He flat out stated.” He takes a deep and shaky breath before pushing onward “But, I don’t think…I was upset, and you’re correct after a fashion, but I don’t know that you have the whole picture.” He drains the juice, sets the glass on the table next to Sherlock’s mug. “What he said about you made me angry, because he’s a cretin who’s not got the right to even speak your name. He was disrespectful and yeah, that pissed me off.” John takes a deep breath, steels himself to push forward. “That’s not what I was most upset about, though. Turns out he knew…things. About me, about things that happened in Kandahar. Um, activities he finds distasteful.
So...he outed me. Told my mates that I’m, well. Shit, that I’m bisexual.”

“Oh,” Sherlock says, almost too low to hear.

“Yeah. The thing is, right now, talking to you? This is the second time I’ve said it out loud in my entire life. Pretty much until a couple of weeks ago, I’ve been so deep in the closet I could have fucking tea with Mr. Tumnus--nevermind, it’s a book--and I’ve been working all this out, I have, I’ve been working so fucking hard, but it’s all so new and close to the surface and….And he was so goddamn ugly about it, about how apparently everyone I served with knew what I was doing, that I was...intimate with men. And I had no idea anyone knew. I didn’t deny it, I won’t deny it any more, I’m done with lying, but it was just too much. I didn’t hit him, but God I fucking wanted to. Maybe if I had, maybe if I took out my anger on the arsehole who deserved it, then I wouldn’t have done something so stupid. Or maybe I would have anyway. Fuck. I don’t know.”

John swallows hard, pinches the bridge of his nose, closes his eyes against the really spectacular headache forming just behind his eyes.

“Then I came back here, and I saw all this shit from a life I never wanted, and Jesus. I’m so tired of being alone, and I miss you so much, all the time I miss you. I miss you so much that I cope by pretending you’re here, and how fucked up is that? I’ve been talking to an imaginary you just to get by because I’m not right unless I’m with you and I don’t even remember why I’m here by myself and it just felt like...fuck, it’s just all too much, I can’t do this anymore. I’m so lonely and I’m so angry, Sherlock, and I’m so tired of feeling like this, I don’t want to feel like this anymore and I don’t know what to do.”

John looks away, overwhelmed by this tidal wave of emotion, raw and vulnerable and ashamed, unable to meet Sherlock’s eyes. His throat is tight and parched and his vision is blurry with more unwelcome tears. He swipes angrily at his eyes, fucking Christ why can’t he stop crying, and he has no idea how Sherlock will react to this flash flood of emotion, maybe it’s too much, maybe he’ll even leave, but it’s out, at last it’s out, and no matter what happens, even if Sherlock gets up and walks away it’s out and at least he doesn’t have to carry it around anymore--

And then.

And then Sherlock does something, makes the smallest gesture that somehow changes everything.

Sherlock reaches into his pocket and pulls out a handful of serviettes plucked from the kitchen table. He takes John’s hand where it is balled in a fist on the blood-spattered denim of his thigh, gently unfurls his fingers, and gently places the paper squares in his trembling palm.

John looks down through blurry tears at the folded napkins, the simple white squares of paper in his hand. He thinks of the fact that Sherlock Holmes, the self-proclaimed sociopath, the man he called a machine, the man who had so strenuously mocked and derided sentiment--this very same man went into his kitchen, carefully washed a jam jar so John could have something to drink, and then had seen the packet of serviettes and folded those squares and put them in his pocket, thinking of John, thinking of what he needed, thinking that John might cry again, and if he did, he should have something at hand to dry his tears.

And with that small, spontaneous gesture of caring, the clouds part and John Watson finally, finally, oh thank God, he finally understands.

Something wrenches loose in his chest, some stone blockade in his heart crumbles at last, and John is unable to stop himself as he begins to cry. It’s not just slow tears this time but genuine, soul-deep ugly crying, great, heaving, hiccupsing sobs full of pain and devastation and regret. It is terrifying and
private and achingly intimate, and neither man will ever again mention the way John weeps right now, torrents of bitter tears that no handful of serviettes could hope to staunch.

John feels the arm stretched across the back of sofa come down gently around his shoulders and Sherlock gives just the barest pull, the most nearly imperceptible suggestion, and John slumps gratefully into Sherlock, leans his head into his shoulder. Sherlock holds him, strokes his hair, allows tears and snot to soak his expensive blue shirt as John weeps.

Presently the storm eventually passes, as all storms must. John’s breathing evens, calms, the tears slowing to a trickle. His eyes feel puffy and raw, his nose blocked, his face itchy from drying tears. He swipes ineffectually with the sodden ball of paper wadded up in his hand, and Sherlock silently hands over another handful of napkins, which John accepts with a nod. After he dries his eyes and blows his nose, Sherlock plucks his mug of juice from the table in offering. Throat raw and aching, John accepts it gratefully.

Neither man speaks for several minutes.

“You knew, didn’t you,” John finally says, his voice deep and rough from weeping.

“I’ve known from almost the first day we met,” says Sherlock. “I could enumerate the many clues, but it doesn’t make a bit of difference now, does it.”

“I’ve never known you to pass up an opportunity to show off your deduction skills,” John murmurs in feeble jest.

“Not at your expense,” Sherlock says mildly. “At least, not tonight.” He turns his head towards John, brushing his lips lightly over John’s hair in a not-quite kiss.

“You’ve changed, then,” John says.

“I think perhaps I have. Maybe more than you realise.” Sherlock is speaking slowly, almost hesitant. “Last week, when you came over to Baker Street and I was out...I was at an appointment. With, um. My therapist.”

He says it with sheepish, slightly defensive embarrassment, and John is careful not show (well, overmuch) his considerable surprise.

“Really,” he says, carefully neutral.

“Twice a week,” Sherlock sighs. “Since the end of January. It was one of the conditions of avoiding prosecution for Magnussen’s murder.” John can’t see his face, but he can practically hear the rattle as Sherlock rolls his eyes. “Of course, up until this point, sociopathy has always been a rather valuable job skill in the eyes of MI6, but shoot just one international media magnate billionaire in the head in front of twenty witnesses and suddenly everyone’s concerned.”

John can’t help but grin for just a fleeting moment--and it’s awful that he finds murder funny, but this is who they are--but just as quickly grows serious again. “Sherlock,” he says, voice rough but kind. “You’re not really a sociopath. You know that, right? It’s not even a current diagnosis. It’s something you pulled out of a book when you were a teenager.”

“I know,” Sherlock replies. “But I want to be. Well, wanted to be. And that in and of itself is indicative of a deeper set of issues, isn’t it?”

“The situation could be worse, I suppose,” Sherlock says. “They allowed me to do my own research and select a provider of my choosing, I found someone who has published outstanding postgraduate work, done really fascinating research into people with… issues like mine.”

“You mean posh, arrogant geniuses?” John teases gently.

“Something like that,” Sherlock answers blandly, shoulders tensing slightly. This is as close to admitting his non-neurotypicality as he has ever come, and the topic clearly makes him uncomfortable.

“So how is it, then?” John asks, shifting the subject slightly to make Sherlock feel more at ease.

“Horrible,” Sherlock huffs. “Tedious. Boring. Time-consuming.” He pauses just slightly, the corner of his lip twitching in something close to a smile. “And much as it galls me to say it, not altogether without merit.”

“It must just tear you up inside to admit that,” John says evenly, trying to hide his utter surprise that Sherlock would acknowledge gaining anything at all of value from psychotherapy.

Sherlock glances at him and quirks an eyebrow in silent agreement.


“Thank you,” Sherlock says, a bit overly formal, clearly feeling a bit awkward himself.

A moment of uncomfortable silence stretches between them, two men floundering about, both clearly miles out of their emotional depth.

Sherlock examines the cuticles on his perfectly manicured nails, then takes a deep breath. “John,” he says quietly. “I have something I want to say to you.”

John briefly remembers the exchange at the airfield, that moment of near-probability. He tilts his head and nods. “All right,” he says, more calmly than he feels.

“When I... when I left,” Sherlock begins. “No. That’s not honest. I want to be honest with you. When I made the deliberate and premeditated decision to fake my own death in front of you, I had to rationalize the terrible thing I did, in order to live with myself. For a long time I told myself that I did what I had to do to keep my loved ones safe. I told myself I had no choice. And that’s... that’s not, strictly speaking, untrue. By the time I faced Moriarty on that roof, my options had funneled down to that one decision point, and I truly had no other choice.”

Sherlock pauses for breath, purses his lips.

“But... I realize something now. In the hours leading up to that final moment, I made a terrible mistake. I made the blind, unexamined assumption that I had to do it all on my own. I was so alone for so long, and it never occurred... I didn’t see what was right in front of me. I didn’t see you. I didn’t see that you were there for me. If I had realized, if I hadn’t been so arrogant yet naive... I could have made different choices. I could have--I would have found another way. A way that didn’t take me away from you. A way that didn’t break your heart.

“That error in thinking is the single biggest regret of my life. I would give anything to be able to go back and change it. I would. But I can’t. The only thing I can do is... I can try to change right now. Because you’re making the same mistake. You’re thinking that you have to go through this alone. But you don’t.”
Sherlock pulls back slightly, gazing intently at John, his pale eyes focused and desperately serious.

“John,” Sherlock says, his voice cracking just the tiniest bit. “I don’t know that I’m any good at this, but I’m trying, I am, and I’m right here in front of you. You don’t have to do this alone. All you have to do is see me. Please. See me.”

This time John is the one pulling Sherlock close. “I see you,” he whispers fiercely. “I do. I do.” He would have sworn he didn’t have another tear in him to shed but his eyes are leaking again, this time from exhaustion and sorrow but also relief, from a light finally visible in the darkness. “I’m sorry,” John says for what feels like the hundredth time. “God, Sherlock, I’m so sorry.”


“I’m sorry,” John repeats, not knowing what else to say.

“John,” Sherlock says quietly. “Shut up now, all right? Your apologies are unnecessary and bordering on tiresome.” He shuts his jaw with a click, swallows, exhales. “That, maybe, was not the best thing to say,” he continues, a bit sheepish. “I apologize.”

The very Sherlock-ness of the words makes John chuckle softly as he leans into Sherlock’s shoulder. The sorrow and pain inside him lift just a bit as he sighs and burrows deeper, openly seeking comfort in Sherlock’s warmth and nearness.

“Honestly, you’re absolutely correct,” John observes, “and that was so very you, and in fact was the exact right thing to say. Thank you.”


The two of them drift into an exhausted but not uncomfortable silence, the calm after a raging storm, all of their emotional energy utterly spent. They stay like that for a long time, curled into one another, drifting perilously close to sleep as the first pale apricot streaks of dawn appear in a dark grey sky.

On the street outside the house a car coughs into life, a neighbor leaving for an early shift. The engine revs up and pulls away. The sound fades into the distance.

Sherlock stirs, wakes from his half-slumber. John shifts against his chest, sighs as Sherlock pulls him close.

“I think you need to stop drinking,” Sherlock murmurs into his hair.

“Oh, right,” John says.

And you need to come home,” Sherlock adds after a moment. “Let me take you home.”

“Okay,” John says.
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

“I’m just going to start the washing up,” Sherlock says, not meeting his eyes.

John’s eyebrow quirks in amused disbelief; not once in five years has Sherlock done the washing up without threat of bodily harm.

He decides to be kind and not call Sherlock on his white lie.

“Come to bed soon, okay?” John says instead, and he doesn’t mean for it to come out low and rough and a little needy but it does, and Sherlock’s eyes flick up to him for just a moment, pupils wide and dark in the lamplight.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Later, John would barely remember the trip back to Baker Street.

Sherlock does almost all the work, packing a change of clothes and a toothbrush into John’s black cycling bag, bringing John a damp flannel to swipe over his hands and face, then helping him carefully maneuver his injured arm into his jacket. John’s jeans are still unmistakably, disturbingly bloodstained, but he doesn’t have the energy right now to change and any cabbie who’s been driving the streets of London more than a week will have certainly seen far, far worse.

Once in the cab John begins to doze off almost immediately, unabashedly using Sherlock as a pillow, mumbling a wordless thanks when Sherlock drapes an arm across John’s shoulders, encouraging him to settle in against his side.

John sleeps for most of the trip, blearily rousing when the cab pulls up to the kerb in front of 221B. He allows Sherlock to take his hand and lead him through the front door, up the steps, into the flat. He scrubs at his eyes as Sherlock guides his jacket off his shoulders and hangs in on the wall hook.

“Right to bed with you, I think,” Sherlock murmurs. John nods in sleepy acquiescence. Sherlock opens his mouth as if to say something else but then hesitates, looks away for a moment, then glances back, an uncertain expression on his face. “The bed upstairs is made up, if you’d rather, but I’d…” He swallows, glances at the floor. “If it’s all right with you, I’d prefer if you stayed down here. So I could, you know, be here if you needed anything. But if that’s not okay, of course you can--”

“That’s fine,” John says. “In fact, I’d prefer it. As long as you don’t mind.”

Something hopeful and tentative briefly lights in Sherlock’s tired eyes. “I don’t mind a bit,” he says, handing John his backpack. “Why don’t you go get cleaned up and into bed, and I’ll get you a glass of water. You’re still very dehydrated.”

John nods and heads into the ensuite; he feels sticky and awful and would love a shower but he can’t yet get the stitches wet and is too tired to deal with the planning and execution necessary to keep his arm dry. Instead he settles for carefully taking off his blood-soaked vest and jeans (he briefly wonders if sleeping in Sherlock’s bed in only underwear would be presuming too much of their
fragile, barely-hatched romantic connection, but in the end he decides presumptuousness is preferable to lying on expensive Egyptian cotton linens in filthy gore-encrusted denim) and chasing the rather horrible taste out of his mouth with his toothbrush, followed by a quick splash of cool water on his face and hands. He leaves his dirty clothing in the bathroom; they will need to be binned, but he decides to deal with that later.

John knows he should feel self-conscious about getting into Sherlock’s bed in nothing but pants; this should be some kind of momentous, life altering moment, but he is frankly too tired and emotionally wiped by the events of the past eight hours to fully process it. He folds back the coverlet (wondering briefly, as he has many times before, how the man who leaves used tea mugs and mountains of paper all over the flat can also be the sort to make his bed every day; or if, rather, he just almost never sleeps in here at all) and slides into the cool embrace of ridiculously smooth, soft sage-coloured sheets.

He’s just getting comfortable when Sherlock comes in, a glass of ice water in one hand and two white tablets in the other. He glances briefly at John, at his naked shoulders visible above the sheets, and he blushes adorably, cheeks turning bright pink.

“How are you feeling?” Sherlock half-mumbles, clearly trying to not look and look at John simultaneously.

“It’s not too bad right now,” John replies. “The local still hasn’t worn off completely. It’s going to hurt a hell of a lot more tonight.”

“Well, I brought these for you,” Sherlock says, placing the tablets and water on the night table. “It’s only paracetamol, I don’t have anything stronger,” he says, semi-apologetically.

“No, that’s wonderful,” John says with sincerity. “Thanks.” He picks up the paracetamol and pops them in his mouth, takes the glass of water to chase them down, then sets the half-full glass back on the night table. Sherlock crosses to the window and closes the heavy blackout blinds, sinking the room into shadowy dimness.

“You must be exhausted,” Sherlock says softly.

“I feel like I could sleep for a week,” John answers honestly. He doesn’t voice the thought after that one, that just being here, back at Baker Street, home with Sherlock, has made him feel more comfortable, more relaxed than he has been months, feeling like he could sleep well for the first time he doesn’t even know how long.

“I should leave you to it, then,” says Sherlock. “I’ll wake you for dinner, though. You’ve missed too many meals already.”

“You’re probably right,” John murmurs, curling deeper into Sherlock’s delightfully silky and comfortable sheets, his eyes drifting shut, already sliding closer to sleep. “G’night, Sherlock.”

”Good night. Well, Good morning, I suppose.” After a brief moment of indecision, Sherlock’s warm hand pulls the coverlet over his bare shoulder, strokes his arm once briefly, through the thick fabric. “Sleep well, John.”

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John sleeps, well and soundly, safe in Sherlock’s bed, and instead of blood and sand he dreams of his grandmother’s Scottish home, of the soft lavenders and greens of windswept heather.

***
“John.”

It’s full dark when he wakes, a bit disoriented by the unfamiliar dimensions of the darkened room; a moment or two later he registers the odd, vertiginously arousing realisation that he’s in Sherlock’s bed, tangled in his sheets in nothing but underwear.

Sherlock himself is perched on the edge of the mattress, blood-red dressing gown over t-shirt and pyjama pants, the halo of his curly hair silhouetted against the light filtering in from the hallway. For a fleeting moment John thinks with a sinking pang that this is another aching, hopeless dream; but then he breathes in Sherlock’s scent, the ginger and citrus notes of his damp, freshly washed hair, overlaid with a trace of a cigarette furtively smoked on Mrs Hudson’s back porch while John slept, and the mint of the mouthwash he used to try and cover it up, and underneath it all the scent of Sherlock himself, wool and amber rosin and the fundamental warm and masculine aliveness of him that has always meant home to John.

And then John wakes, and the understanding fully dawns on him that this is real, that Sherlock is here with him and not a figment of his imagination. That knowledge is a warm swell of joy in his belly, something true and happy and right that John could no longer deny even if he wanted to.

And he doesn’t want to. He won’t deny this, not ever again.

"John," Sherlock repeats softly, and touches his shoulder.

In his still-fuzzy state, one foot still in sleep, John wants to let Sherlock know how happy he is to be here, to be finally be home. What comes out is, “Mmmf. Sh’lock. Hi.”

“Hello yourself,” Sherlock says quietly, his voice warm and deep, his fond, genuine smile visible even in the low light.

John rubs his eyes, sighs, and sits up, scrubbing a hand though the hair at the back his head. “What time is it?” he asks, his voice rough from sleep.

“Almost six o’clock,” Sherlock says as his gaze skitters away from John’s bare torso. "I thought you might like to clean up before dinner. it’s been more than twelve hours so you can take a shower with your stitches now."

“That sounds lovely,” John agrees fervently.

“There’s clean clothes on the chair--you left a couple things behind, and Mrs. Hudson was able to get the stains out of your jeans--she does a thing with a bar of soap and a wire brush--" Sherlock realises he's rambling and stops talking, exhales. "Anyway, there’s tea for you on the night table.” He rises, tugs down his tee, an unconscious nervous habit. “Thai okay for dinner?”

“Marvellous.”

“Green curry or massaman?”

“Massaman, I think.”

“I’ll call for it now. Forty minutes or so.” Sherlock glances up at him as if he is about to say something else, then gives an almost imperceptible shake of his head and rises from the bed.

“Hey, Sherlock?” John asks him as he’s leaving the room.

Sherlock rests his large palm on the doorframe, turns around to face John. “Yes?”
“Thanks,” John says. “For the tea.”

“Of course,” Sherlock murmurs, and then he’s gone.

John sips his tea—it’s still hot, with a splash of milk and no sugar, just as he likes—as he takes a moment to gather his wits. His arm hurts much more than when he fell asleep; the anaesthesia has long since worn off, and the wound throbs and itches and burns. The rest of him is not much better; he feels sticky and grimy and sore, and a shower sounds like just about the best idea imaginable right now.

He climbs out of bed and shuffles into the bathroom, using the toilet before turning the shower taps on as hot as he can possibly stand it. He strips out of his pants and steps under the hot spray, scrubbing with Sherlock’s twenty-pound soap and washing his hair with his impossibly poncy organic shampoo.

After wrapping himself in a towel, John briefly considers shaving but remembers Sherlock’s antique straight razor—a Victorian heirloom from the real-life Sweeney Todd, or so he claims—and decides he can live with the stubble for now. Taking himself back into the bedroom, he dresses quickly in a slightly tattered pair of boxer briefs, his freshly-laundered jeans, and an old Victoria Park 10k T-shirt, gone almost transparent in places from age.

As he dresses John wonders, briefly, about the future. Are they a couple now, even though they haven’t yet kissed? Will they share a bedroom permanently, his jeans and plaid shirts residing next to Sherlock’s couture suits and two hundred quid shirts? Just what are they, now, tiptoeing past the threshold of friendship but not yet precisely lovers?

Wondering and worrying accomplish nothing, he decides after a moment of contemplation. Best to live in the moment, to just allow himself, for once, to enjoy this brief blink of time when anything—everything—seems possible between the two of them.

The scent of curry and coconut pulls him out of his ruminations as John realises he’s absolutely starving. He resolves to let the future take care of itself and decides to focus on dinner for the moment, padding barefooted into the kitchen.

“I bought some co-codamol,” Sherlock says when he enters the room. “It’s on top of the microwave. I know you probably would rather I didn’t have codeine in the flat, but I was worried about your arm hurting you too much to sleep and—”

“It’s fine,” John tells him, “Lovely, in fact, because it really hurts. Thank you.” He goes over to the microwave, opens the bottle and shakes out two tablets.

“There’s Orangina and Irn Bru in the bag on the counter,” Sherlock tells him, and John nods his thanks as he opens an Orangina to wash down the medicine. As John’s taking the first fizzy swallow, he notices the numerous takeout cartons spread across the table.

“There’s enough food here for five people,” John remarks.

“I was feeling undecided,” Sherlock replies, handing him a plate, but as John begins to open the containers it soon becomes obvious that most of the dishes ordered—both the green and massaman curry, as well as fresh prawn spring rolls with peanut sauce, fried tofu cubes, and mango sticky rice—are John’s favorites.

“We’ll never even make a dent in all this,” John says with a chuckle, but to his surprise they make a decent go at it. John is ravenous, inhaling curry and spring rolls, and Sherlock is matching him
almost bite for bite, tucking away chicken satay and dumplings and pad thai like he hasn’t eaten a meal in days himself.

In point of fact, now that John looks, he notices that Sherlock is quite a bit thinner than he should be, cheekbones sharp, the tendons of his neck clearly visible. He remembers what Molly told him about Sherlock not eating, not sleeping, and a hot spike of guilt flares in his belly. He’d been so selfishly wallowing in his misery, he’d not even noticed the obvious signs of Sherlock’s own unhappiness. He permits himself to feel it for a moment, the regret washing over him, then resolves to put it away, to focus on the present.

The two men are comfortable together, not needing to talk much as they eat, and John is shocked by how quickly they fall back into their groove of togetherness. I never should have left is on the very tip of his tongue, but he decides not to give it voice, not to open up that can of worms quite yet. Better to give it a little time, allow them both to heal, to both inhabit this just-slightly-new space.

“I should warn you,” says Sherlock towards the end of the meal. “I’ve been fending Mrs Hudson off all afternoon. She’s likely to make an appearance sometime this evening. I suspect there will be baked goods involved.”

John swallows the last bit of his Orangina and smiles. “I take it she approves of my being back here.”

Sherlock snorts delicately. “That’s putting it mildly. Delighted, ecstatic, over the moon. She--” he seems to reconsider his words, then shrugs. “I don’t think she much cared for Mary.”

John chuckles at the obvious understatement. “A whole lot of people didn’t care for her. In retrospect, I should have been paying more attention. A lot more attention.”

Sherlock’s amiable expression falters, shutters. “I should have been, as well,” he says quietly. “John, I--I owe you an apology for that. Not seeing the truth sooner was an unconscionable failure on my part. I should have known. I should have warned you--”

“None of that,” John says, kindly but firmly. “You didn’t miss anything. You stopped yourself. You stopped yourself from seeing for me, because you wanted me to be happy. You were being a friend and trying to let me be happy. It’s not your fault that I made a terrible decision.”

“Yes, but--”

“We have to stop doing this,” John states with finality. “I mean it, Sherlock. There’s so much blame on both of our shoulders, we could go around forever and ever about who’s more at fault, and we’d both be right and both be wrong and it doesn’t change a thing. All it does is keep us stuck in a terrible past. So. Let’s decide to stop, okay? No more. We’re both to blame. We’ve acknowledged that. Now we need to stop.”

“All right,” Sherlock says after a quiet moment, though his eyes are skeptical, his mouth pressed into a tight, downturned line.

“Good.” John reaches across the table, brushes his thumb across the back of Sherlock’s hand. “Anyway, I’d rather focus on the future. Wouldn’t you?”

His expression lightens a bit, a trace of a smile touching Sherlock’s lips. “I really would,” he says quietly. He turns his hand over, interlaces his long fingers with John’s shorter ones as he looks up at John through his long lashes. He looks sad and hopeful and beautiful all at once, and John is taken by the desire to kiss him right then and there.

John is on the very brink of closing the gap between their mouths when he hears the unmistakable
tap-tap-tap of Mrs Hudson’s heels on the stairway.

“I did warn you,” Sherlock murmurs, looking down at their joined fingers. John sighs, untangles their hands and stands up, collecting takeaway cartons and empty drink bottles as a beaming Mrs Hudson appears in the kitchen doorway, holding a plate of fudge brownies.

“Just brought a little something to welcome you home, dear,” she burbles happily. “I can’t tell you how happy I am, oh and this one, he’s a mess without you here, I don’t mind telling you.”

“Mrs Hudson, please,” Sherlock sighs, taking the plate from her and placing it on the kitchen counter. He turns his head away to hide his blushing embarrassment as he does so, and John can’t help but grin in amused fondness.

“It’s lovely to be back,” John says with complete sincerity. “It’s fair to say I’ve been a bit out of sorts, myself.”

“My boys are back together,” Mrs Hudson sighs happily. “Everything’s right with the world again, isn’t it?”

“It is,” John agrees solemnly, as Sherlock’s pale eyes catch his gaze for the briefest of moments, brimming with undisguised affection.

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Mrs Hudson fusses extravagantly over John, of course, and insists on making tea to go with the fudge brownies. They allow her to, more out of a sense of obligation rather than any real desire for tea, and John accepts a brownie even though he’s full of curry and rice to the point of bursting.

As she serves tea John tells her about his new position at the homeless shelter, and she coos over his selflessness and generosity.

“I’m really not,” he replies, tone jovial but truthful nonetheless. “I’ve discovered I’m bit of a bastard, to be quite honest.”

“He really is,” Sherlock offers, which earns him a halfhearted kick in the shins from John. He flashes him a mischievous grin in reply.

“You know what would be lovely?” Mrs Hudson exclaims after she drains her cup. “If you would play for us, Sherlock. It’s been so long since I’ve heard you play, I don’t think since the wedding--” she theatrically claps a hand over her mouth, but Sherlock merely gives her a momentary glower before he shrugs and rises, opening the violin case without comment.

Sherlock takes a minute to tune the strings and rosin his bow; his face is contemplative, almost dreamy as he settles the instrument carefully under his chin. He plays several of John’s favorite pieces, Tchaikovsky and Debussy and Mendelssohn. His eyes are closed, his crimson dressing gown rippling in silky waves as he sways to the music pouring from his fingers.

John feels utterly lovely, warm and relaxed and peaceful, carried on the soothing river of music that flowed from Sherlock’s skilled, lovely fingertips.

Sherlock has been playing for over half an hour when John realises the co-codamol is really getting to him, despite only being over the counter strength. John is still fundamentally tired, worn to the bone despite his nap, and the warm bath of codeine is spilling over into something a bit flushed and woozy. He yawns, hugely and involuntarily.
“Oh love,” Mrs Hudson says. “You must be exhausted.”

“I don’t want to be rude—” John begins sleepily.

“No, by all means, be rude,” Sherlock cuts in rudely. “Mrs Hudson, John is tired and you need to go away now.”

“Manners, Sherlock,” Mrs. Hudson sighs, though it lacks bite. “Honestly.” She rises from the couch, taking the tray into the kitchen. “I’ll just leave these in here. Both you boys could stand to eat a little more.”

“Noted and agreed,” Sherlock pronounces, unmistakably dismissive. “Good night, Mrs Hudson.”

“Goodnight, you rude, unparented creature,” Mrs Hudson replies without reproach, standing on tiptoes to kiss him on the cheek. She turns to John and gives him a peck as well. “Goodnight, John, darling.” She winks broadly at him. “Make certain that beastly man lets you get your rest, understand?”

John looks away, cheeks colouring as Mrs Hudson takes her leave, tittering. Sherlock shakes his head, a faint smile crossing his lips as he places his violin gently in the case and fastens the latches. John stands, begins to gather tea mugs.

“Stop that immediately,” Sherlock says, swiping the stoneware from his hands. “You’re falling asleep on your feet. Go to bed.”

“What about you?” John asks. “You didn’t sleep last night either.”

“I’m just going to start the washing up,” Sherlock says, not meeting his eyes.

John’s eyebrow quirks in amused disbelief; not once in five years has Sherlock done the washing up without threat of bodily harm.

He decides to be kind and not call Sherlock on his white lie.

“Come to bed soon, okay?” John says instead, and he doesn’t mean for it to come out low and rough and a little needy but it does, and Sherlock’s eyes flick up to him for just a moment, pupils wide and dark in the lamplight.

The look he gives John says… well, it says a lot of things at once. It says affection and nerves and apprehension and hunger—yes, there’s definitely hunger there as well and the realisation sends something zinging along John’s nerves, makes something in him feel hollow and shaky and wanting despite the enormous amount of Thai takeaway in his belly.

“All right,” Sherlock murmurs as he turns away, and John doesn’t miss the flush that stains those sharp, pale cheekbones.

“All right,” John echoes, and ducks into the ensuite to get ready for bed, first using the toilet then brushing his teeth carefully, making sure there’s not a shred of coriander leaf stuck anywhere; not that he’s at all certain what, exactly, is going to happen tonight, if anything, but, well, just in case.

In the bedroom he debates with himself for a moment, finally deciding upon taking off his jeans and wearing his T-shirt and pants to bed; disrobed enough to feel somewhat intimate, decidedly more than platonic, yet not so unclothed as to make Sherlock feel pressured in any way.
And it’s important to him that Sherlock not feel pressured, John thinks as he slides into his bed, between his soft sheets (on the left side because all the clues—placement of the reading lamp, wear on the floorboards, the fact that Sherlock is right-handed—add up to Sherlock preferring the right side. John thinks all of this with a bit of pride, knowing that Sherlock would be grudgingly impressed at his observations). It’s important to John that he not feel pressured because... well, because John is ninety percent certain that Sherlock is completely new to all of this, and he’s completely uncertain if Sherlock even... well, honestly, if he even wants to.

The past two days have left him reasonably certain Sherlock does desire a certain level of physical intimacy, touching and hand-holding and hair-stroking, but John also knows that for some people wanting physical closeness does not mean wanting sex, and he wonders if that is true for Sherlock, because not once in five years has the man shown any overt interest in sex at all.

Sherlock had been interested in Irene, after a fashion; there was an undeniable connection there, emotional as well as intellectual, but when John had once asked Sherlock if he had slept with Irene he shook his head, laughing in amused disbelief.

“I wouldn’t... I don’t. Well, not with her. Definitely not with her,” Sherlock said, and John had wanted to know more, to clarify what that meant—but he was thoroughly embarrassed and flustered and dropped the matter instead.

So, he didn’t know that Sherlock was interested in sex, and if he wasn’t... well, that would be okay, too. John knew now that he’d rather touch and hold Sherlock and never have sex again than have sex with someone else every single day of his life and never get to put his hands on Sherlock again.

There is no question about that in his mind. None whatsoever.

But... then again, Sherlock had asked him to sleep here. In his bed. Which, at least in John’s estimation, conveys a certain undeniable... intent.

And he was absolutely sure he hadn’t misread that flash of want he had seen in Sherlock’s pale eyes just minutes ago. For just that split second, he had the unmistakable look of a man long stranded in the desert, seeing his first glimpse of an oasis.

No, John knew he hadn’t misread that.

So put all that together and it adds up to... to John having absolutely no idea what shape this thing between them would take.

Mixed messages, indeed.

Turning this mess of thought over and over in his head John thinks he's wide awake all over again, but underneath he’s still tired to the bone, and between exhaustion and codeine he falls into a light sleep, unaware he's drowsing until the mattress dips and creaks as Sherlock turns the lamp off and slides into into bed, conspicuously keeping his distance from John, almost clinging to the far edge of the mattress

John opens his eyes, rolls onto his side, gazes at Sherlock’s profile in the dim light of the streetlamps. He’s shed his dressing gown, but he’s still wearing his favorite striped pyjama bottoms and an ancient U2 Achtung Baby concert tee that John suddenly remembers Sherlock filched from his clean laundry basket years ago, claiming he didn’t feel like going all the way into his own room for a shirt.

John realises, about four years late, that Sherlock’s motives for that theft may have gone beyond pure laziness.
He also realises he, John Watson, may at times be the most oblivious man on the entire goddamn planet.

“Um,” he mutters, hopelessly awkward and suddenly feeling very shy. “Hey.”

“Hello,” Sherlock answers, equally awkward in reply. “I thought you were asleep.”

“A bit. Not all the way.”

“I see.” Sherlock is nearly rigid with nerves, staring up at the ceiling, the anxiety rolling off him in palpable waves.

“Sherlock,” John says, aiming for a neutral, conciliatory tone. “If my being here is making you uncomfortable, I can go upstairs. It’s fine. Really.”

“No,” Sherlock says quickly, almost urgently. “I’m just. Okay, I’m anxious, but not because I don’t want you here. I just... I should explain myself, I suppose. I don’t mean to give you the wrong idea.”

That doesn’t exactly sound promising, and John’s stomach gives a bit of a lurch. “Okay,” he says, more evenly than he feels. He turns on his side, facing Sherlock. “How about you tell me what’s going on in that big brain of yours, then, so I have the right idea.”

Sherlock exhales, his eyes fixed on the ceiling, resolutely not looking at John. “I need to clarify something.” He sighs, clearly anxious and uncomfortable. “I do find myself... interested. In you. Physically. Just to be clear on that point.”

John exhales, relieved and feeling somewhat more optimistic. “Okay. Good. That’s good. So, do you mean, interested in... well, everything? Or do you... not...” John trails off, not quite sure how to finish his query.

“Are you asking me if I’m asexual?” Sherlock replies, quiet and serious.

“I guess I am. It’s okay, by the way,” John hastens to add. “It really is. I’m just seeking clarification, I guess.”

“I’m don’t think I am,” Sherlock tells him, carefully, as if he’s not entirely sure of himself. “I do feel... well, impulses. I always have. Rather than lack of interest, I think I’ve disdained the idea, wanting to be above such, um, distractions. So I told myself I was. Above them. Until I met you. Over time, you changed my thinking about, well, about a lot of things. And now, I’m--I want to. I do. But.”

Sherlock falls silent.

“But,” John prompts gently after a long moment.

“But I haven’t. Ever.”

“Anything?”

Sherlock shakes his head. “Not anything. And I want to, now, with you. Very much so, but I’m concerned that you’ve been so much more--” He sighs in irritation. “This inability to express my thoughts is intolerable.”

“Okay,” John says, voice low and soothing. “What I’m getting is, you think that I’ve been so much more, um, more, that I have certain expectations. Of how our relationship should proceed from this
Sherlock nods.

"You’re worried I want to dive into your pants.” John says, unable to suppress a bit of a wry grin.

“No!” Sherlock looks stricken, then reconsiders. “Well, yes, I guess that’s it, actually. More or less.”

John sighs in bemused affection, reaches out with gentle fingers, tucks a stray curl behind Sherlock’s ear. “I don’t. I mean, I do--I really, really do--but I’m absolutely fine with taking this at whatever speed you wish. All I want is to be here, with you. We don’t have to jump in to anything here. I’ve waited five years to touch you, and I don’t mind waiting for a bit longer or a lot longer--if that’s what you want.” He gives a soft chuckle. “Anyway, I just ate half my body weight in curry and then took some codeine on top of it, so your virtue is definitely safe with me tonight.”

Sherlock huffs a soft burst of laughter, some of the anxiety smoothing from the corners of his eyes. “Good to know,” he murmurs.

Both of them go quiet, gazing at each other with open affection, the air between them thick with unspoken sentiment as the minutes tick by.

“So what happens now?” Sherlock asks presently, his soft voice tentative, questioning.

Now.

There is one thing John wants now, more than he’s ever wanted anything, ever, in his entire life.

He brings gentle fingers up, brushes them against the lovely curve of Sherlock’s jaw, feeling the rough prickle of stubble under his fingertips.

“Now I kiss you,” John murmurs.

That first kiss is gentle, just a chaste, dry press of John’s lips to Sherlock’s. John feels him freeze, go completely quiet and still under his mouth. John pulls away just a bit, looks at Sherlock with concern. "Hey,” he whispers. “Are you all right?”

Sherlock stares at him, completely blank, eyes wide and unblinking.

Oh shit, John thinks, his heart dropping to his feet. I broke him. Does that mean he doesn’t like it? He doesn’t like it. He hates it. That was it, that was the only time I’ll ever get to kiss him. And now it’s over and it will never happen again and he hates it.

He went into this knowing the risks. He had known this was a possible outcome. John will find a way to accept it, even though it hurts, it really hurts, but for Sherlock he’ll get past it. Just having Sherlock in his life is enough. He will grieve, he’ll be sad they can’t have this, but John won’t ever give him up, not ever. John can adjust. For Sherlock, he can adjust.

John is about to let him go, pull back and apologise, when Sherlock finally starts to breathe again, quick and shallow.

He blinks, once.

"John,” he whispers.

“Yes, Sherlock?”
“Do it again.”

John does it again, pressing his lips to Sherlock’s, but this time with just a bit more intensity, angling his mouth and parting his lips ever so slightly as his hand slides around to the back of Sherlock’s head to tangle in the curls at the nape of his neck, tugging him gently forward in encouragement. He can almost hear the gears turning as Sherlock takes in the data, processes the relevant sensory information; and then the analysis ends, the conclusion is reached, and Sherlock is suddenly kissing him back hard, hungrily, messily. He’s grabbing John’s head with his enormous hands as they kiss, his lips open and wet and working against his mouth like he’s trying to consume John, to devour him whole.

John is making an unbelievable (yet in hindsight, utterly unsurprising) discovery; the brilliant, gorgeous, untouchable Sherlock Holmes is a terrible, terrible kisser, all sloppy wet lips and cavernous gaping mouth attacking his face with frankly alarming intensity.

In short, it’s rather like snogging a very large, overly enthusiastic mackerel.

This revelation doesn’t put John off in the slightest; in fact, this new knowledge sends a rush of pure, dizzying tenderness through his body, a wave of possessive adoration for this awkward fourteen year old trapped in a grown man’s body--a very, very late-blooming teenager who, at the moment, seems to be doing his level best to passionately chew John’s head off.

It’s adorable.

John brings his hand back to Sherlock’s face, breaking the kiss. Sherlock is gasping for oxygen, apparently not having yet discovered one can snog and breathe through one’s nose at the same time.


Sherlock nods, deliberately slowing his breathing as he gazes at John with wide, shocked eyes.

“You’ve never done that before, hm?” John asks tenderly, resisting the urge to wipe at his wet face, not wanting to embarrass or upset a vulnerable Sherlock.

Sherlock shakes his head. “No,” he says. “I mean, I kissed Janine, but that was just… it wasn’t like that.”


“Can I…” John begins, tentative. “Can I show you how?”

Sherlock’s face falls. “Oh God. I’m terrible at it, aren’t I? I’m a terrible kisser.”


“You don’t find the fact that I’m a naive, blundering idiot sexually offputting?” Sherlock asks, clearly skeptical.

“You’re not an idiot,” John murmurs. “You’re... inexperienced.” The word itself sends a shiver of primitive, possessive arousal through his body; feeling emboldened, he leans over and licks a stripe up Sherlock’s long pale neck, kisses a spot just below his ear, and is rewarded by a soft, breathy gasp. “You’re untouched,” he breathes. “Unexplored. Virginal. And I find it unbelievably, mind-blowingly hot.” He nips along his stubbled chin, mouths the sharp angle of his jaw. “I am a patient man,” John murmurs into the delicate shell of Sherlock’s ear. “But be warned—I am also a very bad man with a very, very dirty mind. And I want to be the one to teach you everything. Everything.
Would you like that?"


John smiles, warm affection growing tinged with something darker, more feral. He kisses the corner of Sherlock’s full, lush mouth. "Tonight, I want to teach you kissing. Will you let me? Will you let me teach you how to kiss properly?"

"Oh," Sherlock breathes out, low and needy. "Yes. Please."

"Good boy," John murmurs. "Just follow my lead, all right? Don’t open your mouth quite so wide this time, just take little tastes--" he kisses Sherlock, nibbles at his lower lip. "--at first. Like this." He gently mouths at Sherlock’s gorgeous plush lips, and Sherlock, never one to pass up a learning opportunity, sets to his task with his hallmark single-minded focus, mirroring John’s actions, following his lead, and their gentle but persistent exploration of each other’s mouths is just getting really good, bordering on amazing, when Sherlock breaks away again, gasping for air.

"You don’t have to hold your breath,” John tells him, unable to keep the small, fond smile off his face. "You can breathe through your nose, you just have to--" and he takes Sherlock’s head in his hands and shifts his approach, brings their mouths together at a new angle so their noses don’t mash into each other as they kiss. Sherlock reciprocates, tentatively at first, then with increasing enthusiasm as he realises with the new angle he can now breathe and kiss at the same time.

"Better?" John murmurs.

"Brilliant," Sherlock sighs, and the hushed awe in his tone compels John to kiss him again, tracing his lower lip with just the lightest swipes of his tongue. Sherlock follows his lead, opening his mouth just slightly (still a bit self-conscious over his earlier gape mouthed mauling, John supposes), tentatively meeting John’s exploratory tongue with his own, allowing John to dip into his mouth and taste him, toothpaste and pad thai and Orangina and just the barest hint of cigarette and he tastes gorgeous, amazing, intoxicating.

Sherlock is, of course, the quickest study that ever lived and he’s getting the hang of this now, giving back as good as he gets, and John's tender affection is shifting into something much stronger, much darker, something hot and needy and primal beginning to build as he kisses Sherlock, weaving his fingers in dark curls to pull him closer, their kisses growing more frantic as their mouths and tongues meet and press and slide and work insistently against each other.

John breaks the kiss to indulge a long held desire, sliding his mouth across Sherlock’s stubbled jaw and drifting downward, nipping at the skin of his impossibly pale and elegant throat, sucking a bruise into the tender flesh as his free hand explores the landscape of his back, the bony crest of his slim hip. Sherlock gasps and arches against him, and John feels the proof of his arousal, his swelling prick poking stiff and warm into his belly. The evidence of Sherlock’s desire is powerfully arousing, making John’s own burgeoning erection grow fully hard, and he can’t stop himself from sliding his hand around to caress that impossibly round and inviting arse, pulling him close, pressing their bodies together.

"You like it," John growls softly as he mouths at the juncture of his neck and shoulder. It isn’t a question.

"Oh God, yes,” Sherlock gasps, his body shaking as John tastes him, tongue slipping under the raveled neck of his tee shirt, then back up to bite and suck at his earlobe.

"Good,” John breathes into his ear. “Because you’re gorgeous, you’re bloody amazing, and I’m not
ever giving you up. Not ever.”

The noises Sherlock is making as John bites and nibbles and sucks at his pale, soft skin are an absolute revelation; in all his fevered imaginings John never thought Sherlock capable of this, these tiny moans and breathy sighs as John touches and tastes him. Somehow John never really thought he’d be as beautifully, achingly vulnerable as this, as utterly alive and human and real as anyone else in the world, gasping shivering and sighing in his arms--

*I’m really here,* John realises with a sudden, shocking burst of clarity. He’s really in Sherlock’s bed, touching and kissing him, everything he ever wanted, ever dreamed about finally coming true. The enormity of it all washes over John, knocking him over and pulling him under like a rogue wave, and he breaks the kiss and pulls away. He wants to see Sherlock, drink him in, take this world-shattering moment and savor it, stretch it out, tuck it away to remember forever.

John looks at Sherlock, really looks at him, and knows he has never seen anything so beautiful in his entire life.

Sherlock is a vision. Absolutely wrecked, pale skin damp with sweat, his hair a riot of curls, eyes gone hooded and dark with desire, full, kiss-bitten lips parted and glistening. Even in the dim light John can see the flush of his cheeks, the rise and fall of his chest as his breath comes in rapid, shallow gulps.

John feels a tremendous, terrifying swell of feeling cresting and breaking over him, pulling him under. He suddenly, desperately wants to lay his heart bare to Sherlock, to promise him eternal devotion, to tell him *I love you, God I love you so much* over and over again for the rest of his days, up until the moment he breathes his last.

But.

Sherlock just experienced his first kiss ten minutes ago, so it’s probably, obviously far too soon for declarations of eternal love.

Or:

They’ve been desperately in love for all of these five years gone by, and John should have said all of these things long, long ago.

Honestly? In this intense, vulnerable moment he doesn’t know which is true.

*Maybe both,* he thinks.

John doesn’t fully register that he’s gone quiet and distant until he notices Sherlock looking at him, his brow creasing with concern.

“Are you all right?” Sherlock asks, his rough voice barely above a whisper.

“I’m wonderful,” John murmurs. “And you’re wonderful,” he continues, tracing reassuring circles on the curve of Sherlock’s clothed hip with his fingertip. “I’m just…” He’s come so far, he’s so much closer to his emotions than he’s ever been before, but John still doesn’t yet know how to put all these enormous feelings inside of him into the right words."I’m just really glad we’re here,” he finally says with hushed reverence, his voice almost a whisper.

“Me too,” Sherlock replies. “I really am. But...I do have a question.”

“Anything,” John replies. “Anything at all.”
“Is it all right to ask you to kiss me again?”

John laughs, low and quiet but utterly genuine. “From now on,” he replies, “You can ask me to kiss you absolutely any time you want.” He kisses Sherlock, not quite as erotically heated as a few moments before, but brimming with desperate, unspoken feeling. “Also, in the interest of full disclosure,” John murmurs against Sherlock’s flushed, swollen lips, “You should know you are allowed to kiss me anytime you want. And you never, ever have to ask.”

“Good to know,” Sherlock replies, then puts his new knowledge to use.

They kiss and touch each other for what feels like hours, slow and tender, learning each other, content to stay here in this moment and revel in this simple, newly permitted intimacy. Their bodies press against each other as their hands roam over new, uncharted terrain; both of them stay mostly hard, but the moment of hot urgency has passed, and they are content to leisurely rub and push against each other fully clothed, secure in knowing that there is no need to rush past this moment, that finally, at last, they have all the time in the world.

Gradually the intense, heated kissing trails off to gentle lips and languid tongues as exhaustion begins to overtake them; eventually they lay peacefully together, entangled in one another as sleep edges ever closer. Sherlock is nestled in the crook of John’s arm, head pillowed on his chest, lanky arm wrapped around his waist.

(Another revelation: Sherlock is, all expectations to the contrary, a cuddler, so welcoming of affectionate touch that John’s heart hurts more than a little when he thinks of all those long years the man spent alone, isolated, so hungry for simple human contact and having no idea how to forge those connections.)

“John Watson,” Sherlock murmurs.

“Hmm.”

“How are you the way you are?”

“Hmm?”

“You’re so ordinary on the outside,” Sherlock says quietly, his fond tone a counterpoint to his not-exactly-complimentary words.

“I hope there’s a ‘but’ coming,” John replies, amused.


“Yes,” John affirms. “It’s a real word.”

“Anyway.” Sherlock snuggles closer and sighs. “Inside of you... you’re a miracle. You’re amazing. You’re the whole of creation inside one ordinary human being. John Watson, how are you possible?”

John’s throat is tight, his chest bursting with the intensity of his adoration as he kisses Sherlock’s hair.

“Everyone’s like that, though,” he tells Sherlock. “Everyone has an entire, unknowable universe inside of them.”
Sherlock snorts. “That’s nonsense. Most people are horrendously boring. Mundane. Banal. If there were universes walking around everywhere I would have observed it. I am very observant, you know.” He kisses John’s chest through his tee shirt, resettles his head. “No. Only you, I think.”

“All right, love. If you say so.” John feels Sherlock stiffen just the tiniest bit. “Is that not all right?” he asks. “If you don’t like endearments, that’s fine. I won’t--”

“No, it surprised me, is all,” Sherlock says. “I’ve never been the recipient of an endearment before. But I… yes. I think I like it. I certainly don’t mind it, if you wish.”

“Good,” John murmurs. Because I do wish.”

“I likely won’t reciprocate,” Sherlock tells him. “I mean, I’ve never been in a romantic relationship before--well, not a real one--so I don’t have any data. But it doesn’t seem like something I would do.”

“That’s fine,” John replies mildly, stroking Sherlock’s hair, reveling in being allowed this simple, longed-for intimacy, gently twining springy curls between his fingers. “I like the way my name sounds in your mouth. That’s enough for me.”

“That’s…” now it’s Sherlock’s turn to sound suspiciously tight and strangled, his voice full of something very much like overwhelming emotion. “That’s…good. I… okay. Good.”

“Good,” John echoes. “We’ve established that, then.”

The two of them fall silent for a bit. John is just starting to drift off when Sherlock speaks again.

“I probably won’t sleep, you know.”

“I figured.”

“You don’t mind if I get up?”

“Not in the slightest,” John answers honestly. "You can do whatever you wish, love. Always."

“Thank you,” Sherlock murmurs, tightening his hold on John’s ribcage. Less than five minutes pass before deep, sonorous respirations (not snoring; Sherlock would wear sweatpants to New Scotland Yard before he would admit to snoring) echo across the quiet dark of the room, making John smile to himself.

“I love you,” he tells his armful of not-snoring, definitely-snuggling Sherlock Holmes, dropping one last kiss into tangled curls. “It’s too soon. I know that. But I do. I love you.”

Sherlock sleeps through this quiet, heartfelt declaration; in fact, he sleeps soundly through the night, his long limbs wrapped possessively around John’s frame, sleeps deep and peaceful for many quiet hours, until midmorning light flows thick and bright through the bedroom windows.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter, patience will be rewarded, and the Explicit rating will be earned. I promise.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

“Sherlock…” John says, pressing a reluctant hand to the centre of his chest, putting a sliver of space between their bodies. “Remember how last night you were concerned about me diving into your pants?”

“True,” Sherlock purrs. “But we never talked about me wanting to dive into yours, did we?”

Chapter Notes

Thanks and love to allonsys_girl and bittergreens for their unwavering friendship and support.

Sometime before midmorning, John awakes to the gentle creak and dip of the mattress as Sherlock slips away from him and out of bed. In response he grunts and starfishes out into the warm spot left behind, drowsily registering the flush of the toilet and the sound of running water, then the soft click of the ensuite door as Sherlock pads back into the bedroom.

John assumes Sherlock will get dressed and leave, undoubtedly eager to catch up on everything he missed while sleeping for an unprecedented ten hours in a row. To his surprise Sherlock slips back into bed, under the rumpled sheets, looping an arm around John’s waist and snuggling close with a soft contented sound.

“John,” he murmurs, nuzzling into his neck. “Johhhhhhhhhnnn. I know you’re not asleep. Your breathing pattern is too shallow.”

“Mmf,” John replies. He blearily opens one eye just a crack, sees Sherlock’s large, silver-green eyes gazing back at him expectantly. Another part of his body seems rather expectant as well, pressing warm and heavy against John’s thigh.

“Well,” says John in a croaky whisper. “I see someone’s wide awake.”

“Very much so,” Sherlock says, then leans forward and kisses him. John responds warmly despite being half-awake, meeting Sherlock’s insistent lips with his own sleepy but affectionate mouth.

Sherlock pulls back almost immediately.

“So. That’s morning breath,” he says, voice carefully neutral while his face struggles not to show his obvious distaste.

“Yep,” John says with a chuckle. “Awful, isn’t it?”

“It really is,” Sherlock replies, clearly relieved he hasn’t caused offense.
John sleepily kisses his shoulder. “Let me get up and use the loo, and I’ll come back much improved.”

“Please do,” Sherlock murmurs, pulling back a fraction to let him climb out of bed.

John shuffles into the bathroom, relieves his full-to-bursting bladder, and splashes water on his face before reaching for his toothbrush. As he brushes, he notices the third-morning stubble on his cheeks, a day or two away from becoming an actual beard, unmistakably gingerish on his jaw and chin. He makes a mental note to pick up some normal, non-lethal safety razors before the facial situation gets out of hand.

Basic ablutions handled, John slips back into the bedroom and climbs back into bed beside Sherlock. “Hey,” he murmurs, and leans over to kiss him, slow and thorough. He pulls back with a smile. “Better?” he asks.

“Much,” Sherlock replies, and wraps a hand around the back of his neck and pulls him close, capturing his mouth with his own, lips and tongue insistent.

He’s becoming very good at this, very quickly.

Their kisses this morning are not the hushed and tender explorations of last night; their mouths are heated, insistent, and soon Sherlock is slipping his hands under the hem of John’s tee, fingertips skating against his bare skin as his teeth nibble at his neck. “I like your stubble,” he murmurs, mouthing the bristly underside of his jaw. “You could keep it, if you wanted.”

“You hated the moustache,” John points out.


Johns can’t help the tiny sigh that escapes him as Sherlock’s deep, rich voice pours into him, thick as honey, pooling warm and sweet in his belly. “You’re feeling adventurous this morning,” he says softly, voice gone a bit breathy as he savors the marvellous feel of Sherlock’s lips on his neck, his insistent exploring hands tracing patterns across the skin of his back.

“I am,” murmurs Sherlock, as his fingertips slide over the small of John’s back, explore the swell of his arse.

“Sherlock…” John says, pressing a reluctant hand to the centre of his chest, putting a sliver of space between their bodies. “Remember how last night you were concerned about me diving into your pants?”

“No, I’m just making sure.”

“I…” John groans quietly as Sherlock’s teeth graze against his ear, wet tongue tasting his earlobe. “I’m just making sure.”

“I am sure,” Sherlock says, breath warm against the skin of his neck. “I woke up to find the only man I’ve ever wanted in my bed, a persistent erection in my pants, and a definite need to do something about both. I could not be more sure.” He picks up his head, looks at John with a cocked eyebrow. “Problem?”

“None whatsoever,” John says.
“Excellent,” Sherlock says with a small, fond smile, then tugs at the hem of John’s shirt. “Take this off. I want to see you.”

“Bossy,” sighs John, but he’s smiling as he pulls his tee up over his head, careful of the stitches in his right arm, and tosses it over the side of the bed as he lays back down. He tries not to feel self-conscious in Sherlock’s eyes as they rake over his body; he feels momentarily grateful that he’s been eating so little over the past several weeks, causing his slight inclination to pudge around his middle has disappeared almost entirely.

But Sherlock has a shadow of an unhappy--no, worried--look on his face. “You’re too thin,” he pronounces. “You’ve barely been eating at all.”

“You’re one to talk,” John says, a bit put out. “You exist on nicotine patches and cold tea.”

“It suits me,” Sherlock says dismissively, and John would be very annoyed, except it’s the truth. “But you’re meant to have more weight on you.” He reaches out and traces the outlines of John’s ribs with his fingertips. “You need feeding up,” he says in a softer tone.

“Is that what you’re going to do?” John says, gently teasing. “Feed me up?”

“Yes,” Sherlock says simply. “I promised, didn’t I?”

John doesn’t know how they went from teasing to tender in the space of a moment, but it suddenly feels hard to breathe with the weight of emotion pressing down on his chest. “You did,” he murmurs, reaching up to weave his fingers in messy curls.

Sherlock just looks at him for a moment, then brings his head down and kisses the bare skin of John’s belly, licks and mouths at his flesh experimentally while John strokes his hair. It’s not quite sexy--John has the oddest feeling of being sampled, of Sherlock analyzing the data he’s acquiring through his lips and tongue--but it is sweet, and he can’t help but smile when Sherlock picks his head up and proclaims, “You taste good.”

“Well, thank you,” John says, not knowing quite how to respond.

Sherlock kisses and licks his way up John’s chest, pausing at the edge of the scar on his left shoulder. “Go ahead,” he murmurs, and Sherlock touches the tip of his tongue to the crater at the centre of the tangled mass of pale raised scar tissue. John doesn’t have much feeling in that area, but he shivers, nonetheless, overcome by the sight of Sherlock’s lips and tongue gentle against the most ruined part of his body.

Sherlock picks up his head. “I’ve wanted to do that for a very long time,” he says, his voice rough, catching a bit on the words.

“How long?” John asks, tenderly carding his fingers through Sherlock’s hair.

“Since the day we met,” Sherlock admits.

“God,” John breathes. “Come here.” He curls his fingers around Sherlock’s skull, tugging him up for a fevered kiss, the lust and desire surging up in him at the thought this beautiful man had been wanting him for so long, since that very first day. He had wanted Sherlock too that day, and badly, but he had been unable to see past a socially awkward man’s first, reflexive refusal.

But maybe it was a good thing in the end, painful as it was, that it took them this long to get here. If Sherlock had responded to his overtures at Angelo’s, that very first night, would John have taken him to bed then shoved him away, like he had done so many times before? It hurt his heart to think
he would have likely turned away from the most amazing man in the universe because he was in denial, weak and afraid.

_No, this is better_, he thinks as he licks into Sherlock’s open mouth, sweet and eager against his own. No matter the cost, no matter the pain, it was worth it, in the end, to be together like this.

Sherlock breaks the kiss, pulls away to look into his eyes, “We always would have,” he says quietly.

John’s brow crinkles in confusion. “What?”

“We always were going to get here. No matter what.”

John doesn’t even question the mind-reading. He just smiles. “You believe in fate, now?”

“Not a bit,” Sherlock says mildly. “But I believe in you and me.”

John goes still for a long moment, utterly gobsmacked by the depth of feeling revealed in those quiet, matter-of-fact words.

What John wants to say in response is, _God, I love you._

What he says instead is, “You’re wearing too many clothes. I want to see you, too.”

Sherlock’s cheeks colour, but he doesn’t look away from John as he sits up and tugs his shirt over his head, tossing it carelessly aside. He has always been cavalier about modesty inside the flat; John has seen most of him without clothing many times, but as attractive as John always found him before he is infinitely more alluring now, soft and open in the morning light, gazing at him with a tender, vulnerable expression John didn’t even know he was capable of.

John lets his eyes roam over Sherlock’s pale, naked torso, so slender but surprisingly muscular, the dusting of downy dark hair between his pectorals, his small, oblong pink nipples.

And the scar. The scar just to the right side of the midline, where Mary’s bullet came within a hairsbreadth of ending his life. It is still a bit reddish but paler, well-healed and beginning to fade.

“You are unbelievably beautiful,” John breathes, pressing him back down onto the bed, bending his head to kiss the round pale divot of flesh where a hateful piece of metal entered Sherlock’s body and almost ended his life. He moves slowly down his body, places a trail of small kisses along the ridges of his ribs, presses his mouth to the flat planes of his belly. He nibbles at the tender hollow at the top of his pelvis, smiling into soft skin as Sherlock squirms and sighs underneath him, his frankly impressive erection tenting the fabric of his soft, faded pyjamas.

John raises his head in silent inquiry as he trails inquisitive fingers along the inside of Sherlock’s thigh, tracing the crease of his groin. Sherlock moans softly, pushing his hips up in unmistakable invitation.

“Are you sure?” John asks.

“Oh for God’s sake, John,” Sherlock snaps, but it comes out softened by desire. “Just touch me already.”

John touches him, wrapping fingertips around his fabric-covered hard length and stroking, gently at first but then with increasing firmness as Sherlock gasps and pushes his hips into John’s hand. Just the sight of it, of Sherlock openly giving himself over to pleasure is enough to make John almost dizzy with lust, with the unquenchable desire to touch and feel and taste him all over.
He releases his grip on Sherlock’s cock and brings his fingers up to where the drawstring is tied loosely around his hips.

“Let me see you,” John breathes. “Please.”

“Yes,” Sherlock sighs, the word sounding almost like a moan. “God, yes,” and lifts his hips to help as John undoes the tapes and slides the loose bottoms down his legs. Sherlock pulls his feet loose and kicks them away carelessly, then stretches out on the bed and looks up at John, his eyes shockingly open and vulnerable.

Naked, Sherlock is every bit as glorious as John imagined. The thin trail of hair on his lower abdomen leads to a thatch of thick, dark curls; his cock, a bit longer than average and as slender as the rest of him, is dusky pink and so hard it’s pressed into his lower abdomen, the foreskin fully retracted, the wet head smearing fluid against his belly. Underneath, his bollocks are dusted with sparse, dark hair, full and firm, already pulling up tight against his body.

“Oh, love,” John says reverently, pressing his lips to the very edge of that dark vee of hair, inhaling the base, animal scent of him. “You’re amazing.” His hand wraps around his the warm velvet length of him and pulls, stroking gently as he kisses and mouths the crease of his groin, the inside of his thigh.

The taste and smell and feel of him is everything John ever imagined and more. It’s perfect.

Except it’s not.

Something’s not right. Sherlock’s erection is fading, his cock rapidly softening in John’s grip. John looks up and sees he’s shaking, head turned away, his arm flung over his eyes.

John lets go of him, kisses the crest of his pelvis. “Everything okay?” John asks gently, although it’s fairly obvious everything is not.

Sherlock swallows, exhales. “It’s just…” he trails off, arm still over his eyes, the confident assertiveness of just a few minutes ago gone, and John realizes that it was largely a put-on, a show of bravado to conceal Sherlock’s self-conscious anxiety.

“Hey. Hey.” John slides himself up Sherlock’s body, kisses his cheek. “If it’s too much too soon…”

Sherlock shakes his head, finally takes his hand away from his eyes. “No. It’s not that. I want you so much. I do.” He sighs. “It’s a lot of new information, new stimulus. It’s just…” he trails off, uncertain.

“It’s just so much,” John finishes for him. “And it’s all so new. It’s a lot to deal with all at once, I’d think.”

“Yes,” Sherlock agrees. “It’s a lot. So much information, so much input. And then I remember that you’re here, you’re right here, with me, and…” He takes a deep breath, exhales. “This is not attractive to you. This is the opposite of attractive. This is not how I want this to go.”

“It’s all right love. I swear it is.” John strokes his hair. “Sherlock, this is not something that has to happen right now for us to be good. There’s no timetable here, okay? We can stop. It’s absolutely fine.”

Sherlock turns his head to look at John. “But I don’t want to stop,” he says, a familiar edge of stubbornness creeping into his voice. “And I’m not saying that because I think I should, or because I want to please you. I want to be with you, physically. Desperately so. In the past year I’ve thought of
little else, much to my consternation. I want this. But I’m just so…” he shakes his head, lips pursed in frustration. “So aware. Of everything.”

John is silent for a long moment, tracing circles against his concave belly and mouthing gently at Sherlock’s bare shoulder as he thinks.


“I have some ideas,” John says in a quiet, considering tone. “Sherlock, do you trust me?”

(Of course,” Sherlock replies without hesitation. “We wouldn’t be in this ridiculous situation if I didn’t.”)

“Okay,” John says. ”Good.” He hesitates, considering how best to frame the next question. “When you’re alone, do you ever, um,--”

He pauses, and Sherlock looks at him with amusement.

“Masturbate?” Sherlock supplies. “You’re a doctor, John. Surely you can say the word. You must have to use it with your patients from time to time.”

“Well, I’m not usually in this position with my patients, am I?” John replies with just a trace of tartness.

Sherlock quirks an eyebrow in undisguised amusement. “Not usually?”


(Occasionally,” Sherlock replies. “Not that often, in the past, but sometimes…” He’s the one embarrassed now, his cheeks colouring a lovely shade of bright pink. “At times… when you and I are, well, spending a lot of time together in close quarters, it may be… more than occasional.”

John smiles, but there’s no mockery in it. “That makes the two of us, then.” He slides down a bit, kisses the centre of Sherlock’s chest. “When you do it do you, well, use something?”

“In the bedside table,” Sherlock replies, his voice even but his face still flushed. John sits up, turns to his left to open the drawer. Inside is a tube of hand cream.

“Oh, love,” he sighs, closing the drawer. “You are, categorically, a teenage boy.”

“Shut up,” Sherlock replies indignantly. “I never needed anything else.” He pauses, then cocks his head questioningly. “What is one supposed to use?”

(Stay right here,” John says, planting a kiss on Sherlock’s lips and climbing out of bed, trying not to feel too awkward at the insistent prominence of his own arousal, hard and bulging in his black briefs. He ducks out of the room before Sherlock can say another word, goes upstairs, wondering if he had possibly left behind--

(John had only done the most rudimentary packing when he first left, in that terrible time after Sherlock’s fall. He had always intended to get the belongings he left behind, but somehow he never did, and now John realizes for the first time that somewhere deep inside he had always been hedging his bets, somewhere deep inside he had always thought--always hoped--he would someday come back here again.)

The bureau has been untouched since his departure, and he finds his prize in the top right dresser
drawer.

He takes the half-used bottle of lube and trots back down the steps, returning to the bedroom. Sherlock is precisely where John had left him; he has not moved a bit, per instructions, save for the fact that he’s gone fully soft now, his penis quiet and flaccid against the crease of his thigh.

“This,” John says, holding up the bottle, “is what we use.” He tosses the bottle on the bed, starts to climb in.

“Wait,” Sherlock says.

John looks at him, concerned and a bit confused. He half expects him to say he’s changed his mind.

“You should be naked too,” Sherlock says, his lips twitching into just a hint of a cheeky grin. “Put me more at ease, remove any power differential. It’s only fair.”

“You’re absolutely right,” agrees John, and pushes down the small burst of self-consciousness in his chest as he hooks his thumbs into the elastic of his boxer briefs, eases the constricting fabric carefully over his straining cock, down his hips, and off. He tosses his underwear aside and straightens his spine, chin up, boldly meeting Sherlock’s wide pale eyes.

Neither one speaks for a moment, but the gaze held between them speaks volumes.

“Get over here,” Sherlock finally breathes. “Right now.”

John grins a little at that as he slides back into bed. “You ready to try something?” he asks, smoothing Sherlock’s hair back from his forehead as he kisses the corner of his mouth, gentle and undemanding.

Sherlock nods wordlessly, eyes still fixed on John’s.

“Okay,” John says softly. “Turn on your side, away from me.”

Sherlock does as he says and John spoons up against him, propping himself up on his injured arm; it hurts, but not unbearably so. He presses himself close to Sherlock’s back; he can’t keep his erection from pressing into the hollow at the small of his back, and the friction and warmth against John’s aching cock is delectable, maddening. With an effort he pushes his own arousal down, out of his mind, dedicating himself instead to what Sherlock needs.

It’s not a sacrifice, or a hardship. Sherlock is lovely right now, naked and trusting, and his, and no one has ever seen him like this before, not ever. and John feels almost overwhelmed with his desire to care for him, to keep him safe, to show him how good his body can feel.

No, it’s not a hardship at all.

John hums softly in appreciation as he nuzzles Sherlock’s long neck, kisses the sharp curve of a shoulder blade. He dips a bit lower, presses his lips to one of the white slashes that mar the expanse of his long, lovely back.

John gathers his courage and asks the question lingering in his mind for months, ever since the first time he laid eyes on those scars.

“Will you tell me about these, someday?” he murmurs against damaged flesh.

Sherlock is still and quiet for a long moment, then he give a tiny nod. “Someday,” he says quietly.
“But not today. All right?”

“All right,” John agrees softly, kissing the pale line of scar tissue one more time before moving back up to press his lips to the nape of his neck, the pink shell of his ear.

“Close your eyes for me,” he whispers.

Sherlock nods.

“If it’s too much,” John murmurs in his ear, “or it isn’t good, promise you’ll tell me.”

Sherlock swallows hard, a shiver running through his body. “I promise,” he breathes.

John brings fingertips of his left hand up to trace the curve of Sherlock’s hip, slip across the flat planes of his taut, concave abdomen, slowly track upwards, savoring every inch of warm smooth skin he is allowed to touch. He finds a pebbled nipple, circles it with his fingers. He gently rolls the nub of flesh between finger and thumb, feels the deep rumble of Sherlock’s low moan.

“Is that good, sweetheart?” he whispers in his ear, trying on a new endearment for size.

“Yes,” he sighs, arching into John’s touch. “Very good.”

“I’m so glad,” John purrs, soft and fond, as his fingers find his other nipple. stroking and flicking and rubbing as Sherlock arches and sighs with pleasure. “Do you do this to yourself, sometimes?” he asks.

Sherlock exhales a shuddery breath and nods.

“You’re so sensitive,” John murmurs, sliding his fingertips downward, circling his navel then moving lower. “Everywhere. Inside and out. Your body as well as your brain. Aren’t you, love?”

“Yes,” he breathes.

Sherlock is almost fully hard again, his cock rising stiffly away from his body. John reaches behind himself, digs in the rumpled sheets for the lube, locates it. He manages to flip the cap and pour some into his palm single-handedly, then recaps it and tosses it back onto the bed.

“Sherlock,” he whispers. “Sweetheart. Your cock is so beautiful, so gorgeous. I want to feel it. I want to hold it in my hand. May I touch you there? Please?”

Sherlock goes still for just moment, then nods.

“It’s gonna be a little cool,” John murmurs, then takes hold of him, wrapping his fingers around the firm, hot, velvet-smooth flesh. Sherlock makes a small surprised noise, a tiny breathy gasp, as John takes his cock into his slick fist. His shoulders tense as his erection fades a bit, and John can feel his anxiety spike at the deluge of new sensation.

“I’ve got you, love, it’s all right. Just breathe for a moment and relax. You’re safe with me. It’s all right.”

Sherlock does as John says and takes one deep breath, then another. John holds him, not moving, just surrounding him and keeping him safe.

“You’re doing so well,” John murmurs. “So lovely, so gorgeous. Just relax and let me hold you. I’ve got you. I promise.”
Sherlock breathes out, relaxing into John; after a few moments, his cock begins to swell and firm again as his anxiety recedes.

“Now put your hand around mine,” John tells him.

Sherlock breathes in, exhales, then takes his hand off his thigh and places it over John’s smaller one, both of them now wrapped firmly around his cock.

“Now show me,” John breathes. “Show me how you do it when you’re alone, how you like it when you touch yourself.”

Sherlock tightens his grip and begins to move, guiding John’s hand in short, firm strokes. Together they work his cock, and it only takes a few strokes before he is fully hard again, silk over stone in John’s fist. Sherlock is making soft, strangled noises of pleasure into the pillow, stifling his cries.

“Let me hear you, love,” John pleads softly. “Turn your head for me. I want to hear how good you feel.”

Sherlock obeys, making a low, raspy moan as his hips start to move in counterpoint with their joined hands.

John can’t help the shiver that runs through him at the sounds of Sherlock’s pleasure; he wants to dedicate his entire self to Sherlock, he does, but he is human and fallible and his own need is growing, a fire stoked by the rhythmic press of lush backside against his hard and seeking cock can’t help but rock gently into him in time with the push of his hips, nudging his hardness against the warm inviting space just under the swell of his arse as the pleasure builds at the base of his spine, a hot itch of need and desire.

Sherlock is making little bitten off cries now, small pleading sounds that sound almost like sobs, almost like he’s afraid as he thrusts into the tunnel of John’s fist, his higher thinking finally shorted out, wiped blank as instinct and need take over.

“I want it,” he keens softly. “Oh. I want it so much.”

“It’s all right,” John croons, kissing the nape of his neck. “I’ll take care of you. I’ll take such good care of you. Just let go. I’ve got you. Let go and I’ll make you feel so good, I promise.”

“Oh God,” Sherlock breathes out, low and desperate. “Oh God, John, I’m close. I’m so close.”

He’s teetering at the very edge of the abyss; John can feel it in the way his cock grows hotter and heavier in his hand, in the way his abdomen tightens, the stutter in the rhythm of his hips.

“Don’t fight it,” John murmurs. “Just give in. It’s going to feel so good when you come, isn’t it? So much pleasure, just for you. All you have to do is let me. Just let me make you come.”

“John,” he says, sounding shocked. “I—Oh.” His entire body goes still for just a moment, and then he’s coming hard, deep guttural cries as his body shakes, his abdominal muscles contracting, his cock pulsing three, four, five times as he spurts hot and slick over their hands, on his belly, into the tangled sheets.

The sight of Sherlock undone like this, so gorgeous and wanton as orgasm takes him—it’s the most erotic thing John’s ever witnessed, and his surging lust combines with the friction of Sherlock’s overheated body against his desperately engorged cock and it’s almost enough to send him flying over the edge; it takes a herculean amount of self control not to wrap his fingers around that sharp hip and rut himself to completion against the hot, inviting cleft of Sherlock’s perfect arse.
John reminds himself that this isn’t about him; right now, it’s about Sherlock and making this as perfect for him as he can, and he barely manages to restrain himself.

But God, it’s not easy.

As Sherlock begins to drift down from his climax John eases him through, gentling his touch as the aftershocks make him shiver and twitch, kissing his shoulder, his hair. Sherlock releases his hand and John lets go of his softening cock, surreptitiously wiping his hand on the sheets before stroking his trembling flank.

They are quiet together for several minutes, as Sherlock’s breathing evens out and his body calms.

“Hey,” John murmurs presently, kissing Sherlock’s shoulder. “How are you?”

Sherlock is silent for a moment, just long enough that a tendril of worry starts to wrap around the base of his skull—

“John,” Sherlock breathes. “That was amazing.” In a single smooth motion he rolls himself over so they’re face-to-face. “You’re amazing.” He kisses John, mouth wet and open. “You’re a genius,” he murmurs against John’s lips. “You’re a prodigy.”

“Well,” John says with a smile, unsure how to reply, and kisses him back instead. Sherlock wraps an arm around his waist, pulling him close. John can’t help but give a bit of a hiss at the friction against his painfully stiff prick, trapped between their bodies.

Sherlock notices, of course. It’s not exactly subtle.

“But what about you?” he asks, with just a trace of uncertainty colouring the very edge of his playful tone.

“I’m fine for now,” John says, meaning it. “I want this to be about you,” he says, kissing him again. “Watching you like that was so gorgeous, I could live on that for the rest of my life, I think.”

Sherlock ducks his head, suddenly shy. “I want...” he starts.

“Anything, love,” John says. “Anything at all.”

“I want to touch you,” Sherlock says. “I want to touch you, and I want you to... I used to think about...” his cheeks colour adorably. “When I, um, used to do that. I used to think about you on top of me, straddling me with your knees as you—” he takes a deep breath, summoning his courage. “I want to touch you, and I want you to come on me, and I want to watch,” he finishes, his voice remarkably steady despite the furious crimson blush of his face.

John is rendered literally unable to speak for a moment. Then he breathes out, swallows. “Good God, Sherlock,” John rasps, his voice ragged with desire. “That is the single hottest fucking thing I have ever heard in my life.”

“So... that means you want to?” Sherlock asks.

“Holy fucking Jesus, yes.” John pushes himself up with his good arm and swings his left knee up and over Sherlock’s torso, his cock bobbing heavily between his thighs as he settles himself astride his lover’s body.

“Give me your hand,” he says, reaching for the bottle of lube.
Sherlock settles his left hand on John’s hip as he holds out his right hand. John flicks the cap open and drizzles lube onto his waiting palm, then tosses it aside. He can’t help but gaze at the vision beneath him, of Sherlock gazing up at him, soft-eyed and sated and wanting this, wanting to see John’s pleasure.

“You’re breathtaking like this,” he says, quiet and reverent, and Sherlock smiles, impossibly fond and open.

“So are you,” he murmurs, and John has to kiss him, to capture those gorgeous reddened lips with his own just one more time before he straightens himself, taking hold of Sherlock’s slick hand.

“Like this,” he says, and guides Sherlock’s warm hand to take hold of his cock, wrapping his own smaller fingers around his fist. “Mmm, that’s so nice,” he breathes, guiding Sherlock’s movements as he strokes him, showing him the long firm pulls John prefers.

As always, he’s a quick learner. John lets go of Sherlock’s fist, places his hands on each side of his head, dips down to kiss him again.

“That’s it, love,” he whispers against his full lips. “That’s so good, it’s perfect.”

“John,” Sherlock breathes in amazement. “I’m touching your penis.”

John can’t help the tiny huff of fond laughter. “Yes, you are. And it feels amazing.”

It’s the absolute truth; Sherlock’s fingers are clearly unpracticed, his strokes are a little rougher than he likes, his grip not quite tight enough, but just the fact that he is here with John, doing this to him, wanting him like this, makes the pleasure coil tight and hot at the base of John’s spine.

“You want me to come on you,” John purrs, thrusting harder into the slick circle of Sherlock’s fist. “Say it for me again. Please, love. Say it again.”

“I want you,” Sherlock breathes, gazing up at him, pupils wide and black. “I want you to come on me. I want to see you.”

“I’m going to do so many things to you,” John growls low and rough, fucking harder into Sherlock’s curled fingers as the maddening hot itch of need spreads through his body. “I’m going to show you everything and you’re going to love it.”

“Oh God,” Sherlock rasps, his hips twitching upward, his cock twitching and swelling as it brushes against John’s thigh. “Everything. Yes.”

John moans without meaning to, his murmured words fueling his own dark swell of arousal.

“Harder,” he gasps raggedly. “Please. Rough is fine, I need--”

Sherlock tightens his grip, pumping John’s cock roughly, insistently. “Like this?” he asks.

“Oh god, oh fuck, yes.” He’s not going to last much longer; his bollocks are drawing up tight to his body, the pleasure winding tighter and tighter in him wrapped around his spine like silvery barbed wire--

“Please,” Sherlock murmurs, deep and rough, and that one whispered word sends him over the edge.

“Watch me,” John breathes out, and then he’s falling, lost to the abyss, his body given over to helpless, mindless pleasure, low broken noises of bliss pouring unheeded from his mouth as he
spasms again and again, his warm seed spattering and dripping across Sherlock’s belly and chest, filthy and beautiful.

“Oh, oh, oh.” John rasps as the wave recedes, the aftershocks sparking and fading; too boneless to stay upright, he collapses onto his side next to Sherlock. “Oh fuck,” he groans, mind completely blank and blissed out.

After a few minutes his galloping heart slows to a canter, his demolished brain reassembles himself, and he opens his eyes to find Sherlock gazing down at his own torso with undisguised interest.

“I know you want to,” says John with a raspy huff of laughter. “Okay. Go ahead.”

Granted permission, Sherlock gives in to his insatiable curiosity and swipes a finger through John’s semen, investigating it for colour, texture and, finally, taste.

“Different from mine,” he pronounces. “Better, If I’m being completely honest.”

“Because I’m a vegetarian,” John says.

“Pescetarian.”

“Okay, the occasional prawn. Whatever. The point is, it makes a difference. Also hydration. Smoking doesn’t help either.”

Sherlock raises an eyebrow. “See, that could be a compelling reason to quit.”

“I certainly wouldn’t disagree.” John reaches over the edge of the mattress, swipes his tee shirt up off the floor. “Are you done investigating my output? Because I’m pretty sure you want me to clean you up before you start getting cold and sticky.”

“Done,” Sherlock murmurs with a nod, allowing John to wipe him down with the wadded up tee.

“We still need a good wash,” John says, “but that’ll keep for later.” He tosses the soiled shirt back to the floor, collapses back into the tangled sheets next to Sherlock.

The two of them are quiet for a moment, gathering their respective thoughts.

“Good?” John asks presently, feeling a bit apprehensive though he’s not sure why.

Sherlock sighs and wraps an arm around John’s belly. “Incomparable. Literally. I have nothing in my life with which this experience compares.”

“So,” John says, tilting his head in bemused query. “That means good?”

Sherlock grins at him, open and unguarded, and it’s almost unbearably lovely.

“Yes, John. That means good.”

“Good,” John sighs, and closes his eyes, allows himself to slide into a post-orgasmic doze.

A few minutes later he wakes to Sherlock poking him insistently in the ribs. “John. Johnnnn.”

“What, love?”

Without preamble Sherlock takes John’s hand and places it on his rock-hard erection.
“It won’t go away,” he says in a near-whine.

“Stop thinking about it,” John mumbles blearily, taking his hand away from Sherlock’s groin and rolling onto his other side.

“I can’t,” Sherlock says, sounding almost annoyed.

“Yes you can,” John replies. “You have an entire mind palace. Find something in there to entertain yourself.”

A moment of silence.

“John.”

“Yes, love?” John sighs, carefully patient.

“I want to do it again.”

“Oh, no,” John sighs. “Oh, no no no. I am over forty, fifteen minutes ago I came so hard I may have ruptured something, and it’s not yet ten a.m. I am taking a nap, and when I wake up we are having breakfast, and then we can maybe discuss doing it again.”

Sherlock huffs sulkily.

John has an idea.

“You could make a spreadsheet, you know. While I nap.”

Sherlock first sighs dismissively, then goes quiet as he considers. John can almost hear the gears turning in his mind.

“A spreadsheet,” he murmurs, contemplative.

“Sure. If you’re going to be thinking about doing it, you could make that time productive by formally organizing all the different ways you want to do it, then as we tackle each one you could analyze the data. Objective experience versus subjective. There could be charts. I know how you love a nice chart.”

“You’re mocking me.”

“I’m really not.”

“It’s... not a terrible idea,” Sherlock says slowly.

“I do have a decent one occasionally,” John retorts sleepily, burrowing back into the covers.

“John…” Sherlock says again a few moments later.

“Yes, love, you can go get your laptop and work on it,” John sighs. “You can do any damn thing you like, as long as you let me sleep for another hour.”

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John ends up sleeping for almost two more hours before the sound of the front door opening and closing wakes him.
The light coming into the windows tells him it’s close to midday; he squints at the clock, feeling bit of guilt when he sees it is nearly noon.

Ah, hell with it, he decides, remembering what he and Sherlock got up to earlier in the morning. After that, he deserved a good nap. Even if he had been coming off of ten hours of sleep.

A shower is non-negotiable; after he steps out of the tub and dries off, he swipes Sherlock’s spare dressing gown from the door hook. The sleeves hang comically below his fingertips, so he haphazardly rolls them up before making his way to the kitchen.

An unwashed and tousle-haired Sherlock is in the midst of a packing peanut and bubble wrap explosion. There’s a fair-sized cardboard box on the floor, and he is holding a small glass vial up to the light when John wanders in.

“Something’s got your attention,” he observes.

“I made the acquaintance of a retired botanist in Chipping Norton,” Sherlock replies, carefully unwrapping another bottle. “He’s sent me a variety of rare plant pollens from the Cotswolds, species so endangered they aren’t found anywhere else in the British Isles. The package just arrived twenty minutes ago.” He looks up at John, eyes sharp and bright. “Do you know how many murders occur on holiday, John?”

“Um,” John replies intelligently. “Can’t say that I do?”

“Couples on minibreak, trying to mend relationships…it happens much more frequently than people realize. An argument about an attractive coworker over the continental breakfast, tempers flare.”

John thinks of all the weekend getaways he’s gone on that have gone horribly wrong, and he can’t help but chuckle. “You do have a point,” he says, leaning against the counter.

“These pollens will be tremendously useful in my investigations. Disproving alibis, establishing place of death, and…” Sherlock trails off for a second, then looks up at John as if just realizing he is there, his eyes (blue this morning, flecked with gold) sliding appreciatively over his body. John feels a bit silly in the overlong dressing gown, like a kid playing dress up, but it seems to do something for Sherlock.

“…and I would like a kiss, if you would be so kind,” Sherlock says in his usual, slightly imperious tone, the embarrassed reticence John had seen in his bed nowhere to be found, carefully tucked behind his usual cloak of cool self-assurance.

“It would be my pleasure,” John murmurs with a smile, leaning over to give him a long, lingering kiss, openmouthed, just the barest flicker of tongue. The scent of sex still clings to him, earthy and musky and intoxicating, and for a brief moment John considers just dragging him back to bed.

“Morning, love,” he murmurs, unable to keep the besotted grin off his face.

“Good morning, John,” Sherlock replies with the trace of a fond smile on his own.

“Suppose you’ve been too busy to make tea,” John says teasingly.

Sherlock’s expression falls a bit. “I was going to. I did put the kettle on--”

John turns to the counter and feels the kettle. It’s barely lukewarm.

“…but then I got busy,” Sherlock finishes with a shrug.
“It’s all right,” John says with a smile, unplugging the kettle and pouring out the tepid water. “I make better tea anyway.”

“You really do,” Sherlock agrees, turning his attention back to his samples.

While waiting for the kettle to boil, John opens the fridge to find the milk and possibly something to make for breakfast. The first thing he notices is the smell; the second thing he notices is aside from the pint of milk in the door shelf, there is absolutely nothing in the refrigerator that is even remotely edible. He’s fairly certain most of it was never even food.

“When was the last time you went shopping?” John asks.

Sherlock shrugs, a shift of a single silk-clad shoulder. “Mrs. Hudson brings me food.”

“Bloody good thing, too.” John says, closing the fridge door with a wince. “Or you’d have become a mummified skeleton by now. Okay, today’s plan now includes groceries.”

Sherlock makes a noncommittal grunt and opens a box of fresh slides.

John pours hot water over teabags, adds milk and sugar, places one at Sherlock’s elbow.

“John,” he says without looking up. His tone holds just a shade of uncertainty.

“Yes, love.”

“We are in a romantic relationship now.”

“I was laboring under that impression, yes.”

“Does that mean I’m...expected to go to the shops with you?”

John laughs and rubs his stubbly jaw.

“Do you want to?”

Sherlock makes a disgusted face. “No.”

“Then of course not.” John drops a kiss into his tousled hair. “But. You do have to clean out the fridge. It’s like an Eli Roth movie in there.”

“Who?”

“Never mind. It’s fucking disgusting. Clean it out while I’m gone. Please.”

“I don’t like this part of being in a relationship,” Sherlock mumbles sulkily.

“I’d make you clean it even if we weren’t sleeping together, and you know it.” John takes a sip of his tea, bends down close to Sherlock’s ear. “But now I can promise that if you clean it out by the time I get home, we’ll get to work on that spreadsheet.”

Sherlock swallows, then exhales. “Promise?” he asks, just the tiniest quaver in his deep voice.

“Absolutely,” John says, and gently bites his earlobe.

Sherlock exhales shakily. “So sexual favors and emotional manipulation are going to feature heavily in this relationship,” he says, aiming for an arch, snarky tone but ending up at amused and
“Problem?” John asks teasingly as he stands up, takes another sip of tea.

“No,” Sherlock says, fighting to keep his face serious as returns attention to his slides. “No problem at all.”

***

John combs his hair, scratches at his stubble (don’t forget razors), and digs in his backpack for a change of clothes.

At some point, he will need to return to West Norwood, if only to get the rest of his clothes, his laptop, and his gun. Then he will need to figure out how to deal with the disaster he made of the house and what to do about his lease and his car.

He sees now that he hates the suburbs, hates everything about them, hates driving a car and mowing the sodding grass and socializing with the dreadful neighbors.

He pretty much hates everything that’s not his life here on Baker Street with Sherlock.

He wonders what the hell ever made him think he could make himself into a different person.

It seems so pointless and foolish and unnecessary now, in retrospect.

“Huh,” is all he says aloud, and digs in his bag for a pair of clean socks.

Back out in the kitchen, he drops a hand on Sherlock’s shoulder.

“Any requests?” he asks.

“Freezer bags,” Sherlock replies after a moment’s thought. “And yoghurt.”

“Got it.” John squeezes lightly and turns away.

“But not raspberry,” says Sherlock, attention already back on his work.


“Precisely,” Sherlock says.

***

John hadn’t realized how many sizes and styles of freezer bags one could choose from.

He pulls out his phone to text Sherlock for clarification when he sees the missed call from a number he doesn’t recognize. Swallowing down a lump of reflexive anxiety--in his rather unique set of life experiences things like unknown numbers tended to be nerve-wracking at best and life-destroying at worst--he calls the number back, somewhat expecting the call to be picked up by a kidnapper demanding ransom for Sherlock or an escaped Mary threatening retribution or the unhinged rantings of zombie Jim Moriarty.

No one picks up. The call goes to voicemail.

“This is Timothy Atherton, director of the New Horizons Center for the Homeless. I’m sorry I missed your call. Please leave a message after the tone.”
John lets out a breath he hadn’t realized he was holding. It was likely just some routine communication regarding his new job, which he was due to start in a week.

“Hello, Mr Atherton,” he says, stiff and awkward; he can never seem to get the hang of leaving voicemails. “John Watson calling. Saw you rung me, didn’t hear my phone. Well. Yes. Call me at your convenience, I suppose. Um, thank you.” John rings off, contemplates his phone for a moment. He briefly wonders why Atherton called from his personal phone, not from a work line, but he decides if it was important he will call back.

He shrugs and types “Small med large? ziptop or slider?” and sends the message to Sherlock.

You're a doctor. What is your recommendation for long term storage of cirrhotic livers? SH

My professional recommendation is NOT IN MY FUCKING FRIDGE.

Don’t be ridiculous. I wouldn't put livers in the fridge. SH

They’re going in the freezer. SH

John sighs loudly, yet he can’t help the dumb grin tugging at the corner of his mouth.

It’s like he never left, except now there’s snogging and orgasms, and it’s absolutely bloody marvellous.

***

When John returns, lugging the heavy bags up the steps, Sherlock is out of his dressing gown, dressed sharply in his usual snug buttondown and black trousers. He sits in his usual kitchen chair as he peers into his microscope, jotting down notes into a battered notebook without even looking at the paper as he scrawls across the lined page. John is about to make a sarcastic comment about Sherlock being too preoccupied by boring bloody pollen to do the one thing asked of him when he notices the grin ghosting the edge of Sherlock’s mouth.

He opens the refrigerator. A stack of repurposed plastic takeaway containers fills the bottom shelf, each round lid neatly labelled in permanent marker. The middle and upper shelves are empty, save for a jar of strawberry jam, a bottle of HP sauce and an almost-empty jar of Branston pickle.

The inner walls and shelves have been cleared of grime and gore. A faint smell of Dettol still lingers.

“Did you...wipe everything down?” John asks in disbelief. “With actual cleaner?”

“Borrowed it from Mrs Hudson,” Sherlock grumbles in confirmation. "It smells terrible.”

“Only you would be find citrus cleaner more offensive than the smell of slaughterhouse in July,” John replies amiably. Closing the fridge door, he leans over to look at the wall on the other side of the refrigerator, and sees the normally-overflowing bin has been emptied as well, and a fresh liner installed. Not for the first time, he wonders how Sherlock is able to accomplish three hours of work in a little over an hour, and look utterly unruffled and indolent by the time John returns.

However he accomplishes it, the good mood it puts John into cannot be denied.

Humming a little under his breath, John arranges the freshly-purchased perishables--eggs and yoghurt and orange juice and rashers and a block of Anchor Cheddar--in the newly-respectable refrigerator. He closes the door and comes around the table, stands behind Sherlock. He gently rests his hands on bent shoulders, drops a kiss into soft hair, damp(he must have showered after cleaning
the fridge, and for that John is doubly, no, triply grateful) and a bit overlong, curling at the nape of his neck in a manner that John can now freely admit he has always found irresistible.

“Thank you,” John says, unmistakable fondness colouring his voice.

He’s about to pull away and begin putting dry goods in the cupboards, when Sherlock’s left hand comes up and long fingers encircle his wrist, holding him gently but firmly.

“You’re very welcome,” says Sherlock, voice soft, a rumbly purr. “However,” he continues, “I didn’t perform that odious task to be remunerated solely by mere words of gratitude.”

He picks up John’s hand, turns it palm up, and presses his lips to the sensitive skin there, sending hot, shivery sparks up his spine.

“Is that so,” breathes John, trying and failing to keep his voice even.

“I believe, in fact,” Sherlock, “I was promised a very specific reward.” He braces his feet on the floor to push his chair away from the kitchen table, and tugs John firmly by his good arm until he’s standing in between his spread thighs.

John tilts his head, squints at him. “Are you...seducing me? In our kitchen?”

“Is it working?” Sherlock asks.

John makes a face of mock consideration, then nods. “Brilliantly.”

“Then yes, I am seducing you,” Sherlock says, and kisses the inside of his forearm.

“Jesus,” John breathes. “There’s fast learners, and then there’s you.”

“And you are the sole focus of my studies,” Sherlock murmurs, then mouths the crease of his elbow. “Aren’t you the lucky man.”

“But you’re busy,” John says in token, teasing protest. He can’t help the hint of a salacious grin tugging at the corner of his mouth. “I wouldn’t dream of interrupting--”

“It’s dried plant matter, John. It’s hardly going anywhere.” Sherlock purrs, voice honeyed and deep, and somehow he tugs John by the waist and slides a hand behind his knee and the next thing John knows he’s actually sitting in Sherlock’s lap, straddling him, and he huffs in token protest, but then Sherlock’s hands are warm on his back and his tongue is in John’s mouth and he’s already rock-hard and pressing into John’s crotch which thickens and swells enthusiastically in response.

They kiss and kiss, warm and open and more than little wet, tongues sliding against each other, and John can’t help the moan that escapes when Sherlock’s hands cup his arse and pull him down firmly as he thrusts up with his hips, and he hadn’t taught Sherlock this but some things, some things are instinctive, he supposes. John sighs as he grinds down against his lap, their cocks pressing and rubbing together despite the layers of clothing, the friction maddening and delicious, making Sherlock gasp into his open, seeking mouth with each insistent push of his hips.

They’re snogging and grinding against each other and moaning into each others’ mouths in the kitchen at one in the afternoon, and it’s as hot and vulgar and and desperate as anything John had ever secretly hoped.

It’s glorious.
It’s so glorious neither one of them hear Mrs Hudson’s tread on the stairway, or the way she first politely coughs at their open kitchen door, then raps her knuckles on the frame.

“Boys!” She calls impatiently, causing John to finally look up and register something besides how good Sherlock feels underneath him. His cheeks flush deep crimson as he looks away; Sherlock looks up at the landlady, rolls his eyes as the crease between his brows furrows deeper in displeasure.

“Mrs Hudson!” He snaps in defensive annoyance. “Do you mind?”

“Client!” she hisses at them. “I left them downstairs. And thank heavens for that, considering.” She huffs and crosses her arms, but her eyes twinkle with amusement.

“Just...just. Give us a minute?” John asks, his voice coming out in far too much like a humiliating squeak.

“Yes. Please. And next time, do bother to knock,” snaps Sherlock.

Mrs Hudson eyes the two of them, her back straight, utterly uncowed. “Well,” she says mildly, “If you don’t want others knowing your business, maybe he next time you two are having it off in the kitchen you should try closing the door.”

She turns away, brisk footsteps tapping down the stairs.

John groans—in embarrassment now, not pleasure—and clammers awkwardly off Sherlock’s lap. His erection is rapidly subsiding; the smirk of one’s elderly landlady is a miracle worker in that department, he’ll have to keep that one on file—as he wipes his slightly saliva-wet face on his sleeve. He looks over at Sherlock, still sitting the kitchen chair. His head is hanging down, his shoulders hunched; for a moment John thinks he is mortified or upset but then he sees the minute shaking on Sherlock’s back and realizes he’s stifling laughter.

“Don’t you dare, Sherlock Holmes,” John says waringly, but the giggles are already rising in him. “Don’t you dare start laughing, not now, goddammit, there’s clients downstairs,” but it’s too late, the giggles are spilling out and he has to smother them in the sleeve of his shirt as Sherlock shakes and wheezes.

A heavier tread begins to ascend the steps, with a lighter but still masculine one following behind.

“Okay,” John says in a stage whisper, both to himself and Sherlock. He squares his shoulders, takes a deep breath. “Clients. Pull it together, for God’s sake.” Sherlock nods once and rises, turns around. His face is perfectly composed, but he assiduously avoids John’s eyes, and John knows it’s because if they look at each other again they’ll be done for.

A tall, familiar-looking older man hovers uncertainly in the doorway. “Dr Watson,” the visitor says in a gruff yet kind tone. “A pleasure to see you again.”

“Mr Atherton?” John says in confused surprise, then remembers himself to step forward and shake the man’s outstretched hand. He then gestures to Sherlock. “Mr Atherton, this is Sherlock Holmes.”

“Mr Holmes,” Atherton says. “An absolute honor, sir.”

“Call me Sherlock,” Sherlock says, shaking the man’s hand firmly.

“Mr Atherton,” says John, a bit puzzled. “I don’t mean to be rude, but--why are you here? Is this somehow related to my position?”
"I wish it were," Atherton says sadly. "No, I’m afraid we’ve come to seek professional help."

At "we," John looked up and noticed a tall, hollow-eyed young man hovering in the doorway.

"Rocco, come in, please," Atherton says. Rocco steps hesitantly into the kitchen, and John can instantly recognize the grief etched in the man’s pale features.

"Rocco works for me at the shelter," Atherton tells them. "He’s been with us a year. He’s worked hard to put his life back together, and he’s been nothing but reliable and trustworthy in the time I’ve known him. I’m tremendously proud of his achievements."

"Very uplifting," says Sherlock. "But I’m hoping you’re not in my kitchen uninvited to bore me with your success stories."

John quirs an eyebrow, but Atherton doesn’t pause or flinch; clearly he had been warned beforehand about the consulting detective’s singular personality.

"I tell you these things to underscore the fact that I find Rocco to be a credible and honest fellow, and to show why I am inclined to believe what he says." Atherton turns his head, looks to the younger man. Rocco nods just minutely, and Atherton takes a deep breath and continues. "Yesterday he came to me for help. He has been hearing things, tales told on the street, and two days ago he made a disturbing discovery of his own. He’s a bright, honest fellow, and if what he tells me is true, combined with some of my own observations, I believe...well, that people, homeless people, are being systematically taken and murdered."

Sherlock tilts his head, presses his lips in a thin line, but says nothing.

"So naturally," the older man says, "I went to the police. However--" Atherton pauses, his face a study of distress.

Sherlock exhales, his expression stony, an entirely different being than the laughing man of minutes ago. "The police have declined to investigate," he states flatly.

"They have indeed," Atherton says. "The homeless are but a nuisance to them, living or dead." He gazes levelly at Sherlock, eyes aged but blazing with anger and sorrow, mouth set in a grim, determined line. "You’ve long been considered a friend to the people I serve, Mr Holmes. Will you take the case?"

John sees the briefest moment of sadness and anger flare in Sherlock’s eyes; then it is gone in the very next instant as his professional mask slides firmly into place, and his face is now that of the cool, untouchable consulting detective, the brilliant and unstoppable mind always ready to do battle with the criminals of London.

John is every bit as awed and impressed as he was that very first day, so many years ago.

"Come in to the sitting room, gentlemen," Sherlock replies. "John, would you be so kind as to make our guests some tea? I feel we have a great many matters to discuss."
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

“I’ve had McGinty’s body sent to Bart’s,” he begins. “Molly knows this is top priority, she started the autopsy immediately. I’ve also sent officers to the shelter to interview Rocco Napolitano and Timothy Atherton. Hopefully they’ll—”

“You turned them away,” hisses Sherlock, crowding close into Lestrade’s personal space. “People who knew him, cared about him. They knew something terrible had happened, they came to you asking for help, and you turned them away.”

“Sherlock,” John says, warningly. “Lestrade is not the entirety of New Scotland Yard. He had no idea—”

“Well, he should have!” Sherlock snaps. “He never learned of it, but he should have.”

“Sherlock, you can’t blame Lestrade for something he never even—”

“He’s right, John.” Lestrade looks at both of them, shoulders straight, gaze even. “I should have known. The fact that an obvious homicide was ignored like this is reprehensible. And I am deeply sorry. Sherlock, I promise you I will do everything I can to make this right, and to try to keep it from ever happening again.”

Chapter Notes

A million thanks to eternally gorgeous and infinitely talented authors allonsys_girl and bittergreens.

John makes tea as Sherlock drags an extra chair out of the kitchen for the visitors, an unprecedented show of concern.

It takes only half a moment of contemplation—and the thought of poor Rocco’s exhausted, grief-stricken eyes—for John to dig the packet of chocolate biscuits out of the shopping bags still on the floor and put a few on a plate to go with the tea. He digs out the little used tea tray, arranges the milk and sugar and the plate of biscuits, and carries the refreshments into the sitting room.

Atherton sits stiffly upright in his chair, his veined, rough-looking hands folded neatly in his lap. John hands a mug to the gentleman, who accepts it with a small nod.

The younger man is hunched over in his seat while holding on to his own arms, an unconscious attempt at self-protection John has seen many times before.

John places a gentle hand on this shoulder. The young man startles a bit, flicking his sad grey eyes up at John.

“Rocco,” John says kindly. “How do you take it?”
“Milk and one sugar.” He exhales, straightens his spine, accepts the mug. “Thank you, sir.”

“John is just fine, mate,” he replies, settling into his own chair.

Sherlock leans forward, hands on thighs. “Now. Start from the beginning and tell me everything. Be concise.”

Rocco takes a swallow of tea, looks into his mug, then up at Sherlock. His eyes are hollow with grief but he regards the two of them evenly, a man grieving but still uncowed.

John likes him.

“Travis was my best mate,” Rocco begins. “He hadn’t been on the streets that long when I met him...three or four months is all. His mum kicked him out when he started acting odd, having hallucinations, saying things about aliens and whatnot. She was scared of ‘im. Lots of people was scared of ‘im. But he was sweet. Harmless. He had weird thoughts, sometimes, but Travis would never hurt a soul.

“He was like an open book. Vulnerable. Nasty people would have hurt ‘im, so I let ‘im stay with me. I had a decent little setup, and...and I shared it with ‘im. We just, well, we clicked. We were a team. Don’t know why. Never felt like that before, not about no one.

“He’d have times when he was almost normal. Lucid periods, I guess. We’d talk about getting our act together, about getting off the street. Me getting clean. He hated that I did drugs. His mum was religious, one of the sort who don’t believe in medicine. And he was the same way, called medicine poison, said it was all about mind control and the government. But I know about schizophrenia, alright? I knew if he got treatment he could have a better life, and he’d never get the help he needed living under a bridge.’

John’s eyebrow ticks upward just a fraction in surprise; Rocco catches John’s look and smiles, a thin rueful curve of his lips. “I’m not an idiot, sir. I wanted to be a doctor, once. A drug problem and brains aren’t mutually exclusive, are they?”

“No, I know that,” John says, abashed, willing himself to not glance at Sherlock. “Apologies.”

“Accepted.” Rocco takes another sip of his tea. “Anyways, he was why I got clean, finally. He couldn’t take care of himself cos his brain didn’t work right, and I was just throwing mine away on drugs. He couldn’t get better to help himself, but I could, so I did. Wouldn’t do it for myself, would I, but I did it for him.” Unshed tears shine in the young man’s eyes; he pinches the bridge of his nose, shakes his head before he continues. “Got some help from Mr. Atherton, got clean. He helped me get the internship at the centre. I’ve got a room there now, but I’m not allowed to share it. I was saving up for a proper flat, so me an’ Travis could settle down, and he could maybe get help. Maybe get better.” Rocco sighs and it comes out thick and choked, almost a sob. “Ain’t gonna happen now, is it?”

“Rocco,” Sherlock says, in a kinder voice that John has ever heard him use with a client. “I know you’ve suffered a loss, and I know you wish to talk about it. But you need to get to the point now.”

Rocco’s eye widen fractionally, but he nods. “Travis told me he heard about these blokes going around giving out hot meals, saying they had farm work, somewhere up North. I told ‘im to be careful. Told ‘im it sounded too good to be true, right? But he was a trusting sort. Like a puppy, really. That boy would follow most anyone who said something nice to ‘im. And then the next time I went to see ‘im, he was gone, and no one knew a thing. He had a phone, I got ‘im a prepaid so I could keep in touch, but he didn’t answer. And then...then Big Joe and Florida--they’re old mates,
they come round to the shelter pretty regular—they came and got me, two days ago. Said they found ‘im—’ at this the tears brimming in Rocco’s eyes spilled over—’They found ‘im in Twickenham, in one of the empty lots behind the stadium. I’d told Mr. Atherton about the situation, and he drove me out to the building, and—and there he was.’

“Can you tell me what he looked like when you found him?” Sherlock asks.

‘He was curled up on his side like he was cold, or he was sleeping, but his eyes were open. No blood, he didn’t look like he was in a fight or nothing. He weren’t wearing his own clothes. he was wearing those trousers nurses and doctors wear—”

“Scrubs?” John asks.

Rocco nods. “The green ones with a drawstring, and a tee shirt, too big for ‘im. He didn’t have no shoes on. He looked like—” He gulps, looks up at Sherlock. “His eyes-- his eyes were bulging out, like he was scared.”

“Rocco,” John says gently. “That doesn’t mean he was afraid. Have you heard of rigor mortis?”

Rocco nods. “After you die, the muscles go all stiff.”

John nods. “The muscle contractions can make dead bodies have odd expressions. It doesn’t mean he was frightened or in pain. It doesn’t necessarily mean anything. Alright?”


Sherlock fidgets as they speak, clearly anxious to continue.

“Did you touch anything?” he asks.

“I checked his neck for a pulse, even though I knew he was dead,” Rocco said. “I just...I had to touch ‘im. Just to make sure.”

John feels his heart clench at those words, thinking about holding Sherlock’s wrist, searching for a pulse, hoping desperately against hope.

John breathes out. The moment passes. “And then?” he asks, his voice even.

“And then…” Rocco cuts his eyes to Mr Atherton, who nods just slightly.

“And then I called the police,” Atherton says. “We stayed until they arrived. They spoke to us briefly, but never took official statements. I went down later, tried to to talk to someone—I thought they might take someone older and experienced more seriously—but they just weren’t interested. What they wanted was a nice easy junkie OD, no messy paperwork, get home in time for tea.”

“Indeed,” Sherlock intones flatly.

“I went back yesterday,” Atherton continues, “and made enough of fuss that I got a copy of the coroner’s report.”

“One day later?” asks John in surprise.

Atherton shakes his head. “They didn’t waste a minute in declaring his death as an overdose, yet there was no toxicology report. No inquest. A single needle mark to the right arm, and that was enough to chalk it up to drugs and close the book. I tried to talk to the police again, explain my concerns, but they pushed me aside.” He chuckles without humour. “Told me I was blinded by my
idealism. What rubbish. It’s not my idealism that made them sweep Travis McGinty’s death under the rug so no one had to miss the match."

“The report says he overdosed,” Rocco broke in, “but Travis would never, ever do IV drugs, Mr Holmes. I swear on my life. He was terrified of drugs. His fear of drugs is what sent him to the streets. He would never, not in a million years.”

“Where is Travis’s body now?” John asks.

“He’s at a funeral home in Hounslow,” Atherton replies. “A dubious little place, has a contract for handling unclaimed bodies for the city--they sent his body there before the day was out. I phoned them this morning to let the know I planned to claim him, and they informed me they will be cremating him in 24 hours unless I make other plans.”

“I doubt they’ll even wait that long,” Sherlock observes.

Atherton nods in resigned agreement.

Sherlock shifts in his chair, steeples his fingers under his chin. “You said you had heard others speak of similar occurrences.”

“I’d noticed several regulars to our soup kitchen haven’t been coming around lately. It’s a transient population, to be sure, but you still get to know some faces. I asked after them a bit, and was told they went with a man who offered them hot meals and farm work up in Yorkshire.”

“I know a bloke who almost went with them,” Rocco offered. “He said a man in a white van was asking weird questions and taking a blood test where they stick your finger. He got scared and left.”

Sherlock is silent for moment in contemplation, then stands, smoothing the creases in his trousers. “John, you and I will go the mortuary to examine Travis’s body. Mr Atherton, Rocco, I want you to go back to the shelter.”

“I want to help, sir,” Rocco says, voice rough, “Please.”

Sherlock nods. “And you will. Talk to people. See if you can find anyone willing to go on record about the man in the white van.” He looks sharply at the pale young man. “Don’t go out in the streets, though. We don’t know how dangerous this mysterious man is, and I’ll not chance your safety.”

Rocco straightens, nods. “Yes, sir.”

Sherlock’s lips twitch into an approximation of a smile, and it’s the real thing, not the fake put-on he sometimes mimes to put clients at ease. “Please, call me Sherlock.”

“All right, sir,” Rocco answers, then blushes. “I mean…”

“It’s fine,” Sherlock says dismissively, turning to Atherton. “You have the address of the funeral home, I hope.”

Atherton fumbles for his wallet, pulls out a battered business card, hands it to Sherlock.

“Mr Holmes, sir,” he says, sounding hesitant. “We’ve not discussed the small matter of payment.”

Sherlock waves a hand at him. “Don’t be ridiculous. You haven’t the means, and I wouldn’t dream of taking it. Now, if you’d be so kind as to do as I ask, and quickly. The time for sitting and drinking
tea is over. There is a great deal of work to be done.”

***

In the cab, John turns to Sherlock and asks the question that has been on his mind since Mr Atherton appeared in their doorway.

“This case is a four,” John observes.

"Barely," Sherlock replies dryly.

“But you’re taking it anyway.”

Sherlock is silent for a moment as he gathers his thoughts. When he speaks again his voice is low, serious.

“Most people who are homeless become that way through dependency problems or mental health issues, or some combination of both.”

“I know that.”

“I’m a rude, arrogant arsehole, I admit, but even so I’m not entirely blind to my privilege. An IV drug user with emotional difficulties and terrible social skills...John, where would I be if I was someone other than who I am?”

John looks away, picks a piece of imaginary lint off his trousers, his heart shying away from this difficult truth. “You don’t know that for certain.”

“Yes I do. And so do you.” Sherlock turns his face to the window and speaks softly, almost to himself. “It stands to reason, then, that I have a certain kind of special regard for those who are outcasts, who struggle to survive on the very edges of society.” He leans his forehead on the glass. “There but for the grace of God,” he murmurs with a wry almost-grin. “And of course, bloody Mycroft Holmes. It doesn’t take a genius to see that I wouldn’t resent him so much if I wasn’t so hopelessly in his debt.”

John can’t argue with the truth of that statement, so he settles for cupping his fingers around Sherlock’s bony knee and giving a single, reassuring squeeze. He leaves his hand there, and Sherlock neither protests nor pulls away.

***

Once inside the dreary, threadbare funeral home, Sherlock easily blusters his way past the elderly secretary and the stuttering, hand-wringing mortuary technician in a cheap shiny suit, flashing a stolen badge and referring to John as a “private pathology consultant” as he demands access to Travis McGinty’s body.

“You got here in the nick of time, didn’t you,’ says the technician as they follow him down a wood-paneled hallway reeking of disinfectant. “About to pop him into the oven, I was.”

“Of course. I can’t imagine you would waste one extra second on a corpse you’re disposing of under city contract,” murmurs Sherlock dispassionately.

The technician narrows his eyes and looks back at Sherlock, clearly uncertain if he is being insulted or not. Sherlock’s cold silver eyes give nothing away, however and the man wisely decides to holds his tongue.
“Here he is,” the technician says as he opens a door, flicks on an overhead light and pulls the draped sheet from the body.

Travis looks tiny and frail on the metal table, as thin and greyish white as a tattered sheet of newsprint.

Sherlock leans forward, peering closely at the corpse. “We can only do a cursory examination here, obviously. If we find evidence indicating homicide, we’ll call Lestrade and have the body taken to Bart’s for a full autopsy.”

John nods, scanning the coroner’s report before setting it aside. Sherlock is already examining the toes, visibly crusted with dark soil.

“Traces of dirt and tar on his feet,” he says, “indicating he was traveling barefoot outdoors.”

John nods, looking closely at the man’s hair, ears, face. “No bruising or lacerations on the head or neck...no unusual marks to torso.” He moves to the arms, turning them palm up. “No track marks. Single venipuncture on right arm, as the report states. But...Sherlock. Come take a look at this.”

Sherlock pulls out his magnifying glass and bends over the body, peers at where John points, at the small round mark on the inside of Travis’s elbow.

"Large bore needle," Sherlock observes. "I'd say 18 gauge." He looks up at John. "That's not an injection. That's a..." he trails off, his brow creasing momentarily in thought. His pale eyes widen suddenly with the light of new understanding as he straightens, takes a step back.

"John. Look at the body."

John cocks his head quizzically. "I am looking at the body."

"You're examining him inch by inch. Step back and look at all of him. Really look."

John does as Sherlock asks, stepping back so he can look at all of Travis McGinty. Frail. Malnourished. Skin colour the unmistakable waxy grey of death--

Wait.

He had been so focused on the details he hadn't seen what should have been immediately, stupendously obvious.

“Where is the lividity?” John lifts the slack limbs with gloved fingers, looking for the distinctive pooling of blood. There are a few scattered areas of mottled purple on his right hip and shoulder, but none of the large dark purple-red areas that should be present at this stage post-mortem.

The conclusion makes little logical sense, but the evidence is undeniable.

"Sherlock. Where is his blood?"

"Someone took it," Sherlock straightens, looks John with his pleased, now you’re getting it expression.

“But...why?”

“I don’t know, but I certainly intend to find out,” Sherlock answers crisply, snapping off his rubber gloves. "Phone Lestrade. Tell him his incompetent farce of a police force has deliberately ignored a screamingly obvious homicide. Have him meet us at the crime scene. It hasn’t rained in four days,
there may still be evidence to be found. This body needs to go to Bart’s, I want Molly on the
autopsy, no one else will do. And you--” He wheels to face the mortuary assistant, his coat flaring
dramatically. “Did you morons bin the clothes he came in with?”

“No, sir. Well, not yet. They’re in a bag somewhere in the temporary--”

“Don’t care. Find them. Don’t take them out of the bag--I’m certain they’re horribly contaminated,
but let’s not make it worse by handling them all over again. And most important--” He draws himself
up to his full height, somehow seeming ten feet tall as he looms over the terrified assistant. "You will
not touch this body again before the police arrive, or I will have you charged as an accessory after
the fact and you will go to prison. Is that clear?"

“Yes, sir,” the assistant squeaks, but Sherlock has already moved on. “Come along, John. I’d like to
get to Twickenham while the light is still good.”

***

Lestrade is waiting for them when they arrive at the crumbling abandoned building in Twickenham.

“I’ve had McGinty’s body sent to Bart’s,” he begins. “Molly knows this is top priority, she started
the autopsy immediately. I’ve also sent officers to the shelter to interview Rocco Napolitano and
Timothy Atherton. Hopefully they’ll--”

“You turned them away,” hisses Sherlock, crowding close into Lestrade’s personal space. “People
who knew him, cared about him. They knew something terrible had happened, they came to you
asking for help, and you turned them away.”

“Sherlock,” John says, warningly. “Lestrade is not the entirety of New Scotland Yard. He had no
idea--”

“Well, he should have!” Sherlock snaps. “He never learned of it, but he should have.”

“Sherlock, you can’t blame Lestrade for something he never even--’

“He’s right, John.” Lestrade looks at both of them, shoulders straight, gaze even. “I should have
known. The fact that an obvious homicide was ignored like this is reprehensible. And I am deeply
sorry. Sherlock, I promise you I will do everything I can to make this right, and to try to keep it from
ever happening again.”

“You can’t promise that,” Sherlock says.

“Yes I can. I do. Other people may think that the murder of a homeless man isn’t worth their time,
but I do, Sherlock, you know I do and I will make this right. You have my word.”

John has to admit, Lestrade knows just how to deal with Sherlock in high dudgeon; his calm
acknowledgement of responsibility effectively negates his burgeoning anger, visibly takes the wind
out of his sails. Sherlock breathes in deeply, exhales, the tension in his shoulders unwinding just a
fraction. He inclines his head, just the merest suggestion of a nod.

“Very well, then. We will deal with the larger picture later. For the moment, let’s focus on what
happened to Travis.”

“Absolutely,” Lestrade agrees. “Lead the way, Sherlock.”

The abandoned building has little to offer them in the way of clues; over the space of just two days
many others have come and gone, for shelter or privacy or a place to drink or smoke or do God knows what, and any useful evidence has long since been erased.

Except for one crucial detail: there are no tire tracks to be found anywhere, in either the weedy lot or the gravelly dirt around the building.

“He came here under his own power,” Sherlock murmurs, “barefoot, missing most of his blood volume. So wherever he came from isn’t far--a mile, perhaps two. He staggered here, cold, weak. He knew this building, knew it offered some protection from the elements. He was beyond exhausted. He laid down to rest for a minute--”

“And never got up,” supplies Lestrade. “Poor bastard.”

“He died alone and cold,” Sherlock says, low and serious. “And none of your people cared enough to find out what happened to him.”

Lestrade has the good grace to look away, ashamed.

“I need to get to Bart’s,” Sherlock says. “Molly should have some preliminary autopsy results by now.”

“I can give you a lift,” Lestrade offers.

“You have work of your own to do,” Sherlock demurs. “And I absolutely do not want to keep you from playing catch up.”

John knows the true reason for Sherlock’s refusal is the need to decompress quietly for a few moments, unwind the tangle of thoughts and emotions surrounding this case, reclaim his cool objectivity in private so he can do his job well. Lestrade knows it too, or at least intuits it somewhat, for he excuses himself graciously, leaving them to catch a cab on the high road.

In the cab, Sherlock is silent, gazing unseeing out the window as the buildings slide past. John reaches for his gloved hand, gives it a brief squeeze.

“Others have let him down, but you’re not,” he says, low and quiet. “You care about what happened to him. I know it feels like it’s making things harder, like it’s tangling you up, but it’s what will push you to solve this case. It is an advantage, this time.”

Sherlock doesn’t answer, but his long fingers curl around John’s and hold on to them for the rest of the trip.

***

“Cardiac arrest due to severe hypovolemia,” Molly tells them. “He was missing somewhere between forty and fifty percent of his blood volume. He was also dehydrated and malnourished, which didn’t help. He had no food at all in his stomach and only a trace of fecal matter in his intestines. He hadn’t eaten for days.”

“Jesus,” John murmurs.

“No signs of forcible restraint or struggle, though,” Sherlock says, contemplative. “One has to presume he was being held against his will, possibly through mental coercion or…” he trails off pale eyes focused on the far wall.

“Atherton confirmed that five more men that he knew personally have gone missing over the past
eight weeks. All between the ages of eighteen and forty-five, all in relatively good health.” He turns to John. “The fiction of farm work in Yorkshire was a cover to explain the mens’ disappearances, but a flimsy one. If these men are still alive, they are here, in London, and they are close. Travis was barefoot, starved and missing half his blood. He traveled under his own power, but he wouldn’t have made it far before he collapsed.” Sherlock is up pacing now, his thoughts cascading, almost visible around him as he strides and turns. “These men are being held against their will. I’m sure of it. Drugged into submission. Travis, already pathologically afraid of drugs, somehow became aware of the drugging--his heightened paranoia serving him well, for once.”

“That’s why he wasn’t eating or drinking,” says Molly. “Trying to avoid the drugs.”

“And he succeeded,” says Sherlock. “At least well enough to be able to formulate an escape.”

“So we have a working theory on the how,” says John. “But we still don’t know where. Or why? Why take homeless men, imprison them, and steal their blood?”

“Homeless men, healthy, between eighteen and forty-five,” Sherlock says. “What do they have of value that someone wants, wants enough to kidnap and drug them? Narrow it down. Not money or material possessions, not their intellect. Their bodies.” He stops pacing and turns to John. “Their bodies, John.”


“That’s my top theory. Of what sort, I’m not yet certain. Something highly unethical and covert, obviously, but I don’t think whoever did this to him was actually trying to kill him. Travis’s blood loss was survivable in and of itself, if not for the strenuous activity and dehydration. Which means--”

“--the other missing men could still be alive,” John finishes.

“Precisely. So right this moment, the why is less important than the where. Time is of the essence,” Sherlock takes off his jacket, hands it to John, rolls up his sleeves. “Travis was being held close by. If we can learn where, we may be able to save them. I need to start analysis on the traces of mud found on his feet, that’s our best bet at the moment. Molly, I need fingernail scrapings and hair samples ASAP. John, I need you to do some legwork. Get me a list of every business tenant in a two-mile radius of where he was found, we can begin to narrow down the list of possible locations where Travis was being held. Also check in with Lestrade, see if his team of imbeciles have managed to trip over anything of importance.”

“Got it,” John says. He moves closer to Sherlock, places a hand on his forearm. “Will you also let me get you something to eat and maybe some coffee? You haven’t eaten since last night. You have a ton of work ahead of you and you need fuel.”

Sherlock is about to shake him off, but John’s eyes catch his and he stops, reconsideres. “All right,” he sighs in acquiescence. “Just coffee and some biscuits.”

“Thank you, love,” John murmurs, raising up on his toes to kiss him.

Sherlock says nothing but stands still for a moment, allows John to peck his cheek before he turns away, muttering something to himself about mass spectrometry.

As John heads toward the lab doors, he catches Molly’s shocked and delighted expression, and despite the deadly seriousness of the case, he can’t help but give her a wink and a small, pleased grin.

If the situation they found themselves in wasn’t so grim, John is pretty sure Molly would give him a double thumbs-up in return.
John knows how much he owes Molly for being a better person than he could ever be, the kind of person who puts the happiness of someone she loves above her own; he doesn’t know if he can ever convey the enormity of his gratitude, but he resolves to try, somehow, as soon as this case is solved.

***

John wakes up to Sherlock’s hand gently shaking his shoulder and the embarrassing wetness of a puddle of drool where his cheek rests against the lab table.

“Go home, John.”

“Wha-what time is it?” John asks blearily.

“Sometime after four. Please go home and go to bed.”

“No. I’m here to help.” Throughout the night John had methodically plowed through a list of the hundreds of commercial locations within two miles of the crime scene, fetched printouts, brought coffee and crisps, made phone calls and sent texts, and occasionally just sat and listened to Sherlock think aloud, a process that sometimes felt pointless to John but Sherlock found an invaluable aid in forming the deductive connections that propelled him forward.

“You’re no use to me collapsed face-down on the tabletop.” The words could be construed as harsh, if it weren’t for the soft, fond tone in which Sherlock says them.

John scrubs wearily at his face. “I’m not collapsed.”

“You are,” Sherlock says, voice not unkind but brooking no argument. “I’ve got some interesting preliminary results on the analysis of the clothing Travis was wearing at the time of his death, but it’s going to take several more hours to confirm my findings. The best way for you to help me now is to get some rest so you’re useful to me tomorrow. I’ve already called a cab.”

“Are you sure?” John asks. He hates the idea of leaving, of Sherlock working alone, but he is undeniably exhausted.

“I’m certain. Go get some sleep.”

John nods and struggles blearily to his feet, picking his jacket up from where it lay across the tabletop and shrugging one arm into a sleeve. Long fingers grasp the shoulders of his jacket, making it much easier for John to get his other arm situated. Sherlock briefly smooths the black fabric over the slope of his shoulders, then gently turns John to face him. One eyebrow quirks upward as the barest ghost of a smile crosses Sherlock’s face.

“Can I have a kiss?” he asks softly, verging on shy.

“Any time,” John murmurs, raising himself up on his toes to give Sherlock a brief but affectionate peck on the lips. “Honestly? I did not think you’d be the demonstrative type.”

“Frankly, neither did I. Interesting.” Sherlock kisses him once more. “Go home now. You’ve become a distraction.”

“Yes, dear.” John gives him a small, fond smile before turning to leave.

***

A little before ten the next morning, John is awake and making toast when Sherlock arrives back
home with a manila folder full of printouts in his hand. He looks more than a little worse for wear, his clothes rumpled, his hair simultaneously flat and frizzy, and his jaw shaded with surprisingly ginger stubble.

He crosses the kitchen without a word of greeting and drops the folder on the table.

“Good morning, Sher-” John begins before he realises he’s talking to an empty room. He sighs and butters toast as drawers rattle open and shut in the bedroom, hangers rattle and clang in the armoire, then the bathroom door slams.

Sherlock’s still on the case then, and not slowing down any time soon. He got a good night’s sleep two days ago, he’s likely good for three more, but John decides he’ll try to at least get some breakfast in him anyway. He pulls eggs and cheddar out of the fridge and a frying pan out of the cabinet.

He is breaking eggs into the hot pan when he senses Sherlock hovering in the doorway leading to the bedroom.

“John,” Sherlock says in a low raspy grumble, and John immediately registers that his voice is somehow...changed.

He looks up from the pan to see someone he hasn’t encountered since late last summer.

Sherlock is kitted out in scuffed, fraying trainers, baggy tracksuit bottoms, a collared knit shirt the charity shop wouldn’t touch with a ten-foot pole, and a stained grey hoodie. More fundamental than the change of clothes, though, is how Sherlock himself is different. His bright eyes are dark with resentment, and his posture is both slouchy and defiant.

John takes a deep breath. He had forgotten how, despite the anger and frustration and sadness he felt in the wake of Sherlock’s lapse into using, he found his Shezza persona dirty and disheveled and dangerous, but yet strangely and profoundly...attractive.

He’s undeniably aroused, but also pissed off at what Sherlock obviously has in mind.

“What,” John says, shockingly articulate as usual. “No.”

“It’s the quickest way to get the information I need,” Sherlock says.

John calmly turns to the stove, flips the eggs, adds salt. “Find another dirty tee shirt then, cos I’m going with you.”

“You’re not,” Sherlock says, apologetic but firm. “I know these people. I know how to blend in. You don’t. You have many valuable skills, John, but undercover work is not one of them.”

Anger flares bright and hot at the thought of Sherlock running off without him, of being left behind again. John breathes out through his nose, turns off the hob, slides the eggs on to a plate. He turns, glares at Sherlock, and slams the plate down on the table.

‘I made you eggs,” he says, deadly calm.

“I’m not hungry, and I have to--”

“Eat the fucking eggs, Sherlock.”

His face must be terrifying, because Sherlock sits down and picks up a fork, cuts a piece of fried egg and puts it in his mouth. John sits in the other kitchen chair, pinches the bridge of his nose and shakes
“I’m not angry,” John says. “But--”

“Yes you are,” Sherlock says. “Why will you never admit it?”

“Okay. I’m angry. But I’m not about to tell you what you can and can’t do.” John sighs. “Can we talk about this first, before you go swanning off?”

Sherlock chews, swallows. Puts the fork down. “The homeless population is very closed off, highly suspicious of outsiders, and for very good reasons. They consider the police the enemy. They won’t talk to the police, but they will talk to me. The quickest way to get the information I need is to go to the source, and time is of the essence if we hope to find these men alive.”

John exhales, his anger evaporating. He picks up the fork, cuts a piece of fried egg, pops it in his mouth. “What you’re saying is right and valid. I just really hate the idea of you going off on your own, and me sitting here twiddling my thumbs.”

“You won’t be.” Sherlock picks up the folder, puts it in front of John, takes the fork from him and eats another bite of egg. “I completed the analysis of the clothes Travis was found in. There are chemical traces, an unusual combination of compounds that I’ve not seen before on clothing. I need you to research them, see if you can make some sense of it.” He puts down the fork, picks up John’s coffee cup and takes a swallow. “I’m just gathering information. I know these people, they know me. There’s no danger, I promise.”

“What if these men are out there right now trying to find new test subjects?” John asks. “What are you going to do?”

Sherlock blinks and glances away briefly, his classic tell of dishonesty. “If they have any brains at all, they’ll be lying low in the wake of McGinty’s disappearance. It’s highly unlikely they’ll be stupid enough to try to take anyone else for quite a while.”

“See,” John points out, “not really answering my question, are you.”

Sherlock huffs out a breath, quirks an eyebrow and nods in acknowledgment of John’s perceptiveness, but says nothing.


Sherlock brings his eyes back to John’s face, looks at him steadily. “Yes,” he answers simply.

“Does Lestrade know any of this?”

“No. And you’re not to tell him. He’d insist it’s too dangerous, want to come charging in--”

“Because he’s a rational human being!” John snaps. “You want to go looking for the kidnappers, offering yourself as bait, alone, without any backup--”

At that moment the front door opens, and heavy boots cross the threshold.

“Well,” says Sherlock, “Not exactly alone.”

A rangy, distinctly grime-looking young man suddenly looms in the doorway. “Morning, gentlemen.”

John’s eyebrows nearly disappear into his forehead. “Oh, so I can’t come with you, but Billy fucking
“Wiggins is welcome to tag along?”

“Bit of a domestic, then,” Wiggins observes. “I’ll be waiting for you downstairs, Mr. Holmes.” He disappears, but after a moment his ratty dishwater head reappears in the doorway. “Begging your pardons, but I deduce congratulations are in order.”

“Maybe not after this conversation,” John growls, low and dangerous.

“Wiggins,” Sherlock says warningly.

“Sorry, sir. Leaving now, sir.” His head disappears, and his clomping footsteps descend the stairway.

Sherlock returns his attention to John. “I know you’re angry. But this is the fastest way to get the information we need. We can save these lives, John. If that means making you angry, then I’ll pay that price.”

John looks away, rubbing his jaw. When he speaks again, his tone is less strident, more resigned. “Jesus, Sherlock. I’m worried, can’t you see that? I hate the idea of you putting yourself in danger without me there to back you up. If someone comes after you, what’s Wiggins gonna do? Annoy them to death?”

“If I take you with me,” Sherlock counters, “every single source I have will disappear. You practically radiate Queen and country, law and order. Not that it’s necessarily true, but that’s the impression you give off, and that’s not going to work for this endeavour. Can you stop being pissed off long enough to see that?”

John considers for long moment, then finally shrugs and sighs in pained assent.

“Fine. Fine. If you must. But I don’t like it.”

“I am exquisitely aware.”

“I want you to call me every half hour.”

“Hour.”

John presses his thin lips together so hard they practically disappear. “Half hour. And I want a code that means everything’s okay, no one’s holding a knife to your throat or got you trussed up in the back of a van.”

Now it’s Sherlock’s turn to sigh in exasperation. “All right. Fine. What’s the code phrase?”

“‘I’m a sodding idiot.’ Say it back to me.”

“Really, John? This is terribly juvenile.”

“Say it back, you wanker.”

Sherlock rolls his eyes, but the corner of his mouth twitches. “I’m a sodding idiot.”

“Yes, you are,” John replies, and stands up, holding out his hand to Sherlock. “Now get out of here before I knock you in the head to keep you from leaving.”

Sherlock gives the tiniest of grins as he takes the offered hand and rises, loops an arm around John’s waist, and pulls him close.
“I’m still pissed off,” John tells him, but it’s fonder, without heat.

“I know,” Sherlock says, and presses his lips to John’s forehead.

John sighs in defeat and allows himself to relax just fractionally into Sherlock’s embrace.

“You like me dressed like this,” Sherlock rumbles, amused.

“What gave me away?”

“The erection, mostly.”

“Top notch detective work, Mr Holmes.”

“I do have an international reputation.”


“That you’re turned on by me dressed as a ratty homeless drug addict?” Sherlock chuckles, unable to keep the smirk off his face. “Yes. Very disturbing. In fact, I think we need to explore this topic at a later date. Thoroughly and in great detail.”

“I agree,” John murmurs, twisting his fingers in Shezza’s ratty, tangled curls and pulling him down for a kiss. A moment later he breaks away, pulling a face. “You could have brushed your teeth, though.”

“Verisimilitude, John.” Sherlock rumbles. John huffs a breath of laughter, then rests his forehead briefly on Sherlock’s chest.

“Be safe, okay?” John says quietly. “And if you can’t be safe, then be brilliant.”

“That I can promise,” Sherlock says, placing a final kiss to the top of John’s head and then he’s gone, size thirteen trainers pounding down the stairs; even his steps sound different in disguise, more thudding, less graceful.

“And if you do get yourself in trouble,” John says to an empty flat, “I’m gonna have to show up to drag your sorry arse out of it, as usual. Don’t think I don’t know that.”

***

Sherlock is true to his word; every thirty minutes he phones John and mumbles “I’m a sodding idiot.” Most times he rings off immediately; once or twice they converse briefly, Sherlock assuring John he’s safe and on the trail of valuable information.

Throughout the afternoon John is at his laptop, researching the possible sources of the trace compounds found on Travis’ clothing. Potassium, a common mineral. Mannitol, a sugar alcohol. Allopurinal, used to dissolve uric acid crystals. Adenosine, used to slow a fast heart rate. His searches turn up nothing he didn’t already know; all common compounds, all conceivably of use in medical testing of one sort or another.

Something is niggling at him, though. John has that impression of something catching on a sharp snag in his mind, that unmistakable feeling that something is in front of him, something huge, something right there that he’s not seeing. He finds himself appreciating how important his usual role really is, how valuable he is just being a sounding board for Sherlock, helping him tease his racing
thoughts apart and weave them back together again, forming the connections and patterns he needs to make his leaps of brilliance.

But right now John’s alone in the flat, with no one there to think out loud to. Well, no one except--

“So Billy,” John says conversationally to the skull, as twilight begins to darken the sitting room windows. “It’s just you and me tonight, mate. Help me out. What am I not seeing here? Common compounds, not restricted, easily available to anyone with Internet access. So where did these traces come from? What do they mean? Do they mean anything at all?”

Step back, Sherlock’s rich baritone murmurs in his head. You’re too close. Don’t look at each individual brushstroke. Take a step back, and really look at the whole picture.


What would those chemicals add up to if you put them all together, into one solution?

He remembers a class from his first year of medical school, about the use of preservative solutions during organ transport.

Organ transport.

The brushstrokes resolve into a painting, and suddenly John sees it, crystal clear and horrifyingly obvious.

“Oh Christ,” John breathes as sick understanding washes over him.

On the heels of that discovery comes another. It’s been thirty-seven minutes since he’s heard from Sherlock. He snatches his phone up with a shaking hand, presses Sherlock’s speed dial as cold sick dread pools in his gut.

Sherlock picks up on the second ring. “Not now,” he whispers hoarsely.

“They’re harvesting organs,” John yells into the phone. “Jesus, Sherlock, they’re harvesting organs, don’t go anywhere with anyone, please--”

But the line has already gone dead.

John phones him again. The line rings four times, then goes directly to voicemail.

“You fucking idiotic bastard,” he breathes, then dials Mycroft with trembling fingers.

Mycroft picks up immediately. “Doctor Watson,” he says smoothly, with just the barest trace of annoyed concern. “What has he done now?”

“I know you have military grade GPS on Sherlock’s phone,” John says tightly.

“You know I can’t possibly speak to --”

“Turn it on NOW, Mycroft, so we can find your brother before he’s cut up and sold overseas for parts.”
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

John ends the call and tries Sherlock’s phone again, hoping against all probability that he will pick up and proclaim John prone to hilarious overreaction.

As he knew it would, the call goes directly to voicemail yet again, making John curse and smack the doorframe in frightened frustration.

“I am going to find you,” John growls into the empty sitting room. “Just for the exquisite pleasure of strangling you myself.”

The skull says nothing in reply, but the hollow eye sockets seem to be watching him, the toothy grin smirking at the empty bluster John uses to hide his fear.

“Of course I’m not going to kill him,” John sighs, peering out the window, willing a long black car to come around the corner. “I’m just very pissed off right now. And scared, yeah. Scared to death, in fact.”

The skull remains silent, but his empty eyes seem to regard John with a softer, almost bemused understanding.

John wonders, briefly, when talking to imaginary companions became a routine part of his life.

Chapter Notes

None of this would have happened if not for allonsys_girl and bittergreens.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I’m going to assume that’s not some sort of metaphor,” Mycroft replies.

“He’s on a case,” John explains. “He went after suspected kidnappers, they’re harvesting organs for the black market, and I’m almost certain they’ve got him.”

“Is that all? Sounds like another Monday afternoon at Baker Street to me.”

“Mycroft, this is dead fucking serious,” John snaps, and something in his tone brings Mycroft up short for a moment.

“And you’re not with him,” Mycroft points out. John doesn’t miss the accusatory tone.

“Not my choice, and also not the point.”

There is a rustle as Mycroft covers the phone with his hand; John hears him give muffled orders in what sounds like Russian, then return to the phone. “I’ve activated the pinpoint GPS tracking on
Sherlock’s phone,” he says crisply. “I’m in Kiev at the moment, so unfortunately I cannot assist you in person. I’ll have all relevant data sent to Gregory Lestrade, and there will be a car waiting for you within ten minutes to take you to New Scotland Yard. Now if you’ll excuse me, I’m a bit indisposed at the moment. I’m trying to prevent hostilities in Crimea from going nuclear. That last part, by the way, is not public knowledge.”

“I could care less about the fucking Crimea right now,” John tells him honestly.

“Of course not.” Mycroft pauses for a second, takes an audible breath. When he speaks again his voice is a touch warmer, more personal. “John, I wouldn’t leave this in your hands if I wasn’t certain you will move heaven and earth to keep my brother from coming to harm.”

Sherlock’s brother has never before voiced this level of regard, and John is speechless for a moment.

“Be in touch,” Mycroft says, and rings off.

The moment John ends the call his phone chimes again with an unknown number. Anxiety pools in his belly. He takes a deep breath and presses the call button.

“Who is this?” he says in his calmest, most authoritative voice.

“It’s Wiggins, sir.”

Relief and annoyance flood through him, an odd, confusing mix of emotions.

“Jesus Christ, Billy,” he barks. “What the hell happened? You were supposed to be watching him!”

“I was working with ‘im, not watching ‘im!” Wiggins snaps. “Begging your pardon, but Sherlock Holmes ain’t a toddler, sir.”

“You don’t think so?” John huffs a short, humourless bark of angry laughter, then realises he’s taking his anger and worry out on the wrong person. He inhales through his nose, exhales. Closes his eyes. “Sorry. I’m upset.”


“Did you see who he left with?”

“I only caught a glimpse, sir.”

“All right.” John takes another deep, calming breath. “I’m on my way to Scotland Yard right now. Get yourself there, quickly. Ask for DI Lestrade.”

“I’m already gone, sir.”

John ends the call and tries Sherlock’s phone again, hoping against all probability that he will pick up and proclaim John prone to hilarious overreaction.

As he knew it would, the call goes directly to voicemail yet again, making John curse and smack the doorframe in frightened frustration.

“I am going to find you,” John growls into the empty sitting room. “Just for the exquisite pleasure of strangling you myself.”

The skull says nothing in reply, but the hollow eye sockets seem to be watching him, the toothy grin smirking at the empty bluster John uses to hide his fear.
“Of course I’m not going to kill him,” John sighs, peering out the window, willing a long black car to come around the corner. “I’m just very pissed off right now. And scared, yeah. Scared to death, in fact.”

The skull remains silent, but his empty eyes seem to regard John with a softer, almost bemused understanding.

John wonders, briefly, when talking to imaginary companions became a routine part of his life.

Fortunately, he doesn’t have long to consider the question; Mycroft’s inscrutable omnipotence somehow also applies to London traffic, and a black car pulls up to the kerb in front of 221b less than two minutes later. John pulls on his jacket as he jogs down the steps.

Mrs Hudson pops her head out the door of her flat. “Oh, John. I heard you stomping around and sounding worried. What’s Sherlock done now?”

“Gotten himself kidnapped,” John answers shortly, brushing past her.

“What, again?” Mrs Hudson shakes her head. “Well, go find him, dear. “

“Intend to,” John says as he leaves, closing the front door behind him.

***

“Got a fix on the last signal from Sherlock’s iPhone,” Lestrade says to John by way of greeting. “Great Chertsey Road, residential area outside of Feltham. I’ve sent officers over there already.” He looks up at John. He looks even more exhausted than usual, hair rumpled, coat creased. “By the way, the timing is brilliant as usual. Can’t you put a tracking device on him or something?”

“If I could,” answers John, “he wouldn’t be Sherlock Holmes, now would he.”

“Suppose not,” sighs Lestrade.

“How much do you know?” John asks.

The tired detective shakes his head, looks up to the heavens as if seeking a divine intercession from the terrible life decisions of Sherlock Holmes.

“I know I’m working the homicide of Travis McGinty,” Lestrade says wearily. “I know I have Sherlock Holmes on record as a private forensic consultant. I know Sherlock has been working some leads on his own without telling me, because that’s what he always does. In addition, I know that fifteen minutes ago Mycroft Holmes gave me the last known location of Sherlock’s phone and told me to stay here and wait for you, and I do what Mycroft Holmes asks because if I don’t I’ll end up working in Animal Control. So, therefore,” he concludes with righteous exasperation, “I know Sherlock did something definitely impulsive and likely dangerous. At the same time, I clearly don’t know a damn thing. So would you be so kind as to enlighten me?”

John lays out Sherlock’s plan and his own discoveries, and Lestrade’s eyes grow wide as he grasps the implications.

“Organ harvesting from transients,” he says, shaking his head as if in disbelief. “Mass murder for profit, right under our noses. This is big. This is huge.”

“Sherlock wasn’t aware of the scope of this when he went out there,” John says. “Neither was I. If I was, I’d never have let him go without me.”
“He’s an idiot,” Lestrade snaps, in worry now rather than frustration. “Going out alone into the homeless camps, looking for some mad scientist mass murderer...”

“He wasn’t alone,” John clarifies. “He took--”

At that moment Lestrade’s desk phone rings. He picks it up, listens. He gives John a quizzical look then answers, “All right. Escort him to my office.”

“Yeah,” John sighs. “He took Wiggins.”

“Who?”

“Hello, gentlemen,” Wiggins says as he ducks into Lestrade’s office. “Detective Inspector,” he says, holding out his hand. “I’ve heard a great deal about you from Mr Holmes. All good, of course.”

“I find that very hard to believe,” says Lestrade dryly. He tilts his head just a tick, narrows his eyes as he shakes the offered hand. “And you are...”

“Bill Wiggins. Heir apparent to Mr Holmes.”

“No,” John says crisply.

“Well, I ‘elp out a bit,” Wiggins amends smoothly.

John cocks an eyebrow, then nods in resigned acceptance.

“Okay,” Lestrade says, carefully neutral but clearly unsure what to make of this ragged young man, gaunt-cheeked and hollow-eyed but obviously bright, his mental acuity almost visibly radiating from him in the same way it does from Sherlock.

John feels simultaneously annoyed, jealous and just a bit grudgingly protective. He makes a sour face. “Wiggins went with Sherlock to help him. Close ties to the homeless community and all that. Apparently, I don’t blend.”

Lestrade tilts his head, shrugs one shoulder. “Well...”

“Yeah, I get it,” John snaps.

“It’s the truth, mate. Sorry.” Lestrade turns to Wiggins. “Where were you when Sherlock was taken?”

“There’s a little park, dunno the name, off Pinkcourt Road in Feltham, near the cemetery. Dirt road runs along one side. I was talking to an old associate, then another bloke came running over says it’s them, it’s them I didn’t realise Mr Holmes had gone with them until after the van went down the road and turned. All this to say, long story short, ‘e ditched me. Deliberate, I’ve no doubt.”

“That sounds like Sherlock,” Lestrade sighs. “Did you get any kind of look at the vehicle?”

“There’s a standard issue white van. Ford Econostar, oh-eight or oh-nine. Rear tag deliberately obscured. Crumpled fender on the back driver’s side, minor accident with a small car, likely a Mini, possibly a Fiat. Traces of green paint visible along the dent.”

“That’s a hell of a glance,” Lestrade says with grudging admiration, and John has to admit to himself that perhaps Wiggins is more useful than he was originally willing to admit.

A uniformed officer pokes her head into Lestrade’s office. “They found the phone, sir. On the side of
the road, smashed. Looks to have been thrown from a vehicle.”

Lestrade nods his thanks, and the officer disappears. “I don’t like the sound of that,” he says. “If Sherlock had deliberately left his phone behind when he left with them, that would be one thing, but it being taken off him and thrown out a window strikes me as more ominous.”

“Do you think whoever he went with knew he was undercover?” John asks.

“It certainly feels off. Possibly they recognized him from the papers?” Lestrade wonders aloud. “Whatever happened, it makes finding Sherlock all the more urgent. But now we have some good leads to go on. Somewhere between the location where Sherlock’s phone was found and the building where Travis McGinty died is where these men are being taken. If we can get that van on CCTV, we can narrow it down even more.”

“What do we do next?” John asks, irritated and anxious, sick to death of sitting around and talking, itching to fly out of the chair and tear apart the city to find Sherlock.

“We get ourselves some coffee, cos we got we got a night of non-genius, old-fashioned detective work ahead of us.”

***

Four hours later, assisted by Billy Wiggins’ not-inconsiderable deductive talents and a couple of clear snaps of the dented van on CCTV, they’ve managed to establish likely parameters and locations. Not retail, not a restaurant, considerable square footage, using vans for delivery or transport—as they narrow the scope they are able to winnow probable locations down to forty-five businesses.

“We’re taking huge logical leaps here,” John grumbles, pacing the length of the conference room like a caged animal, feeling like he’s letting Sherlock down by not being out there, right now, searching for him.

“We have to have faith we’re going in the right direction,” Lestrade says, taking a sip of long-cold coffee. “Or we’ll get ourselves hopelessly in the weeds before we know it. And Jesus, mate, can you sit the hell down? You’re making me crazy.”

John sighs, sagging heavily into the cheap blue chair. He rubs his eyes, tries to push down the sick worry clawing at his chest. Hours now they’ve been at this, and they don’t seem any closer to finding answers then they were when they started. He’s used to working with a genius, and he’s come to take astonishing observations and amazing deductions for granted. Compared to Sherlock’s soaring brilliance, this slow, painstaking slog through information feels like trying to walk through treacle in winter.

We’re never going to find him, John thinks with a pang of despair, teetering dangerously close to the edge of hopelessness.

“Hold on,” Lestrade suddenly says, sitting up straight in this chair. “I know this name.” He waves the sheet of paper in his hand at John, places it on the table in front of him. “Kevin Astor Lee. Listed as owner of Medical Linen Supply of London, located in an industrial park in Hounslow. That name. It's crossed my desk before. I know it.”

“So do I.” John’s forehead creases in thought. “But from where?”

Greg is pulling the laptop towards himself when Wiggins’ laconic drawl cuts in. “Christi Monroe. The pop star. He’s ‘er husband. Well, widower now, I suppose.”
“American bloke,” John remembers. “Sleazy as all hell, had to be twenty years older than her. He was her live-in physician and drug dealer as well. They had only been married a couple of months. Sherlock was called in to prove he deliberately gave her the drugs that killed her. He claimed it was an accidental overdose, but Sherlock proved it was murder. He was guilty as sin, and a right bastard, too.”

“He escaped prosecution, though just barely,” Greg reads from the laptop screen. “Her family stopped cooperating with the authorities, possibly in exchange for Lee relinquishing a claim to her estate. He was stripped of his medical license, though.” Greg scrolls down the page. “After that he dropped off the map. No information on his whereabouts from late 2011 until twelve weeks ago, when he obtained--” he picks up and brandishes the sheet of paper-- ”this. A business license for a commercial linen service.”

“What is a disgraced doctor doing running a laundry service?” John muses aloud.

The three of them are silent for a moment, and John would swear he can hear the puzzle pieces click into place.

“It works,” Greg says slowly. “Large building, use of vans, high water and power usage. Able to move bodies without attracting undue attention. "


John raises an eyebrow and nods in agreement. “And a sleazy ex-doctor looking for a payday.” He presses his lips together, straightens. "This is it," he says. "I'm sure of it."

"I agree," Lestrade says. "At any rate, It's enough for a warrant, as far as I'm concerned."

John feels the blood drain out of his face. “A warrant.”

Lestrade looks at him, sympathetic but firm. “John, Sherlock went looking for this bloke. Everything we have says he went with them voluntarily. Not a kidnapping, and beyond that it’s all very circumstantial. We need a warrant.”

“Jesus Christ, Greg. Are you fucking kidding me with this?"

“If we leave right now, we can get the magistrate to sign off in twenty minutes,” Lestrade says apologetically. “I know how badly you want to rush in there and rescue Sherlock. I do. But if Kevin Lee is the monster we think he is, I absolutely don’t want him to skate away on a technicality. Neither does Sherlock. Neither do you.”

John glares at Lestrade, calculating, then sighs in annoyed frustration. “Fine. Fine.” he stands, pulling on his jacket. "Let's go, then."

He follows the DI out of the conference room, as does Wiggins.

"Not you," Lestrade says to Wiggins, almost apologetically. "I'm already breaking ten different critical regulations just letting this one come with me. "

"Understood," Wiggins says amiably. "No offense taken."

"Although," Lestrade says, eyeing the young man speculatively, "if you ever decide you'd like to give police work a try, I might be able to find a place for you here."
'I appreciate the offer, sir," says Wiggins. “But I find freelance work a much better fit for my temperament as well as my, er, hobbies.”

“I can understand that,” replies Lestrade with a smile. “Let me give you a card anyway.”

Digging in his jacket pocket, Greg is momentarily taken up with indulging his odd soft spot for feral geniuses.

John sees his moment of opportunity. He makes a split-second decision--it’s not a decision, really, he will do whatever it takes to find Sherlock without hesitation, without a second thought--and slips away, unnoticed, around the corner and out the door.

***

John has the cabbie drop him off a block away from the building in question.

The exterior is unremarkable, a bleak windowless edifice just outside the airport fence. At the left corner of the building, a single outdoor lamp illuminates the tempered glass door, bisected by a metal crash bar on the inner side. To the right of the door is a large, plainly lettered sign marked “Medical Linen Supply”. The building is surrounded by a woven metal fence, about two and a half meters tall; the sliding gate is open, but a security camera is clearly visible, perched on top of the right gatepost.

John doesn’t know if the camera is live or a decoy but decides to err on the side of caution, slipping away quickly and quietly into the shadows along the far side of the chainlink fence, scaling it--well, not easily, but scaling it nonetheless--and dropping down on the other side, landing on his feet and managing to not break an ankle in the process.

He quietly moves to the back of the building; the few cars in the weed-strewn car lot are bathed in the queasy yellow glare of a large sodium floodlight. No windows, but in the centre of the rear wall are two closed garage bay doors. To his right is a solid metal back door, no window, no hardware except a steel deadbolt and doorknob.

Just on the off chance someone was lazy and luck is on his side, John tries the door.

It’s locked.

He considers a moment, then decides to check the two rolling bay doors as well.

The first one is locked. The second one opens, ungreased gears screeching against rusted metal, agonizingly loud. John opens it just enough to be able to slip under and leaves it open, deciding it is preferable to creating another racket.

The room is dark; he stays crouched close to the bay door until his eyes adjust to the gloom.

There are two white vans, both Ford Econostar as Wiggins said. John creeps around to the other side of the van nearest him; the right side of the rear bumper is crumpled, the panel above it dented. He pulled out his phone and dashes off a quick text to Lestrade.

**Van with damage. It’s the right place.**

In one of his more forward-thinking moments, John turns his mobile to silent before shoving it back into his pocket and scanning the perimeter of the room.

Several large wheeled carts are lined up along the far wall, some empty, some piled high with crumpled linens. Along the closer wall cardboard boxes are stacked haphazardly; the light is too low
to make out the contents.

John crouches in the shadows, heart sounding thunderously loud in his own ears, waiting to see if the screech of the bay door attracted any attention. A minute passes, then another. No one arrives to investigate.

On the far wall, the interior door’s single window admits a square of grayish light. John threads his way carefully between the vans, stands on tiptoe to see if he can glimpse anything through the window. All he can see is a section of grubby, nondescript hallway, lit by fluorescent tubes.

He opens the door carefully, giving thanks for the silence of the hinges. The hall is empty; John slips through the doorway, carefully easing the door shut behind him. There is a murmur of voices coming through an open doorway ahead; John quietly makes his way to the edge of the open doorway, peeks around the corner.

Six military-style cots are arranged in two rows, an army surplus blankets folded on top of each. A row of metal lockers line one wall. At a cafeteria-style table, several disheveled, unkempt men are eating sandwiches and drinking coffee.

John knows it’s unwise to reveal himself, but he’s certain he could take these blokes in a heartbeat. He makes a decision, steps through the doorway.

“Excuse me,” he says, politely but firmly.

Five heads swivel around instantly, eye him wordlessly.

“Have you all been here all night?”

Silence. One man nods his head just a fraction.

“I’m looking for a bloke. Tall, thin, dark hair. Goes by Shezza. You seen him?”

All five men regard him in stony silence.

“Okay, look.” He opens his wallet, pulls out a note, holds it aloft. “There’s a tenner for anyone who’s got information.”

The room is silent for several seconds, until a young, dark-skinned man in a black knit watch cap and tattered parka raises his hand tentatively.

“Yeah, you.” John focuses his attention on the man and realises he’s not much more than a kid; nineteen, perhaps, maybe not even. He softens his voice just a touch. “Come over here and talk to me for a moment, please.”

The kid rises, crosses the room to where John stands. The other men immediately resume ignoring him steadfastly.

“Can you tell me anything at all, mate?” John asks.

“I know him,” the young man replies. “I know what he looks like. And I’ve not seen him here.” He flicks his eyes up to John’s. “Does that count as anything?”

John sighs, but he’s a man of his word, and he hands the tenner over to the kid.

“There’s gonna be trouble, then?” the young man asks in a low conversational tone.
“What makes you say that?”

The kid cocks his head to the right, looks at him, grins. “Where he goes, trouble’s seldom far behind.”

One of Sherlock’s contacts, then, one of the street kids he jokingly refers to as ‘The Irregulars’.

John quirs an eyebrow, nods. “There’s gonna be police all over the place in about ten minutes. Keep your head down, stay out of the way.”

The kid inclines his chin in acknowledgment before turning away to rejoin his mates at the table.

John ducks out of the room, clammy tendrils of fear wrapping around the base of his spine.

Sherlock had not come into this building under his own power, if at all, which likely means someone recognized him. Not good news-- if his cover is blown, the chances of him being used as a hostage, or hurt, or killed outright increase exponentially.

There is a card reader on the wall next to the steel double doors at the end of the hallway. John figures his luck might hold; he pushes at the crash bar. No dice. The door is solidly locked.

He stands there for a moment, wondering what the hell he should do next.

What would Sherlock do if he were here?

*Honestly, John. It’s obvious. If you can’t open the door, get someone else to open it for you.*

John slips back into the common room; the kid in the black cap flicks his eyes upwards, meets his. John nods and tilts his head; *C’mere.*

The kid’s expression grows less defensive, more curious. His eyebrows tick upwards in renewed interest. “What, you a fed or somethin’?” Suddenly, recognition washes over the kid’s face. “I know you,” he murmurs, *sotto voce.* “You’re his bloke. I seen you in the papers.”

John’s eyebrows lift in surprise, then he nods. “I suppose I am. “ He reaches into his inner jacket pocket, pulls out his wallet, takes out a fifty-pound note. “I’ll give you this if you go over there and start a fight.”

The kid eyes him with skepticism, then he nods. “Whaddaya want now?” he snaps suspiciously.

“I need a diversion,” John says.

The kid’s expression grows less defensive, more curious. His eyebrows tick upwards in renewed interest. “What, you a fed or somethin’?” Suddenly, recognition washes over the kid’s face. “I know you,” he murmurs, *sotto voce.* “You’re his bloke. I seen you in the papers.”

John’s eyebrows lift in surprise, then he nods. “I suppose I am. “ He reaches into his inner jacket pocket, pulls out his wallet, takes out a fifty-pound note. “I’ll give you this if you go over there and start a fight.”

The kid eyes him with skepticism, then his features smooth as he shrugs, indifferent. “Whatever, mate. Money’s money, right?”

“Right.” John holds the folded note out to the young man; he adjusts his knit cap, rolls his shoulders and takes the money, deftly sliding the note into his pocket as he strolls back to the table, theatrically nonchalant. In the very next moment he hauls a short, beefy, bearded man up out of his chair and slugs him hard across the face, unprovoked.

“What the FUCK,” the injured man bellows, and chaos erupts.

John flattens himself against the sliver of wall between the lockers and the doorway as he hears the
The man who enters the room is barely dressed any better than the homeless men in the common room; his jumper and jeans perhaps a shade cleaner, and he’s wearing a key card on a white lanyard around his neck. He doesn’t take any notice of John; from his shambling gait and distinctive sour aroma John is almost certain the man fails to see him because he’s currently high as hell on heroin.

“Oi, you filthy minging bastards,” he groans, more annoyed than truly angry, wading into the melee in the centre of the room, never even noticing the small blond man as he slips out of the room, barely making it through the closing double doors in one piece.

On the other side of the door, John gives himself a moment to calm his galloping heart rate, then he can’t help but grin to himself briefly. Bloody audacious maneuver, and one he didn’t really expect to work. He thinks briefly of the drug-addled guard/minder/whatever, wondering what the hell kind of operation he and Sherlock have gotten themselves mixed up in.

No time for ruminations. He needs to find Sherlock, and quickly. He pushes himself up to standing and looks around.

The hallway in front of him is dim and cluttered, boxes and bags of rubbish lit only by the creepy reddish glow of exit signs and fire alarms.

Knowing he’s got little time to waste, John turns the knob on the next door he finds.

The first room is stacked floor to ceiling with boxed medical supplies, scalpels and hemostats, bags of normal saline, and the like. He closes the door and proceeds to the next.

In the next there are two hospital beds. One holds a burly man with a long, unkempt ginger beard and one contains a scrawny bloke with wispy, thinning light brown hair. They are hooked up to IV’s, both pale and unmoving but clearly breathing and alive.

The next two rooms are empty, save for a single broken desk chair.

When he opens the fourth door, however, his stomach lurches with sick horror.

A white sheet, spotted with dried blood, covers a body on a metal table. An IV line runs under the sheet, still hooked into an arm. The fabric has been drawn haphazardly over the corpse.

Under the top edge of the sheet peeks a shock of dark brown hair.

John knows it’s not Sherlock. The shape of the body is entirely wrong, the hair is far too short.

He knows it’s not Sherlock.

His heart is still hammering wildly, terror singing in every nerve as he pulls back the sheet with numb fingers.

The body is grotesque, opened from clavicle to pubic bone, ribs cracked and spread. The heart, lungs and liver have all been neatly removed.

This poor bastard met a terrible end, but he’s not Sherlock, thank God, thank fucking God, and John sags with profound relief, intermingled with sorrow for the man that once lived in this butchered body, and furious anger at the monster who did this to him.

He’s so consumed by the powerful swirl of emotions inside his chest that he doesn’t hear the man
behind him until the cold barrel of a gun is pressed against the base of his skull.


_Fuck. Fuckity buggering fuck._ Not seeing another option, John raises his hands.

“Come looking for your better half, I’ll bet,” the man says calmly, almost conversational.

“You know who I am, then,” John replies carefully.

“I know who both of you are,” the man replies. “The doc is no idiot, and he never, ever forgets a face.”

Another pair of feet come trotting up behind him, and John hears someone panting, trying to catch his breath. “I came quick as I could, Jack.”

“Gimme the needle, then,” the voice named Jack growls.

A moment’s pause.

“You didn’t tell me to bring the needle,” the second voice says, tremulous, cringing.

Jack sighs, the drawn out noise of the put upon and the long suffering.

“Jesus fucking Christ, Nigel. I tell ya someone’s sneaking about, come help me get him, does it not fucking occur to you that I might want to knock him out?”

“Well, um. No, I guess not.”

“Obviously,” Jack snaps. “All right, go get the fucking needle. Meet me down in the cooler.”

The second set of steps recede, then fade away as Jack prods him with the barrel of the gun. “Now, then, Doctor Watson. You’re gonna turn to your left, and we’re gonna go through that exit door and down the stairwell. Nice and easy.”

_Why did I not bring my sodding gun_, John wonders to himself as he nods and does as he is told, the gun pressed into the base of his neck the entire time.

At the bottom of the stairwell, Jack pulls his lanyard over his head and hands the keycard to John.

“Swipe it then walk through, nice and slow.”

John complies.

“Give me back the card.”

He does so.

The basement, lit by a row of bare hanging bulbs, is warm and humid and smells strongly of detergent. Various pallets and crates are scattered about haphazardly, lacking any semblance of order. The far wall is taken up by two commercial washers and two dryers, vibrating and rattling through their cycles. To his right a walk-in cooler is set into the corner, three meters or so on each side; a wheeled cart piled high with various pieces of heavy equipment is placed directly in front of the steel door.

“Move that cart aside,” Jack orders.
It is heavy despite the wheels, and it takes John nearly half a minute to move it clear of the walk-in door.

“You were looking for Sherlock Holmes, and I’m such a nice guy I brought you right to him,” Jack sneers. “In fact, you two can have a lovely little reunion. Open the door.”

Sick, shaking with fear, and trying desperately not to show it, John pulls the heavy door open, and Jack flicks on the light.

Sherlock lies curled on his side, clad only in grey boxer-briefs. His arms are bound behind his back, eyes closed, pale thin body deathly still. John can’t help the audible gasp that escapes his lips.

“Aww, he ain’t dead,” sneers Jack. “He’s just a little chilled.” He pokes Sherlock with the toe of his boot. He doesn’t move. Jack prods a little more forcefully, almost a kick to the ribs, and Sherlock remains still and silent.

“Aw hell,” Jack sighs. “This is the worst sodding day.” He bends down, pokes Sherlock hard in the shoulder.

“Don’t you dare die on me, Mr Holmes,” he growls, an edge of panic colouring his voice. “Doc’ll fucking kill me if you--”

Sherlock flings his upper body up and forward in one lightning-fast movement, butting the man squarely between the eyes with all his strength. The man staggers back with a thick, clogged-sounding cry, blood streaming from his nose. John launches himself at the larger man’s back, wraps his left arm around his neck, pressing square on his windpipe as his right hand wrenches the goon’s wrist hard, sending the gun clattering to the floor.

Sherlock gives a practiced wrench, snapping the plastic that binds his arms; he then does the same with his legs, breaking the zip tie binding them together before snatching up the gun and rising to his feet. Breathing slightly ragged, he aims the weapon square and steady at the centre of the goon’s forehead.

And if John sees the minute sway of his body as Sherlock stands, the slightest shake of his arms that indicate he may not be one hundred percent after spending five hours tied up in a refrigerator--well, he knows no one else would see Sherlock right now as anything other than a perfect machine, remote and untouchable despite being in only his pants. The truth of the person behind that facade, aching and cold and exhausted and more than a little afraid--well, John has been entrusted with that secret, and he will keep it safely in his heart forever.

“Zip ties?” Sherlock asks the bleeding man on the floor in mocking incredulity. “What kind of amateur hour are you people running here? With the right technique, anyone at all can snap a zip tie.” He looks down carefully into the man’s face, and understanding fills his pale eyes. “Ah. He’s paying you in drugs, isn’t he? I see. That explains so very much.”

Jack cradles his broken face and glares, but says nothing.

Sherlock pauses, looks down, registers his state of undress. He looks up at John.

“Did you happen to see my clothes?” he asks.

John can’t help the amusement that tugs at his lips. “Nope. You’re gonna stay in your pants for a while longer, I’m afraid.”

“Hopefully the cold will be taken into account by all I meet,” Sherlock says dryly, and it takes John a
moment to catch up before he gets the joke, grinning broadly up at him in amusement and relief and unguarded fondness. Sherlock’s lips twitch in the barest hint of a smile in response. He opens his mouth to utter another snarky rejoinder, but something on the other side of the room catches his attention and the smile on his face dies instantly.

“John,” he murmurs. “Take the gun.”

John takes the gun, keeping it trained at the bloody, broken-nosed goon moaning on the floor. Sherlock crosses the small room, moves a stack of boxes aside, revealing a pile of large cylindrical parcels, rolled in clear plastic.

Keeping the gun trained on Jack, John edges across the small room and peers through the translucent material.

“Oh god damn it,” he breathes.

Bodies, wrapped in plastic. Four of them, nude and bloody, their torsos mangled.

“He’s a monster,” John rasps, feeling his knees buckle and threaten to give way. “How can he ever have been a doctor, we’re supposed to--” he whirls around, advances on the man hunched miserably on the floor. “Did you know about this? Did you?”

The bleeding man cowers in fear.


John shakes his head, refocuses. Sherlock is right, of course. “We have to go,” John says, his voice rough and cracked with anger. “There’s another one on his way down here, I have no idea what’s upstairs. The police are on their way, but I don’t know when--”

“Let’s just focus on getting out of this room,” Sherlock says.


“No time to tie him up,” Sherlock says. “Take his lanyard. We’ll need the key card.”

John holds out his hand, nods at the man on the floor; Jack glares but complies, taking the now-bloodstained white lanyard from his neck and handing it to John without a word. They back out of the cooler and close the door, then John rolls the heavy cart back to its original position.

“Remind me to tell someone he’s in there,” John says. Sherlock raises an eyebrow but nods.

John takes off his jacket and drapes it over Sherlock’s bare, sharp shoulders, and the pair of them carefully pick their way across the litter-strewn floor.

“Are you okay?” John asks. “And what happened to your clothes?”

“I’m fine, and presumably they took them to take away anything I might use to escape. I was drugged the instant I got in the van. I woke up in the pitch black not that ago.”

“You should be unconscious from severe hypothermia, by the way.”

“I trained extensively in handling cold temperatures. Six months of winter swimming in a hole cut into the ice of a Russian lake.”

“You’re not serious.”
“I am,” Sherlock replies. “Never underestimate what boredom will drive me to do.”

They cross the long, cluttered basement, as quickly as Sherlock’s occasional violent shivering will allow. The air around them is warm and humid, but Sherlock’s skin is still clammy and cold to the touch.

“I should have insisted on going along,” John muses aloud.

“I’m not disagreeing,” Sherlock murmurs, almost too quietly for John to hear.

They are almost at the stairwell when the door clangs open and the second minion—the man Jack sent for knockout drugs—comes bounding into view. He stops at the sight of them, and his shock of sandy brown hair and prominent front teeth make him look like a large terrified rabbit.

John levels the gun at him, eyes steely.

“Turn around,” he says, low and dangerous. “And run.”

Number two does as he is told, scrambling away as fast as his legs can take him.

The two men pause at the door, look at each other.

“I honestly have no idea what’s waiting for us upstairs,” John tells Sherlock.

Sherlock shoots him a tired, sardonic grin. “Well, we’d best find out, then.”

The trip upstairs is slower than either man would like, Sherlock occasionally bends double, the muscles of his back contracting in violent shivers.

“It’s normal,” John tells him soothingly. “Core body temp coming back up.”

“I know that,” Sherlock replies, a bit testy. “Russian lake.”

There is an emergency exit door at the ground floor stairwell. A hasp closure is welded to the door as well as the frame, secured with a heavy padlock.

“Installed in the wake of Travis’ escape, I’m certain,” mutters Sherlock.

With trepidation, John eases open the door to the hallway. To their surprise, the passage is utterly empty.

“Nope. Nothing is ever this easy,” John observes sardonically.

“The smell, John,” Sherlock replies. It hits him suddenly, a trace of something sharp and volatile hanging in the air, filling his nostrils.

“Told you,” John sighs.

A slight, nondescript black-haired man steps out of one of the rooms on the left. He’s fortyish, vaguely handsome, somewhat Asian in looks but not distinctly so. His white shirt and khaki trousers are soaked and clinging to his slight frame. He holds a metal canister in his right hand.

The reek of petrol increases tenfold.

He tosses the canister aside and smiles, as casual as if they were meeting in the park.
“Mr Holmes and Doctor Watson. Again, you are a party to my ruination.” He nods in John’s direction. “You can put the piece away. I’m unarmed.” He gestures up and down his petrol-soaked clothing and chuckles, an unpleasant grating sound. “Unless you count British Petroleum’s finest, of course.”

“I’m fine, thanks,” John replies tightly, keeping the handgun steady.

In Lee’s presence, Sherlock’s shivers are gone; his back is ramrod-straight as he regards the man in front of him with cold, pale eyes. He is as calm and self-possessed as he is wearing a bespoke suit and Ferragamos, and in this moment John finds him almost impossibly regal, even in a borrowed coat and boxer briefs.

“Mr Lee,” Sherlock says evenly. “I see you found something more profitable than murdering teenage pop starlets.”

“It was an accident,” Lee says.

“It was an accident,” Lee insists stubbornly. “An accident that ruined my life. After that, I had to scrounge for work wherever I could. I spent years practically in exile. Estonia, Russia, the Ukraine. I got a good freelance gig, going wherever my boss needed me, patching up his men. I started a little side business in organs, a stolen kidney here, a death row convict there. I started a little side business in organs, a stolen kidney here, a death row convict there. He never saw the big picture, though, you know? He wanted me to keep fixing up his goons, setting broken bones, sewing up stab wounds. He never saw the big picture, though, never quite understood the kind of money we could make without ever leaving London.” His eyes go comically wide. “Do you have any idea what a human body is worth, Mr Holmes?”

“I do, in fact, give or take a few pounds. You, on the other hand, have no understanding of the value of a human life.”

“Oh, isn’t that precious,” Lee coos with an ugly leer. “You care. You’re not at all like your reputation, are you?” His mocking smile vanishes in an instant. “You can keep your squishy feelings, Mr Holmes. Nobody gives a damn about these people, and I figured out how to turn them into a commodity. Money is what makes the world go round, in the end.”

“And you need money to make money. So you required a new backer who was willing to invest in your...vision,” Sherlock spits, flat and disgusted.

Lee nods. “A couple years back, there was a bit of a power shuffle in the crime world. I believe you two know something about that?”

John’s jaw tenses, but he says nothing. Sherlock nods just fractionally.

“There was a struggle for the top spot, you see. Bit of a stalemate for awhile as things shook out. So I laid low, waited until the moment was right... and then I made a proposal. My new boss is eager to bring in some of the big money, and way more willing to take some risks to get it. And in London? Bums are basically a renewable resource.”

“You take their blood first,” Sherlock says, slowly but clearly, his silver-green eyes murderous. “That alone is worth five figures, made into plasma products. Then when you can’t take any more blood, you harvest their organs. Like farming. Like livestock.”

“Got it in one,” Lee replies dryly.
“That’s monstrous,” John breathes, voice ragged with disgust. “You’re a doctor. You took an oath.”

“Was a doctor. Past tense. Never did get that caring thing down. Now I’m a businessman.”

“Not much of a businessman, though, if you’re putting every quid you make into your arm.” Lee makes a face, opens his mouth to reply, but Sherlock cuts him off. “Please, don’t bother. Takes one to know one, and you’re high as a kite right now. Can’t stop talking, inappropriate euphoria, labile affect. Speedball, I’d guess. Heroin and cocaine, both pharmaceutical grade.”

The cheerful expression on Lee’s face falls away suddenly; he glares sullenly at Sherlock, looking every inch the caught-out teenager.

Sherlock smirks. “Ooh, yes. You’ve got a taste for the really good stuff, don’t you? Your backer knew about your heroin habit, but he didn’t know you would lose all control when granted access to pharmaceutical grade drugs, didn’t expect you to go crazy like an obese child in a candy store. That’s where the money’s gone. A body full of healthy organs is worth hundreds of thousands on the black market. You should be rich. Well-off, at least. But your clothes are high street, your shoes cheap. You’ve crashed before you’ve even got off the ground. You’re out of money, and you’re desperate.”

“It’s a cashflow issue,” Lee says defensively. “Overseas black market organ transactions are a bit tricky, ya know. It’s not like selling stolen iPads off the back of a truck.”

“Maybe you have assets on paper,” Sherlock sneers dismissively. “But you’re running out of money, aren’t you? You’re falling behind with your boss, and quickly. He’s started wondering where his money is going, wondering if maybe you’re a bad investment. He started calling his chits in, didn’t he? So you started to cut corners. Not repairing the vehicles, letting maintenance go—This hallway is overflowing with rubbish—and hiring homeless addicts as your guards, paying them in drugs. That’s how a terrified, half dead man was able to escape your lazy clutches. And that’s why you didn’t lay low for a month like any half-intelligent murderer would have done afterwards. You needed the money, plain and simple.”

“Spot on,” Lee acknowledges sardonically. “Then you turned up, like an answer to my prayers. Unlike my other specimens, you’re much more valuable alive and in one piece. My boss would have forgiven ten times my debt if I delivered Sherlock Holmes to him.” He glances at John. “John Watson would have been icing on the cake. Delicious. But of course, you were the worst thing that could have happened instead.” Lee sighs. “I should have just killed you straightaway.”

Sherlocks raises one eyebrow, gives a tiny, sarcastic shrug. “It’s a mistake you’ll never make again.”

John hears distant thumps and muffled voices in the distance. The police have finally arrived. Sherlock ignores the noises, focusing the white-hot beam of his attention solely on Lee.

“No,” Lee says, resignedly. “I suppose not.”

“So tell me, then,” Sherlock says evenly. “Who is he? Who is this boss of yours? Who thinks me so very valuable?”

Lee’s demeanor shifts abruptly again to something manically playful, almost mocking. “Come on, Mr Holmes. Use that big brain and think. Someone who is very cross with you right now. You almost put him out of business, but he’s back now, rested and refreshed. And boy, is he mad.”

John gets it then, belly flooding with black dread. He feels ill. Sherlock looks poleaxed, his eyes wide and shocked for a moment before he regains his composure.

“He’s dead,” says Sherlock, going for a dismissive tone and missing by a mile. “I saw his body. I
held a piece of his brain in my hand. I assure you, *he is dead.*”

“Jim Moriarty is alive and well, Mr Holmes. Always has been, always will be. Death is a mere inconvenience to him, you see. You can’t stop him. You came closer to most, but you can’t defeat what doesn’t die.” He shrugs, pulls out a box of matches, gives a short, bitter chuckle. “Unfortunately, I can’t say the same. Moriarty will never let me live, not after a disaster like this.”

“No,” says Sherlock sharply, suddenly, and John knows Sherlock is seeing his only insight into this terrifying new knowledge literally going up in smoke. “We can protect you from him, Lee, don’t do this, we can help you—”

“No, you can’t. You can’t even help yourself, though you don’t know it yet.” Lee grins, and it’s a gruesome vision, a death’s head. “Goodbye, Mr Holmes. Tell Jim Moriarty I’ll see him in Hell.”

He strikes the match, and with a whoosh his entire body erupts into a pillar of flame. Both Sherlock and John instinctively duck away from the blast of heat.

The boxes and rubbish lining the hallway catch fire almost instantly, tongues of flames licking and spreading everywhere.

John recovers his faculties first, grabbing his jacket from Sherlock’s shoulders and rushing towards Lee, wrapping him in it. tackling him to the floor as the fire alarms engage and the overhead sprinklers activate. He can hear voices, and someone pounding on the steel double doors.

The sprinklers quell the flames effectively in moments, leaving the two of them drenched.

“Try the door,” he says, handing the card to a dripping wet and drowned-looking Sherlock before turning back to Lee.

The man is burned horribly, almost beyond something recognizable as human. John picks up his wrist, cringing at the feel of crackling roasted skin under his fingertips. Under them his pulse still flutters, weak and thready.

He looks at the burned man’s chest. He’s not breathing.

In this moment, John knows he will have to make a judgment call. He doesn’t think about the lives this man has taken, the unforgivable acts he has committed. Instead he thinks about the patient in front of him, the terrible damage to his lungs, the slow lingering agonizing death that awaits him.

Not that this monster deserves any less. But in this moment John is a doctor, not a judge, and the man in front of him is a patient, not a killer.

Then the pulse under his fingers jumps once, twice, and is gone. John is profoundly grateful to be spared that terrible decision.

“Is he dead?” Sherlock asks.

“Yes,” John says, turning away from Lee’s charred body.

“The key card doesn’t work,” Sherlock tells him. “Lee must have locked the building down when the police arrived.”

“They’ll be able to open it soon enough,” John replies. “We’ll just have to be patient.” He shifts his attention on Sherlock, wet and chilled in just his pants. Despite the situation, despite Sherlock rather resembling a drowned rat, John can’t help a moment of fleeting appreciation for his shoulders and
chest, broad and surprisingly muscular despite his slim build.

He shakes his head, chastising himself for entertaining lustful thoughts about his shivering, hypothermic lover.

“Jesus, Sherlock, you’re gonna get pneumonia.” John ducks into the nearest room, rummaging around, coming back out and trying another door. He finds what he’s looking for, and winds the clean white sheet around Sherlock’s damp chilled body.

“I saw that, you know,” Sherlock murmurs, his voice a deep rumble, almost sexy, before the effect is ruined by another violent shiver.

“Shut up,” John says, but the tone is concerned and fond, not irritated. “You saw nothing. Anyway, the cavalry’s coming, soon as they figure out that door or bust through it, but it’s going to be a few minutes. Come here, please.” He pulls Sherlock down to the floor and sits next to him, wrapping his arms around his shivering, bony frame.

“You’re not yelling at me,” Sherlock observes, mildly quizzical.

“Oh, I will, but I’ll let you have a hot cup of tea first. I’m not a monster, you know.”

The two sit for several minutes in damp silence, each man processing his own thoughts. John listens to the buzz and thump of power tools being brought to bear on the door situation.

“He escaped being held accountable,” Sherlock says quietly, almost to himself. “I don’t like that.”

“I know you don’t, love. But he won’t hurt anyone else. That’s something.”

Sherlock huffs in annoyance but nods, then burrows his head into John’s shoulder.

That’s how Lestrade finds them a few minutes later, wet and clinging to each other, while a charred corpse lies not ten feet away. He raises a single eyebrow at them, and Sherlock sighs, annoyance tinged with a touch of self-conscious embarrassment.

“Yes. All right? Yes. Now go you can collect your winnings in the office pool or running bet or whatever it is you’d like to do with that piece of information.”

Lestrade nods. “Okay,” he says amiably, then rounds on John. “You,” he growls, suddenly, genuinely angry. “You’re a worse liar and sneak than he is.”

John opens his mouth to answer, to defend his choices, but Lestrade cuts him off. “Later,” the DI snaps. “I’ve got enough to deal with at the moment.” He gestures at Lee’s blackened corpse. “I take it this is Dr Lee?”

“Mr Lee,” Sherlock corrects him, “and yes. Apparently he felt a dramatic exit preferable to facing the consequences of his actions.”

“He gave a full confession before he lit himself up,” John adds. “Also, I dunno how many people Lee had working for him, but there’s a bloke in the walk in cooler who might know things.” He swallows. “Also, there’s bodies in there. Four. Wrapped in plastic.”

“That brings his total up to six, that we know of.” Lestrade sighs, shakes his head at the bottomless depravities of the human race. “He was a doctor, once. How could he butcher people like cattle for profit?”
“Evil runs bone deep in some people,” Sherlock replies, a faraway, almost sad look in his eyes. “I know that’s a profoundly unscientific view to hold, but my experiences have never shown me any different. Some people are good, and some are...just evil. Full stop.”

John glances over, surprised to hear such an irrational, illogical opinion coming from Sherlock’s lips. Lestrade is silent, looking pensively at the charred figure on the floor as the paramedics bustle in and begin to briskly check both John and Sherlock over.

“All right,” he says presently, “after the EMT’s look you over, I’ll get a panda to take you home. You both look like shit.” He narrows his eyes at Sherlock. “And where are your clothes? Nevermind, forget I asked.” A constable comes up to Lestrade, silently requesting his attention. “And I need you two down at the Yard tomorrow for full statements,” he adds over his shoulder as he turns away. “No skiving off, please and thank you.”

The DI disappears down the hallway without saying goodbye, leaving the two men to the attention of the paramedics.

John looks over at Sherlock, now wrapped in an orange blanket and scowling at the man unlucky enough to have to take his blood pressure, and wonders what the hell Lee was on about when he said Moriarty was still alive. Curiosity pressing on him, he almost says something to Sherlock, but right then a female EMT waves a lighted scope at him and asks him to open his mouth. He complies, filing away his questions for later, for a quieter conversation at home.

Home. Home with Sherlock. Now that the case is over, the enormity of the past two days begins to sink in; his right arm throbs and itches with healing flesh.

They have the rest of their lives together, a long road stretching ahead of them, and suddenly John is impatient to begin.

“Excuse me,” he says to the technicians in his very best, most serious Doctor Voice. “I appreciate your assistance, but I’m quite sure we’ve got nothing more serious than a mild case of hypothermia and a few scrapes between us. If you don’t mind, I’d very much like to get my partner home and into a hot bath.”

Sherlock’s head snaps up at the word ‘partner,’ his pale eyes locking with John’s for a moment. John can’t help but smile at this impossible, brilliant man wrapped in a sheet and a shock blanket, and Sherlock responds with a smile of his own, genuine and full of promise.

John stands, holds out a hand. “Let’s go find the panda Lestrade promised us.”

Sherlock takes the offered hand and unfolds himself from the stretcher he is perched upon; once upright he lets go, but not before he gives John’s fingers a quick but definite squeeze.

“A bath does sound marvelous,” he replies. “Lead the way, Doctor.”

***

The streetlights flickering past play across Sherlock’s face, sharpening his features, alternately bathing him in light and shadow.

He hasn’t said a word since they slid into the back of the police car now taking them home. His eyes are open, gazing out the window as the dark houses and shuttered businesses slide past, but John can tell he’s deep within his mind palace, physically present but a million miles away mentally. John says nothing, gives him space to process his thoughts as the car makes its way through the night.
As they near Baker Street, John reaches over and takes his hand, twines long fingers with his own.

“You did well,” he murmurs, more for something to say than any real need to say it.

“The case was easy,” Sherlock replies quietly, still a bit remote as he pursues his thoughts. “Kevin Lee was a sloppy junkie. Even the morons of the Metropolitan Police could have solved this, if they had bothered to look at the evidence for five minutes. If they had given a damn at all.”

“You saved lives,” John says soothingly. “It may not have been fancy or tricky or complicated, but you saved lives, and that monster will never hurt anyone else again.”

Sherlock says nothing, still gazing out the window.

“That’s not what’s bothering you, though,” John says, the request unmistakable in his tone.

*Share your thoughts. Please. Let me in, so we can face this together.*

Sherlock breathes in, opens his mouth to say something, seems to reconsider. “It’s not,” he says finally. “It’s unfortunate, and infuriating, but it’s not what’s bothering me.”

John hesitates for a moment, feeling almost afraid, as if speaking the man’s name out loud will summon him, conjure him into reality like a malevolent Djinn.

“What Lee said. About Moriarty. About death not stopping him...Sherlock, what the hell was he talking about?”

Sherlock doesn’t answer him for a long moment. John is about to think he’s going to ignore the question completely when he finally replies, low and quiet.

“I entertained the hypothesis, briefly, then discarded it. It seemed too outlandish, too melodramatic to be true. Or maybe I just wanted desperately to believe James Moriarty had been eliminated forever and for good. But in light of new information...it’s the only theory that fits the data.”

John’s forehead creases in confusion.

“He died, Sherlock. You said saw him yourself, you touched his body. I didn’t see him, but I believe you absolutely. If you say he’s dead, then he’s dead.”

Sherlock sighs, but it’s a sound of resignation, not derision. “He was hollow inside, utterly soulless. He could become anyone in the space of a heartbeat, create new people out of thin air. He wasn’t born Jim Moriarty, or Richard Brook for that matter, and whatever name he was given at birth is utterly meaningless. He was an Irish street kid who clawed his way to the top of the criminal ladder with pure viciousness and no remorse. That man, the man we knew as Jim Moriarty? Yes, he died on the roof of Barts that day.”

John shakes his head, stubbornly rejecting the tendril of understanding trying to snake through him.

“Jim Moriarty is dead,” he says slowly, enunciating each word, almost as if saying it often enough will make it true.

“It’s not a man. It’s not a name.” Sherlock finally turns his head, fixing him with his crystalline gaze. “It’s a position, John. It’s a goddamn title.”

Sherlock turns away again, rests his forehead against the cool glass of the car window. When he speaks once more, his voice is hollow, resigned.
“Jim Moriarty is dead. Long live Jim Moriarty.”

Chapter End Notes

Only one chapter to go... in this fic. Wherein all the sex and snuggles will commence.

But there's so much more to tell, isn't there?

I'm thinking a trilogy...
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

“What about—” he can’t bring himself to say the name, not when they’re like this.
“Don’t you want to get to work? I understand, I don’t m—”

His pale eyes lock with John’s just for a moment, and there’s hunger there, but also fear
and a little sorrow and John feels it too, the unfairness of it all, the spectre of loss a
shadow over the two of them yet again.

But this is how they can fight it, fight back against an enemy that threatens to tear them
apart, an enemy they can’t yet see. They can be together. They can love each other,
completely and without reservation, and stubbornly refuse to be parted from one
another.

Right now, this is what they have. And it’s enough. It’s everything.

“You have me,” John murmurs, quiet and serious, wrapping his hands around
Sherlock’s sheet-swathed waist. “All right? You’ll always have me.”

“Then shut up,” breathes Sherlock, “and kiss me.”

Chapter Notes

...And here we are.

I never would have been able to see this through without the amazing allonsys_girl and
bittergreens.

They are the best Johnlock author friends (or any kind of friends, full stop) a girl could
ask for, always endlessly patient and generous with their time, support and good advice.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

John stares at Sherlock in stunned silence.

After a moment, he gathers his wits enough to again form words. “What? Sherlock, that’s--I don’t--”

“I should have known,” says Sherlock, voice tight with something very close to despair. "The kind
of contacts he had, the breadth and depth of his enterprises, the resources he had at his disposal--no
one man, clever as he was, could have assembled an empire of that scope. It all fits. I know it sounds
outlandish, but if we eliminate the impossible…” His fists clench and unclench in frustration. “I
should have seen it, John. It's inexcusable that I didn't."

“Why now, after all this time?” John’s brow creases with the questions swirling around his brain.
“It’s been three years. Why did he not emerge sooner after Moriarty--the old Moriarty, I mean--
died?"  

Sherlock is quiet a moment, eyes going a bit unfocused as he considers the question. "The roots of the Moriarty organization are too deep, too entrenched to be destroyed easily. I crippled the network, but unfortunately I didn’t kill it. Mycroft pulled me out of Serbia before I could solve the final piece of the puzzle--"  

"He did it to save your life," John points out.  

"I’m sure he did--or thinks he did. The fact remains that I left the work undone, and parts of the network survived. I’m not saying that to assign blame on myself or anyone else. I’m merely stating facts."

"Okay," John says. "Parts of Moriarty’s group survived. Why did it take three years for a new leader to emerge?"

Sherlock steeples his fingers in his classic thinking pose, the effect only diminished somewhat by his current state of undress.

"I dislike speculation without sufficient data," Sherlock grumbles.

"You say that like it ever stops you," John replies dryly.

Sherlock quirks an annoyed eyebrow at John before continuing. "That said, if I have to theorise, I’d say the surviving portions of the operation regrouped, rebuilt, and then split into competing factions, following some sort of power struggle, exacerbated by doubt over whether Moriarty was really dead. He was brilliant and unstable and unpredictable enough that no one knew what to expect--faking his own death was absolutely the kind of strategic move he would employ as part of a longer game. The broadcast Mycroft created to get me out of my exile just added to the confusion."

John sighs, slumps lower in his seat. "Which brings us to Mary."

Sherlock nods. "Which brings us to Mary."

"Where--" John shakes his head. "No, who was Mary in all of this?"

"She was Moriarty’s number two, his top confidante, his best and most reliable assassin--in short, the girl most likely to succeed, the obvious successor to the top spot. She would have gotten it too, if not for her entanglement with you and her pregnancy. She was Moriarty’s long game, and his death left her in an untenable position. When we misled her into thinking he was alive, she recognised that she had no place in his organization, not after the myriad ways she had botched the job. She planned to offer us to him to buy her way out of the game for good. Or so she hoped." He quirks an eyebrow. "It’s a good thing for her that he really did die. He never would have let her leave. He never would have let her live."

"Okay," John squints, shakes his head, pinches the bridge of his nose, feeling vaguely headachy at this new, unwelcome mystery that has landed squarely on their doorstep. "That all makes sense, I suppose."

"Well, somewhat," Sherlock says, uncharacteristically hedging his bets. "It’s just pure speculation, at this point. There are so many loose ends here, John, far too many. Far more questions than answers and very little reliable information at the moment."

John looks out the window, contemplates a moment. "The number one question in my mind, is, who is he? The new Moriarty? If Mary lost the power struggle, then who won?"
Sherlock falls silent again, thoughtful and distant as the panda turns on to Baker Street, pulls up at the kerb in front of 221B.

The car comes to a stop and John looks up, glances at the clock on the dash. He is shocked to see it is just past midnight. With everything that happened since he left the flat, it feels like days should have passed. “Ta very much,” he tells the pc behind the wheel, who nods in response as John opens the door. Sherlock makes no move to get out of the car, remote and deep in thought.

“Sherlock. You okay?”

Sherlock shakes his head slowly. “I don’t know, John. No idea whatsoever.”

“That’s all right,” John says, holding out his hand. “Come on, then. Hot bath will help.”

***

John digs his keys out of his jacket, opens the front door. Sherlock trails behind him, pushing the heavy door closed with a thump and a soft click.

John knows Sherlock has a great deal on his mind, and is fully expecting him to wander off into the forest of his own thoughts, distant, remote, unreachable in mind even as his body remains in 221B.

What he doesn’t expect is that the instant the front door closes Sherlock wraps long fingers around his upper arm, stopping him before he can start up the stairs.

“John,” he murmurs, low and ragged.

When John turns to answer Sherlock pushes him against the wall, cups large warm hands around his head and kisses him, greedy and desperate, mouth open, tongue wet and seeking.

John can’t help but pull back a fraction, giving Sherlock a quizzical look.

“What about--” he can’t bring himself to say the name, not when they’re like this. “Don’t you want to get to work? I understand, I don’t m--”

“No,” Sherlock murmurs, voice deep and rough as gravel. “What I want is you. Now.” His pale eyes lock with John’s just for a moment, and there’s hunger there, but also fear and a little sorrow and John feels it too, the unfairness of it all, the spectre of loss a shadow over the two of them yet again.

But this is how they can fight it, fight back against an enemy that threatens to tear them apart, an enemy they can’t yet see. They can be together. They can love each other, completely and without reservation, and stubbornly refuse to be parted from one another.

Right now, this is what they have. And it’s enough. It’s everything.

“You have me,” John murmurs, quiet and serious, wrapping his hands around Sherlock’s sheet-swathed waist. “All right? You’ll always have me.”

“Then shut up,” breathes Sherlock, “and kiss me.”

John shuts off his higher brain functions and kisses him; his desperate need for this man is so constant, so close to the surface it takes him over in mere moments, the kisses quickly growing wet and messy with want. Sherlock is frankly filthy; his hair is greasy and tangled, his breath stale and sour; his body is distinctly unwashed, smelling of pure sharp musky maleness, and John is shocked and a little appalled at how aroused it makes him.
His mind conjures up long-buried desires, memories of the times he’d eyed a bit of rough trade hanging around outside a dodgy pub, the hard, flinty, slouchy young men who’d let you do whatever you like for a twenty and may or may not mug you for your wallet after. John had never done it, never would, but more than once he’s looked just a touch too long, imagined for just a moment what it would be like to take one of them behind a skip, to do something filthy to a dangerous stranger, or have something filthy done to him—and then he’d pushed away the sharp stab of shameful lust, disgusted with himself for wanting something so dirty and degrading and bad.

The wrongness of those hidden urges intermingles somehow with his endless aching want for Sherlock and the mixture is heady, intoxicating. A shiver of hot, desperate desire ripples through his body, his nerves tingling with pure base lust in a way he’s never felt before. John is blinded by his body’s clamoring need, heedless of where they are, heedless of everything that’s not the hot press of Sherlock’s body against his own, Sherlock’s sour tongue insistently in his mouth. John moans low against Sherlock’s mouth as he grabs slim bony hips, pulling his body flush against his own, reveling in the press of hardness against his belly as he pulls the blanket away from pale naked shoulders. John digs his fingers briefly into hard biceps before wrestling with the fabric covering the rest of Sherlock’s body, finally pulling the sheet away, letting it pool at their feet, leaving him in nothing but his snug grey pants, thin cotton clinging to every swell and curve.

Sherlock is just as desperate and flushed and needy; he slides one long, pale thigh between John’s legs, shamelessly grinds his cock into the soft flesh of his belly, sighing and moaning as he nuzzles and sucks at John’s throat. John’s hands slide down his bare back, skimming over his hips, grasping firm handfuls of plump, cotton-covered arse as he ruts shamelessly against the leg between his own, the friction against his trapped, straining cock a maddening, delicious itch. Sherlock takes his hands away from John’s head, sliding them under his black jacket, tugging his shirttails out of his trousers so can slide searching hands under, seeking the bare warm skin underneath. John gasps, arching into the heat of his touch.

“Oh Jesus,” John pants, so helpless against this sudden, surging tide of desire he’s certain he would collapse if it weren’t for the weight of Sherlock’s body pinning him to the wall. “Please, Sherlock,” he moans, not even knowing what he’s asking for. “Please.”


He’s scrabbling at John’s belt, trying to unbuckle it with shaking fingers; John is just about to slip his hands under the waistband of Sherlock’s briefs, desperate to wrap fingers around the velvet heat of his rock-hard prick, when some distant, disconnected part of his brain dimly registers the click and creak of an opening door.

“Boys!” Mrs Hudson gasps.

The two of them freeze; it’s as if, John thinks semi-hysterically, they think if they keep perfectly still somehow they’ll blend into the wallpaper and their landlady won’t see what they’re doing.

“It’s very that nice you two are so happy together,” she says, her voice high and tight with indignation. “But there’s some activities that are to be kept in your flat. We will be having a very serious discussion tomorrow about appropriate behavior.”

Her door slams shut.

John is beyond mortified at how carried away they had gotten, and he’s not even the one in his underwear. Sherlock is sagging against him, panting; John’s trying to think of something to say to quell his burning embarrassment when the door opens again.
“And Sherlock,” Mrs Hudson adds, in something closer to her normal voice. “I’m very glad to see you home safely. I was a bit worried.”

“Thank you, Mrs Hudson,” he says, and how he manages to sound perfectly serene and composed in such a compromising position, erection still poking insistently into John’s belly-- it’s quite impressive, really.

“That doesn’t mean I’m not cross with you,” she adds. “Really, Sherlock. At my age.”

The hallway is silent; the door does not close, and John would bet a fifty his landlady is getting an eyeful of Sherlock’s fantastic arse. And who can blame her, really?

“Goodnight, Mrs Hudson,” Sherlock says, pointedly.

“Goodnight, boys,” she says, really not sounding very cross at all any more. Her door clicks shut, the deadbolt sliding home.

John rests his forehead against Sherlock’s bare shoulder, huffs a breath of sheepish, self-conscious laughter. “I haven’t been like this since I was a teenager,” he says, shaking his head.

“I wasn’t like this when I was a teenager,” Sherlock replies, amused. He brackets John’s hips with his hands, thrusts very deliberately against him. “Now,” he purrs, “where were we?”

“We were about to do unspeakable things to Mrs Hudson’s wallpaper,” John replies with a smile, weaving his fingers in tangled curls and pulling Sherlock down for a kiss. “But now that I’m thinking with the proper head, we’re going to take this upstairs.”

“Spoilsport,” Sherlock pouts.

“You need fluids, you taste dehydrated. And food. And a hot bath. And good God, a toothbrush.”

Sherlock hums in mock contemplation. “Counteroffer. Fluids, no food, toothbrush, and a hot shower. With you in it.”

“I can work with those terms,” John agrees with a smile.

Sherlock heads for the stairs, pulling John by the hand as he’s about to pick up the discarded linens.

“Leave them. They’re going in the bin anyway.”

“We just offended Mrs Hudson’s delicate sensibilities. The least we could do is pick up after ourselves.”

Sherlock huffs but pauses a moment, allows John to scoop up the fabric before he resumes yanking him impatiently up the stairs. He hums and bounces as John unlocks the door, ducks past him as he sighs and drops the discarded linens on the kitchen floor.

“Let me pop into the loo first,” John says. “I only need a minute. Then you can start your shower.”

Sherlock wiggles like a four year old. “Hurry up,” he whines. “I desperately need to piss.”

“You didn’t five minutes ago.”

“I was fine until you mentioned fluids, thank you very much.”

“That reminds me.” John opens the refrigerator, pulls out a bottle of water, hands it to Sherlock.
“Work on that while I’m using the bathroom.”

“You’re being all doctor-y now,” Sherlock grumbles. “You were much more fun downstairs.”

“And I will be fun again,” John promises. “In just a little bit. Drink the water.”

Sherlock sighs but drops into the kitchen chair, unscrewing the cap on the water bottle. John turns and ducks into the bathroom, using the toilet and washing his hands before swiping a toothbrush hurriedly around his mouth.

When he returns to the kitchen he sees Sherlock has finished off the entire bottle of water. “All yours,” he says to Sherlock, opening the fridge and grabbing a water for himself.

“Finally,” Sherlock exhales theatrically as he rises, but before going into the bathroom he comes up behind John as he’s closing the refrigerator, dropping a kiss on his shoulder and wrapping long arms around his waist. “You know, you never did yell at me,” he murmurs against John's neck, tickling the short, bristly hairs there.

“No, I never did, did I?” John leans back against Sherlock’s long, warm frame. “You distracted me with fantastic snogging, and by the time I came back to my senses the impulse to yell had passed. Well played, my dear.”

“Why, thank you,” Sherlock purrs, amused. “Come join me in a minute?”

“I’d love to.”

Sherlock releases him and slips away to the bathroom; John stands in front of the fridge for a moment longer, lost in thought, marveling at how unexpectedly affectionate and demonstrative Sherlock is. In a way, though, it makes a kind of sense—Sherlock Holmes never does anything by halves, and once he decided to take the enormous step of entering a romantic relationship, of course he would do so unreservedly, with his whole heart.

John realises he’s the one holding back. He thinks about the things he’s wanted to say ever since he returned—and much longer than that, if he’s being completely honest with himself. Why is he keeping himself back? Why is he harboring reservations, when Sherlock is giving John his own heart so freely?

With the dark shadow of Moriarty looming over them yet again, John sees with shocking clarity how every second they have together is utterly precious. What they have could be taken away at any moment, not just because of Moriarty, but because of the realities of the life they choose to lead.

He’s so tired of regrets. If the worst ever comes to pass, God forbid, he doesn’t want to regret the words he never said, the things he never did. He’s been down that road too many times before.

Standing in the middle of their cluttered kitchen, John makes a silent vow. He promises himself he will stop holding back that little piece of his heart and give Sherlock the gift of his total trust.

He’s pulled out of his reverie by the groaning sound of the bathtub taps, the patter of water droplets falling against the floor of the bathtub. John shakes his head and rolls his eyes at his maudlin turn of thoughts, returns his attention to matters at hand. He opens the fridge again, pulls out two more bottles of water and takes them into Sherlock’s bedroom, where he’s greeted by the unmade (and undoubtedly gamy) bed of yesterday morning. He sighs, putting the water down on the night table and setting about stripping the sheets off the mattress.

John remakes the bed (finding the bottle of lube lost among the tangled bedclothes and putting it into
the night table drawer) and takes the soiled sheets out into the kitchen for tomorrow’s laundry. He returns to the bedroom, toes off his shoes; he’s sliding his belt out of the loops of his jeans when the ensuite door opens and Sherlock emerges, stiff prick flushed dark red and bobbing upright against his his flat belly, nude and unselfconscious and breathtakingly beautiful. John feels his mouth literally water at the sight of him.

Sherlock smiles, warm and soft and tinged with naked desire.

“Coming?” he asks, his voice deep and a little rough.

“Eventually,” John replies with a grin. “But I’d like to take the scenic route first.” He moves to where Sherlock stands in the doorway, grabs his head and pulls him down for a hard, demanding kiss, pushing him back against the doorframe as he presses himself against miles of lean pale flesh. Sherlock’s kisses taste of toothpaste now, his mouth open and searching against John’s as his long fingers fumble with the buttons of his shirt. John works open the button and zip of his jeans, working them down over his hips, and the two of them together manage to somehow wrestle off his clothes without anyone toppling over. Sherlock drags him back toward the bathtub, still kissing him, refusing to relinquish his mouth as he tries to step over the edge of the tub backwards and pull John in with him at the same time.

“Come on,” Sherlock mutters, impatient, basically trying to drag John into the tub.

“Wait, hey,” John says, smiling against Sherlock’s mouth, “wait, shit, my socks are still on,” and then they’re both laughing as John attempts to hop on one foot, naked, and peel his sock off the other foot while holding on to Sherlock’s arm for balance, Sherlock still persistently trying to kiss him.

“Okay,” John says breathless from laughing. “Turn around and look where you’re going, please, you’re going to fall and break something, I’m right behind you, I promise.” Sherlock reluctantly breaks away, turns to step into the tub. John follows him, not too proud to admire the impressive view of his bare, round, inexplicably plump arse. Once they’re in the tub Sherlock turns and bends to kiss him again, large hands pressing against the small of his back, and John succumbs to his urges and grabs hold of Sherlock’s rear, relishing the feel of that one soft place on his hard, spare body, giving a low, involuntary growl as he pulls their bodies flush against each other. Their hips don’t align--height difference--but the feel of Sherlock’s wet naked skin against his cock is still amazing, makes John gasp with pleasure as Sherlock sighs, tilts his hips, rutting gently against John’s stomach.

John has done it often enough to know that shower sex is generally overrated--not enough room, not enough shower, one person getting all the water while the other is shivering against freezing cold tile--but this moment is absolutely perfect, everything as it should be, warm water cascading over them as they kiss and kiss, mouths searching as their hands roam everywhere, touching and stroking hot, wet skin.

“First things first,” John murmurs after a few minutes. “Let’s get your hair washed before we get too carried away.” He picks up Sherlock’s fancy shampoo--it costs at least thirty pounds, he’s certain of it--and tips a handful into his palm. “Turn around,” he says, and the words come out more hoarse and needy than he intends.

Sherlock nods wordlessly, turns his back to John and lets him massage the shampoo into his hair, combing out the snarls with his fingers. “Okay, rinse.” Sherlock tilts his head back, ducks under the shower head as John watches him, transfixed by the sight of his dark hair plastered and dripping, rivulets of water streaming over the faint scars on his well-muscled back. He straightens, turns back to John, pushing his wet hair back with two hands and smiling down at him.

“Hi,” he murmurs, almost shy, looking decades younger with his hair dripping and pushed away
“Hello again,” John says softly, before wrapping a hand around his wet head and kissing him again, his other hand exploring the flat planes of his back, the curve of his shoulders.

“God, Sherlock, fuck,” he breathes. “You feel so good.” John’s mouth leaves his to nibble at his jaw, stubble rough and bristly under his lips, and Sherlock makes a tiny choked moan of pleasure as he tilts his head back, wordlessly encouraging him as John tastes the long pale column of his throat, presses lips to the fading purple mark he left there—God, was that yesterday morning? It seems like ages ago—and nips gently, pressing his teeth into the marks he left behind earlier.

“John,” Sherlock gasps, and John takes his mouth away from his neck and pulls back, takes a moment to appreciate the vision in front of him, Sherlock drenched and wrecked and panting, his eyes glassy, pupils dilated, cheeks and chest mottled with the dark pink flush of arousal.

John suddenly feels absolutely, irrationally certain he’ll die if he isn’t touching him, certain that his need for Sherlock is so deep in him, in the very cells of his body, that he’ll wither and perish if they’re not touching each other every single moment of their lives, in every single way possible. He takes the bar of Sherlock’s expensive French soap and rubs his palms together before running them over Sherlock’s impossibly long, hard torso, scrubbing the suds into his chest, his shoulders, his back with gentle circular motions, reveling in the feel of Sherlock’s alabaster-pale skin so warm and alive under his fingertips. Sherlock just watches him, lips parted just slightly, seemingly rendered mute as John washes his body with careful tenderness.

“You’re so beautiful,” John says quietly, hands cradling his slim hips, thumbs rubbing against the ridges of his iliac crest. “Do you know that?”

Sherlock shakes his head. “I’m not,” he murmurs, soft and a little sad, and it breaks John’s heart in two.

“You are,” John tells him, feelings surging up, burning hot in his chest. “Inside and out. Every part of you. Even when you’re difficult, even when you’re an obnoxious git, even when you piss me off so much I want to scream. You are always the most beautiful person in the entire world to me.” He rubs the bar of soap against his palms, then slips his fingers between Sherlock’s legs, behind his balls, massaging them gently for a few moments before sliding further back, gentle soapy fingers in the cleft of his arse, brushing over the tight furled knot of his entrance as he kisses his neck. Sherlock wraps his arms around John’s neck and moans, just once, low in his throat, vibrating against John’s lips. “Every single inch of you,” John murmurs, and brings his hand back up, giving Sherlock’s hot, hard cock some needed attention, closing his soapy hand around the shaft and stroking firmly once, twice, making Sherlock gasp as his hips twitch involuntarily, pushing into John’s firm grip. John chuckles once, quietly, and releases him, making Sherlock whine softly at the loss of contact.

“Shh, I know,” John murmurs soothingly, reaching up and adjusting the shower head so the water cascades briefly down Sherlock’s body to wash the soap away. After a moment he nudges the showerhead to the side and raises himself up on tiptoes to kiss Sherlock’s swollen, reddened lips just once before putting hands on his shoulders and gently pushing him backwards until his back presses into the tiled wall of the tub. Sherlock just stares at him, wide-eyed and uncertain, as John presses his lips to the centre of Sherlock’s sternum, just above his scar.

“I want you all the time,” John says softly, voice stripped rough and raw by honesty as he mouths his way across the swell of Sherlock’s taut pectoral muscle. “Do you know that? I want to touch you, I want to taste you. All. The. Time.” He bends his head and takes a small pink nipple in his mouth, sucks on it, then closes his teeth gently over the hardened nub of flesh, making Sherlock gasp and whimper. He releases it, soothing the bite with gentle licks and kisses. “I want you in every single
possible way,” he breathes, dropping to his knees, his face level with Sherlock’s prick, hard and deep red. John looks up into shocked silver-green eyes as he takes one of Sherlock’s huge hands and places it on the back of his head.

“You’ll want to put your other hand against the wall,” John tells Sherlock, then opens his mouth and devours his cock, taking it in as deeply as he can.

Sherlock’s not as large as John but not small, either; he’s the exact right size as far as John’s concerned, the hot velvet of him filling his mouth perfectly; he savours the taste of smooth delicate skin, the weight of it on his tongue, the way his lips stretch around the blood-hot shaft as Sherlock shudders, crying out a choked sob at the way John is pleasuring him.

There’s a fundamental truth at work here; John absolutely loves sucking cock.

He knows he is bisexual. He knows he is attracted to both women and men. But now that he has faced that knowledge and survived, even thrived, he can finally admit to himself how much he enjoys this act, even craves it. He loves being on his knees, loves the submissiveness yet total control of it, the power that comes with overwhelming someone with pure spine-twisting pleasure. He loves being the instrument of someone else’s desperate need, he loves the shocking intimacy of staring into someone’s eyes as his lips are wrapped around their cock. He loves, absolutely loves the filthy thrill of having his hair pulled and his mouth roughly fucked as he gags and drools, the brutally arousing debasement of having his mouth filled with hot bitter come.

He loves it, all of it, and now that he knows he can have all of that not with a passing acquaintance or a near-stranger he will never see again but with someone he loves desperately, with his whole heart--that realisation overwhelms him, a wave of searing desire crashing through John’s body as he worships Sherlock’s cock, wrapping his fingers around the base as he sucks hard, hollowing his cheeks with each bob of his head, then pulling back and swirling his tongue around the head before taking him in again, as deep as he can, nose pressed into dark wet hair as he swallows around his shaft, pushing down his gag reflex, working him with the muscles of his throat, making him shudder and groan in wordless pleasure.

Sherlock’s hand is just resting on the back of his head; John covers his hand with his own, pulls his mouth away with a wet pop.

“You can pull my hair if you want,” he purrs, then traces his tongue around the head, swipes it slowly across the slit.

“Are you sure?” Sherlock asks, his voice breaking, his breathing as rough and ragged as if he had just run a punishing race.

“I’m positive,” John breathes. “In fact, I like it. I love it.” He wraps his mouth around Sherlock’s cock again, sliding wet lips down his shaft, swallowing him down again to the very root. Sherlock is tentative at first, carding his fingers through John’s wet hair, but soon he grows bolder, pulling John’s hair in earnest as he growls low in his throat, guiding John’s head as he starts to move more insistently, thrusting his cock down his throat, beginning to fuck his face in earnest as John moans in pleasure around his mouthful of hard flesh, saliva spilling past his lips and trickling down his chin.


John stops instantly, releases Sherlock’s cock from his mouth, pulls back. “What’s wrong?” he asks, stroking his thigh reassuringly.
“No, nothing’s wrong. I just--” Sherlock gently tugs him up with the hand in his hair, presses their foreheads together as he catches his breath, recovers his composure. “I don’t want to come like this,” He bends to kiss John’s shoulder, tucks his head into the curve of John’s neck. “I want,” he murmurs against John’s collarbone. “I want to come with you inside of me. Please.”

John gives a short exhale of surprise. “Sweetheart. Are you sure?”

Sherlock nods against his shoulder. “Unless you don’t--my conclusions were that you generally prefer to be on top, but if I’m mistaken--”

“No, that’s not it--I like to top, yes, but I like it both ways a lot, and. Well. I haven’t topped all that often because of my,” John’s face is glowing, crimson with embarrassment. “Well. Because of--”

“Because of your size,” Sherlock finishes for him, and John can feel him smirking just a bit against his shoulder.

“Yeah.” John is blushing furiously now, cheeks blazing. “It’s just... you’ve never done anything like that before. It’s a bit of a leap. And, well. People think they want a big cock, but in reality, well. It can be. Um. A challenge. Logistically.”

Sherlock straightens, grinning, his shy self-consciousness fading in the face of an opportunity to take the piss out of John. “I have seen porn, John,” Sherlock replies, tilting his head and quirking a sardonic eyebrow. “I am well aware of the mechanics of that particular act. And while your size is impressive, it’s not so far outside the norm it requires a warning label.”

“I know how big my penis is, thank you very much, and I’m not bragging. It has been problematic. Real life isn’t like porn, love. It’s a lot more... work. It can be awkward. And uncomfortable. You might not even like it. Not everyone does.”

“I didn’t just decide this right now, on the spur of the moment,” Sherlock tells him, quieter, more serious. “I’ve thought about this for a long time. For five years I’ve thought about this. I very, very much want to do this with you. Unless--” Sherlock tilts his head, presses his lips together. “Unless you don’t want to, for some reason I haven’t yet--”

“Jesus Christ,” John sighs, shaking his head. “Are you insane? Of course I want to. I want to so much I may spontaneously combust just thinking about it.”

“People don’t really spontaneously combust, John.”

“I know, you incredibly literal-minded prat.” John kisses him. “I’m just saying yes, God, of course I want to. I just want to make sure you’re sure. Also, there’s the minor detail of not having condoms.”

“I was tested monthly for six months after my drugs lapse. You were tested for STI’s when you learned of Mary’s infidelity, as well as six weeks after. We’re both completely clean, and you’re the only person I’m ever going to have sex with, and I’m the last person you’re ever going to have sex with. I don’t want to use condoms.”

“You have given this some thought, I see.” John looks up at him, bemused, and then his brow creases as a thought occurs to him. “How did you know--” he starts, and then realises. “Oh, God. You had Mycroft look at my NHS records, you--ahhhh,” he sighs, as Sherlock nibbles at the juncture of his neck and shoulder, reaching down between their bodies and wrapping his fingers around John’s aching and neglected cock. He should be angry, John thinks dimly, but how can he be angry when Sherlock is naked and wet and touching him like this--

“Irrelevant,” Sherlock purrs dismissively, stroking him slowly, teasingly once, twice more before
releasing his hold. “What’s important is that we don’t need condoms. Also, that you never, ever again mention my brother’s name when we are both déshabillés.”

“Agreed,” John replies fervently, suppressing a bit of a shudder.

Sherlock dips his head down, kisses him, wraps a hand around his hip and pulls him close. “Please, John,” he breathes into his ear, “I’ve thought about it so many times, I want you so much. Please have sex with me.” He traces the shell of John’s ear with his tongue, rocks his still-persistent erection into his belly. “Please fuck me, John. Please, please sodomise me with your statistically-above-average penis.” John can’t keep the giggles from escaping as Sherlock wraps him tighter in his long arms, and kisses his hair. “Johhhhhhhhn,” he moans theatrically against the side of his head. “Please terrorise me with your freakishly huge member.” They’re both laughing now, panting and giggling into each other’s necks. “Johhhhhhhhn. Please plow me into next week with your throbbing, cartoonishly oversized genitalia.”

John is laughing so hard he almost can’t breathe. “Okay,” he finally gasps. “Okay, you ridiculous creature. Fine. You win. I would love to have enthusiastic penetrative anal sex with you, okay? You mad, inappropriate bastard.”

John kisses him, presses their foreheads together; they stay like that for a moment, breathless from laughter, utterly wrapped up in each other.

John feels so much right now, feels so many things for this man, that his ribcage feels like a dam about to burst inside him, like he might drown and die in this wave of feeling if he doesn’t let it out.

“Do you know?” John asks him, still smiling, but quieter, more serious. “Do you know I’m absolutely gone on you?”

Sherlock gazes at him for a moment, gobsmacked, his pale silver-green eyes wide and round; he looks like he’s about to say something, then he breathes in, exhales and smiles.

“I do,” he says quietly. “Do you have any idea what you’ve done to me in turn?”

“I do.” John tries to sound confident, lighthearted, but his voice cracks and breaks on the two simple words. “I truly do.”

“That’s good.” Sherlock kisses him, a simple press of lips, and it would be almost chaste if not for the depth of devotion underneath. “That’s lovely. Now turn off the shower and take me to bed, if you please. We have acts of sodomy to commit.”

***

“Leave the light on,” John murmurs when Sherlock moves to switch off the bedside lamp. “I want to see you.”

“All right,” Sherlock replies softly.

The are standing at the edge of the bed, facing each other; the laughing silliness of a few minutes ago has faded, replaced by a quiet, almost reverent seriousness. Sherlock’s earlier show of sanguine self confidence has crumbled; his eyes are wide and dark, the flicker of anxious nerves plain to see.

John is absolutely, painfully conscious of the fact that the two of them are staring awkwardly at each other, naked and damp and about to have sex. The self-awareness of the entire situation is almost overwhelming to him; and he knows if he feels that way, Sherlock must want to run screaming from the room.
He slips a hand around the dip of Sherlock’s waist, smiles up at him, trying for reassuring, hoping he doesn’t overshoot and end up at condescending.

“It’s just you and me,” he says. “All right? Whatever happens, however this goes, it’s just you and me and it’s absolutely fine.”

“I know that,” Sherlock says, and he means it to come out sarcastic and dismissive, but it sounds insecure and defensive instead.

John turns to the bed, folds back the covers, and slides in. He looks up a Sherlock, and for an agonizing moment can see him consider fleeing, see the various muttered excuses and dismissals as they flit through his mind, can see him teetering on the edge of I can’t.

John smiles, tries to convey without words how very much he cares for him, adores him without reservation, from now until his very last breath. He holds out a hand. “Come here,” he says, gently. "Please?"

Sherlock exhales, nods, takes his hand, lets John pull him into bed, pull him close. He’s tense, anxious, allows John to kiss him but doesn’t really reciprocate.

“Are you nervous?” John asks.

“No,” Sherlock says, meaning yes.

“We’ll just take it slow, see how it goes,” John says. “And if it’s not working for you just tell me and we’ll stop.”

“For goodness sake,” Sherlock sighs, “you don’t have to coddle me,” meaning I’m acting like I know what I’m doing but I have no idea what I’m getting into here, so thank you for understanding that.

“Okay, love,” John murmurs, and kisses him again, gentle but persistent, tracing the edge of his full lower lip with his tongue, coaxing Sherlock into kissing him back, tentatively at first; then John can feel the exact moment Sherlock’s body finally overtakes his racing brain. He sighs, presses his body against John’s as the kisses grow heated, their mouths open and wet, tongues moving and sliding against each other. John shifts onto his back, gently tugging Sherlock by the waist. Sherlock takes the hint and rolls on top of him, his arms on each side of his head, his hips nestled in between John’s thighs. John wraps his legs around Sherlock’s, pushing his hips up so they press against each other, their cocks only partially hard now but rapidly stiffening as they rub and slide together with delicious friction.

Sherlock is past his anxiety now, making little whimpering grunts into John’s mouth as their bodies move together. His hands find John’s and in an unexpectedly assertive move he pushes them over John’s head, making him moan and squirm at the delicious feel of Sherlock’s strong hands holding him tight, pinning him down.

“Oh God,” he pants, arching into Sherlock’s grasp. “That feels so good.”

“You like that?” Sherlock asks, and his voice is genuinely curious, but John doesn’t miss the darker, predatory current underneath.

“I do,” John replies, breathless.

“I thought you preferred to be on top,” Sherlock murmurs, kissing his neck, nipping at his skin.

“It’s not that simple for me,” John tells him. “I like being the one on top, the one to teach you and
show you, but I also like it like this, you pinning me down. I’m an utter slag, you see, and I like--

ahhh God,
yes--I like absolutely everything.”

“Good,” Sherlock rumbles, sounding confident again, and a little amused. “Because I think I like everything, too.” His mouth moves down John’s torso, and his reach is long enough that he is able to slide down and suck on John’s nipple without releasing his wrists. John gives a sharp, bitten-off cry as he squirms underneath him, his nerves alight with pleasure.

“Oh, fuck,” he moans. “Oh fuck, that’s so good, that’s brilliant--”

Sherlock laves and sucks at his nipple, tracing around it with the pointed tip of his tongue, lapping at it with broad flat sweeps, then closing his teeth over it and pulling, making John curse and babble incoherently in mindless pleasure as he does the same to the other side, almost thrashing against his strong grip.

“Oh fuck, oh god, yes, please, yes,” he moans at the feel of his rough, warm, wet tongue against achingly sensitive flesh. Sherlock grinds hard into him in response, and their cocks are fully hard and hot, flesh against exquisitely sensitive flesh, making the tension in John’s body wind up tighter and tighter.

Sherlock releases his wrists and gives his nipple one more catlike lick before sliding down, placing tender kisses into the soft flesh above the navel, tracing the curve of John’s hip with his tongue. John can’t help the whimper that escapes his lips, can’t help but spread his legs, pushing his hips forward in silent entreaty. His cock juts up obscenely, foreskin fully pulled back, the wide head deep red, shiny wet and leaking.

Sherlock slides his head down, kisses the inside of John’s thigh as he wraps his long fingers around his shaft and strokes, at first tentative, then more firmly, making John sigh and press up into his grip. Sherlock mouths at the crease of his groin for a moment, then shifts himself up a bit. His strokes once more, slower, twice, then stops.

For a moment both of them are still, then John cracks one eye open and he props himself up on his elbows to look down at Sherlock.

He is crouched between John’s thighs, one hand splayed on his hip, the other around his cock. He is eyeing it with what can only be described as trepidation.

“John?” he murmurs.

“Hm?”

“I take back what said earlier about your penis. It is much more... daunting at eye level.”

John has to bite down hard on his back teeth to keep from laughing out loud; his laughter is based in fond affection, not mockery, not ever mockery, but he knows it would devastate Sherlock anyway so he keeps it in through sheer force of will.

“So I’ve been told,” John says evenly.

“The length is not a problem. Seven and three quarters inches is not so far above the norm--”

“Eight.”

“Hmm, seven and five-eighths at most.”
“I cannot believe your face is in my crotch and you’re arguing with me about this.”

“No, the issue here is... circumference.”

“Yeah, Sherlock. I know. I’ve been attached to it my whole life.” John gentles his tone, reaches a hand down, cards fingers gently through Sherlock’s soft hair. “Tell me what you’re thinking right now, and I’ll do what I can to help you through it.”

“I’m thinking I want to fellate you.”

John briefly wonders if it’s possible to die from holding in laughter.

“That is perfectly okay with me.”

Sherlock hesitates, makes a little huffing noise as he flicks his eyes up to John’s—and John sees the uncertainty there, his fear of being ignorant, foolish, embarrassed. Exposed.

It makes something ache inside him, that Sherlock is taking these kinds of risks, facing these fears, making himself vulnerable in a way he hasn’t dared to before, maybe ever.

“You can’t really go wrong with that,” John tells him, gently reassuring. “Just watch out for teeth. Don’t try to take too much at once. Keep your hand around the part not, um, in your mouth.”

John knows this should be an awkward, unsexy conversation. But weirdly enough, the entire situation, the awareness that he’s instructing Sherlock Holmes in how to suck his cock--John finds it deeply, powerfully arousing for reasons he can’t quite put a name to, and he finds his cock still rock-hard and very interested in the proceedings.

Sherlock nods, and wastes no time in wrapping his hand around the base and guiding his mouth over the head of his cock. He only makes it a little more than halfway down the shaft but it’s amazing, warm wet velvet heat surrounding him, engulfing him, and when Sherlock looks up at him, with lips stretched obscenely around his large hard length, pale green eyes already watering, the arousal that floods John’s belly is something primal, deep and overpowering. He has never wanted anything in his life as much as he wants to thrust hard into that gorgeous mouth, and it takes every shred of willpower to keep himself still, to let Sherlock explore him with his lips and tongue and hands.

Sherlock bobs his head once, experimentally, before pulling back off, tracing the prominent underside vein with his tongue, licking across the slit before pulling him back into his mouth, his cheeks hollowing as he sucks him inexpertly but enthusiastically, taking him even deeper with each wet slide of his lips as he works his hand in counterpoint at the base in imitation of what John had done to him earlier.

John collapses back onto the bed, panting out sharp, mewling cries as Sherlock sucks him. One hand finds Sherlock’s head, weaves fingers into dark curls, not pulling or demanding, just guiding him, showing him how to best give him pleasure. “God, Jesus fuck,” he gasps, “Sherlock, God, you’re so good, you’re so good.” Sherlock hums at the words of praise; the vibrations travel through John’s cock straight up his spine, showering his brain in sparks of electric bliss. Without warning, John is suddenly, dangerously close to orgasm; he wants to, God how he wants to come hard into Sherlock’s lush wet mouth, rush of hot white pleasure spilling across his waiting tongue, come dripping from his beautiful lips as he tries to swallow it all down. It would be so good, God, it would be amazing and he’s so close--

“Hey,” he manages to gasp, tugging at dark curls. “Stop. Sherlock. Stop.”

Sherlock pulls away, looks up at him, uncertain.
“No, love,” John sighs, breathing heavily. “It’s so good, it’s too good. If you keep that up, we’re not going to make it to what you asked for.” He plucks Sherlock’s hand from where it rests on his hip. “Come here, you gorgeous thing,” he murmurs. Sherlock slides up his body and kisses him, lips and chin wet with saliva, and he tastes himself on Sherlock’s tongue and it’s filthy and arousing and marvellous.

“That was brilliant,” he whispers against Sherlock’s mouth, “Perfect. Unbelievable. Fantastic.” He can feel Sherlock shiver with pleasure at his words, and John files that tidbit away for future reference.

“Really?” Sherlock murmurs, lips curving into a tiny pleased grin.

“Really truly,” John tells him. “Did you like it?”

“I…” Sherlock contemplates the question. “I really did, and not just because I wanted to please you. It was pleasurable for me too, despite being objectively uncomfortable. I don’t quite know why.”

“Good,” John says, and wraps his fingers around the back of Sherlock’s head, pulls him down for a kiss, unabashedly grabbing his rear to pull him close. Sherlock makes a small noise of appreciation and kisses him back, throwing a long leg over him, insistent fingers exploring the curves and planes of John’s back.

John kisses his forehead, the tip of his nose.

“Can I ask you a question?” he murmurs, running a thumb tenderly across one impossible cheekbone.

Sherlock nods wordlessly, eyes wide in the low lamplight.

“Do you still want me inside you, love?” John’s unable to stop his hips from rutting gently against Sherlock’s long thigh, the tension tight in his belly and his balls achingly full and still-hard cock yearning for more friction, more pleasure, just plain more. “Because I would really, really like to fuck you right into this mattress.”

Sherlock takes a deep breath, exhales, nods. “I want that,” he says, low and ragged. “Very much.”

John smiles at him, and it’s filled with love, and tenderness, but he can’t deny the darker, more possessive feelings lurking underneath. He gives Sherlock one last kiss on the lips before moving back, sitting up next to him. “Scoot over for me, to the middle of the bed.”

Sherlock looks at him, uncertain. “On my front or my back?”

“On your back,” John tells him, and strokes his thigh reassuringly. “The other way is good too, but this first time I want us to see each other.”

Sherlock nods and does as John asks, sliding himself to the middle of the bed, lying flat on his back, knees spread; as he gazes at John, his face expectant, a trace of anxiety visible in his eyes, his nerves evident in his drooping, rapidly softening cock.

John plucks a pillow from the headboard and taps the crest of Sherlock’s hip; he nods and arches his hips upward so John can slide the pillow under the small of his back. John turns to the night table, opens the drawer and retrieves the small translucent bottle. He kisses Sherlock once chastely, strokes his damp and riotously frizzy hair back from his forehead.

“Promise me you’ll tell me if you want to stop,” he murmurs.
“Are you going to be like this the whole time?” Sherlock murmurs in mock-annoyance, but his eyes are tight with apprehension behind the show of bravado.

“You mean, the whole caring about your well-being, making sure you’re all right thing?” John smiles, tracing reassuring fingertips down the defined muscles of Sherlock forearm. “You knew that when you bought the ticket, I think.”

“Too late for a refund, then, I suppose.” Sherlock replies, and the intended snappy comeback comes out breathy with arousal as John climbs between his spread legs, kisses the tender flesh at the inside of his knee.

“No exchanges, no returns,” John murmurs, mouthing and licking at warm skin. “I’m not letting you go. Not ever.” Sherlock sighs and lets his knees fall wider in entreaty, making John’s cock twitch and jump at the sight of him spread open like this, completely exposed and vulnerable and trusting and breathtakingly gorgeous.

“You’re so beautiful,” John murmurs against Sherlock’s inner thigh, brushing his fingers up the inside of his thigh, oh so slowly, feeling the sparse dark hair on his legs, his fingertips moving higher until he’s just brushing against the neatly trimmed dark thatch between his thighs. Sherlock’s erection has revived, full and dusky red, bobbing against the pale flesh of his belly as John cups his bollocks, massages them gently, feeling the lovely warm weight of them in his palm.

“You feel so good,” John murmurs. Sherlock shivers, whimpering low in his throat at his touch. John traces the crease of his groin with his tongue, savoring the clean musky taste of him, then dips his head in between Sherlock’s thighs, gently licking and kissing the soft wrinkled skin of his scrotum, taking first one testicle in his mouth, then the other, making him keen and writhe with pleasure.

“You taste amazing,” John purrs, then places a hand on each of his inner thighs and spreads his legs even wider, opening him up completely for his insistent tongue.

“John,” Sherlock breathes, sounding equally shocked and aroused. “What are you--”

“Shh,” John murmurs soothingly. “I want to taste every inch of you.” He presses his tongue against his perineum, lapping against it with a series of flat, broad strokes. “Put your hands under your knees and pull them up for me.”

Sherlock complies wordlessly, pulling his knees against his chest, opening himself up completely. John slides his hands up the backs of his thighs to the round flesh of his arse, parting his cheeks fully, licking a broad stripe from his sacrum to his bollocks as Sherlock arches and cries out under him, the sounds of his pleasure making John’s nerve endings spark and tingle, the tension pooling hot and heavy in his pelvis.

John patiently works him with his tongue, first tracing wet swirls around the tight furled knot of his entrance, then licking catlike stripes along the entire exposed cleft. He takes his twitching, iron-hard cock in his left hand and strokes slowly, carefully, not quite enough stimulation to bring him to climax but enough pleasure to help him relax and open up to John’s careful ministrations.

“Oh God, John, Oh fuck. I can’t I can’t I--oh, fuck, please, John, please.” Sherlock is babbling now, incoherent with need as John carefully presses against his entrance with a pointed tongue, coaxing him open with gentle caresses as Sherlock squirms and curses and moans. He’s soaking wet with saliva now, his tightly closed hole loosened just enough that John can take his tongue away and carefully slide the tip of his right finger in, past the ring of muscle, just up to the first knuckle.

Sherlock inhales sharply, his muscles tensing all around John’s finger. “Oh. Oh.”
“Is it all right?” John asks. “Be honest.”

“It feels... odd,” Sherlock admits between ragged gasps. “Not bad, exactly, but odd.”

“Breathe out and try to relax,” John tells him. “The odd sensation will pass in a minute.”

Sherlock nods and exhales, and the tight muscle clamped around John’s index finger loosens just a fraction, enough for John to slide his finger in further, slowly, almost to the second knuckle as he continues to stroke his somewhat-flagging cock.

“You’re doing wonderfully,” John murmurs. “You feel so good inside,” and it’s true, he’s almost impossibly hot and tight, and the idea of that snug velvet heat wrapped around him is almost unbearably arousing, sending a pulse of heat to his already aching prick. He is absolutely willing to be patient, though, wants it to be good for Sherlock more than he wants to meet his own needs, so John coaxes his body open patiently, carefully, sliding gradually in further with each push of his finger, until he’s loosened enough that John feels he’s ready for more. He slides his finger out, releases his grip in Sherlock’s prick so he can sit back on his heels. He wraps his hands around Sherlock’s wrists, takes his hands out from under his legs so he can put his feet back down on the bed. John slides up his body, kisses his panting, swollen mouth.

“You’re doing so well,” John tells him. “I’m going to use two fingers now. Is that okay?” Sherlock nods wordlessly, eyes shut, and John slides down his body, uncaps the lube and slicks his fingers, sliding them under his balls, past his perineum, circling and rubbing against his relaxed entrance before pressing into his body. Sherlock exhales in a pained moan, and John stills his movement. “All right, love?”


“Okay,” John murmurs, then leans forward and takes hold of Sherlock’s softened cock and guides it into his mouth, bobbing up and down in long pulls, curving the fingers buried in his arse, pressing upward, seeking that tender bump of tissue. He locates the edge of Sherlock’s prostate and strokes across it with just the barest hint of pressure.

Sherlock cries out as his body stiffens and arches. “Oh hell. Oh fuck. Fuck. That was--God. Do that again.” John complies, sucking his rapidly hardening cock as he presses his fingers in and out in time, expertly stroking across his prostate with each thrust. He can feel Sherlock’s clenching inner muscles begin to relax as the confusing signals of his body melt into pleasure; John pulls out almost all the way, slides in a third finger, pressing against his walls, taking his time, slowly stretching his still-tight rim.

Sherlock begins to moan, low choked gasps gradually becoming heedless animal cries as his body responds instinctively, pushing back against John’s movements, seeking more pressure, more fullness as he thrusts down against the push of John’s fingers then pressing up into the heat and friction of his skilled mouth. John can feel Sherlock’s muscles tightening, the tension in his body spiraling higher as his climax approaches.

He whimpers brokenly when John pulls off his cock with a wet slurp, kisses the soft skin just inside the crest of his pelvis.

“Tell me how good it is,” John murmurs.

Sherlock’s neck is arched, eyes closed, his head lolling from side to side. “It’s... oh, fuck, it’s so good,” he gasps in between ragged breaths. “Please don’t stop, oh God, don’t stop.”
“Do you want to come like this?” John asks him. Sherlock opens his eyes to look at him, shakes his head, an emphatic no.

“I want it, John, I want you to fuck me, I want it more than anything. God. Please.”

John considers, then nods. “All right, love.” He withdraws his fingers slowly, not able to resist gazing for a moment at the mesmerizing sight of Sherlock’s twitching, gaping hole, slick with saliva and lube, open and waiting for him.

“Oh God, John,” Sherlock sighs, a note of pleading in his voice. “Stop looking at it and put your cock in it.”

“The mouth on you,” John murmurs, picking up the lube and squirting out a generous handful, slicking the length of his cock. He positions himself over Sherlock, lines himself up, and presses forward oh-so-slowly.

Sherlock’s eyes fly open wide as the blunt, broad head of John’s cock breaches his body.


“I can stop,” John pants, and he can but oh God he doesn’t want to, he feels even better than John thought he would, but he would never hurt Sherlock and if he says stop--

“No,” he rasps. “No. It hurts, it’s so... full, so much, but it’s good. It’s going to be good, I know it is. Just go slow.”

So John goes slow, inch by agonizingly slow inch, and the feel of Sherlock opening up inside for him, of accommodating him, of taking him in—it’s the most unbearably aroused he’s ever been in his whole life, his pelvis aching and heavy with need. He’s two-thirds in when Sherlock brings his legs up and locks them around John’s waist. “Come on,” he whispers. “I want all of you, now.” John’s frayed self-control snaps and he buries himself fully into Sherlock in one hard thrust. Sherlock cries out, grabbing John’s shoulders, fingers digging painfully into his deltoids as he shivers and gasps against him.

John is sheathed in Sherlock completely, his body hot and snug and unbelievably good around his cock. John looks down at where their bodies are joined, pulls out partway so he can watch himself sliding back in, watch how Sherlock’s body takes him so gorgeously, John’s thick length stretching his hole obscenely wide. It’s breathtakingly lewd and gorgeous.

Sherlock moans impatiently, thrusts up against him in naked entreaty. “Fuck me,” he implores brokenly, “God, John, just fuck me,” and John does, thrusts into him hard, and it’s unbelievable, it’s transcendent, and it’s going to be over far too soon, plowing over and over into Sherlock’s arse so tight hot perfect around his cock. John watches Sherlock’s face, transfixed, watches him sigh and sob and beg, all pretense of control abandoned, waves of pleasure playing across his sharp, otherworldly features.

John slips his forearms under Sherlock’s legs, bending him almost double as he crushes their mouths together, swallowing his sounds of desperate pleasure as his entire being narrows down to the unbearable heat and slide and pleasure of their connected bodies.

“You’re everything to me,” John rasps in between rough, demanding kisses. “You’re my whole world. You’re my life.” He feels tears gathering in his eyes, threatening to spill down his cheeks; this crashing wave of emotion is terrifying, obliterating, and John wants to run but there’s nowhere left to go, nowhere left to hide so he accepts it, lets it wash over him, fill his lungs, drag him under without
a struggle. “I love you,” he breathes, the words harsh and broken, almost a sob. "Fuck, Sherlock. I love you so much.”

“I love you,” Sherlock breathes into his mouth between gasps of pleasure. “God, John, yes. I love you I love you I love you. I’ve always loved you.”

“You’re mine,” John growls, raw with naked emotion, “and no one will take you away from me. Not him, not anyone, never, not as long as I’m alive.”

“I’m yours, always, always,” Sherlock rasps brokenly. “And you’re mine. Say you’re mine.”

“I am,” John promises. “I am.” He takes his right arm out from under Sherlock’s leg so he can wrap a still-slick hand around his twitching, leaking cock, jerking him roughly in time with the snap of his hips. John can feel how close he is, the muscles of his abdomen tightly contracted, the tension of his body a quivering bowstring.

“Come for me, love,” John breathes. “Come for me now, I want to feel you come while I’m buried inside you, I want to feel you come so hard for me--”

“Oh God, oh God, please,” Sherlock moans, heedless of his words, "Oh god oh John, yes, fuck, please--” He draws a deep, shuddering breath and then he’s coming hard with a deep choked cry, head thrown back, back arched as he spasms, spurting forcefully over John’s fist, striping hot and thick across his own belly.

Sherlock’s body clenches and contracts rhythmically around John as he comes, powerful pulsing waves from the very centre of his body rippling outward, and it pulls John to the very edge; three, four, five more thrusts, then his body goes still for a split second and he’s falling, blinding white pleasure crashing over him like a tidal wave as he spills hot and slick inside Sherlock’s body, mindless guttural noises pouring from his mouth, every nerve in his body on fire and he’s still coming, harder and longer than he ever has before in his life, the pulsing waves building and cresting, then suspending for a single endless gorgeous moment before finally receding.

The shivering aftershocks ripple through their bodies as they cling to each other, gasping and boneless. Sherlock’s lips finds his and they kiss, nuzzling animalistically at each others mouths as they slowly come back to themselves, sticky and sated and limp. John shifts to the side, sliding wetly out of Sherlock’s body, making him gasp and wince.

“I’m sorry, sweetheart,” John murmurs. “Are you very sore?”

“S’alright,” Sherlock mutters, exhausted, eyes closing, slumber already claiming him. John feels his own body clamoring for the sweet pull of sleep, but fights it off for few minutes more, long enough to stumble into the loo and wipe himself down with a wet flannel, then bring one back to bed for Sherlock.

Sherlock flails sleepily at him. “I know,” John murmurs, “but I want to make sure you’re not bleeding.”

“God, I’m fine,” Sherlock groans, but lets John wipe down his chest and between his legs, checking carefully for any blood or signs of damage and finding none. He tosses the flannel over the side of the bed and curls up behind Sherlock’s boneless, sweaty body. Sherlock turns his head back towards him in silent request; John obliges him with a kiss.

“Love you,” Sherlock mutters. “Now sod off and let me sleep.”

John huffs out a soft chuckle as he switches off the bedside lamp, “Love you too,” he murmurs
fondly. “Love you more than anything, you rude, ungrateful git.”

Sherlock’s breathing is already deep and even, with his unmistakable sonorous edge that means he’s truly deeply asleep. Within moments John’s own eyes are drifting shut, and he soon follows Sherlock down into the land of deep, dreamless slumber.

***

When John wakes up it is still dark, and Sherlock’s side of the bed is cold.

He pushes down a brief flare of irrational panic; surely he hasn’t gone very far, not in the middle of the night. He cranes his head, looks at the doorway; a sliver of dim yellow light is visible under the closed door. He just went to make a cuppa or find a snack or look something up on his laptop, then.

I’m being ridiculous, John tells himself sternly. He can’t live like that, jumping at shadows, thinking every unannounced trip to the toilet is a Moriarty kidnapping. He knows he can’t. But he doesn’t quite know how not to be like that, not yet; this is all too new, too fragile, and already danger is dangling over their heads, again, a Sword of Damocles hanging over what should be a new chapter in their lives.

But he can’t live like that, always fearing the worst. So he’ll learn how not to. Tomorrow.

John slips out of bed, pads into the bathroom. He uses the toilet in the dark, locates his pants on the floor by touch, and slips them onto his slightly sticky, slightly sore body before making his way across the hall to the kitchen.

Sherlock isn’t here, though the unwrapped block of cheese and opened biscuit tin tell John he was not too long ago. He’s not in the sitting room either, and his coat hangs peacefully on its hook.

I didn’t even manage to keep him for twenty four hours this time.

Oh God, stop it.

John is breathing calmly, deliberately, in through his nose and out through his mouth, trying to keep the incipient freakout at bay. On one of those deep inhales he smells it, the unmistakable acrid burning edge of fresh cigarette smoke. Relief floods through him as he realises where Sherlock’s gone. He climbs the dark steps two at a time, opens the door to his old room.

The yellow curtain is pushed to one side, fluttering in the breeze.

Sherlock is sitting on the fire escape, knees pulled to his chest, smoking a cigarette. He’s bare to the waist, navy striped pyjama bottoms riding low on his hips. A mug of tea is next to him, likely long gone cold.

“Hey,” John says as he pushes his head through the open window.

Sherlock doesn’t say anything, but shifts over on the fire escape to make room for him; the wince that crosses his features as he moves doesn’t escape John’s notice.

“A bit tender?” John murmurs.

“It’s certainly going to remain fresh in my memory for a day or two,” Sherlock replies dryly. He takes a drag of his Silk Cut, blows a stream of smoke into the cool night air.

The two of them are silent for a bit, their thighs pressed together as Sherlock smokes and John waits
for him to say something.

“I don’t want to do this,” Sherlock finally says, and for a terrifying second John thinks he means this, the two of them; but their bodies are comfortably touching and his body language is open, not closed off or distant, and John realises immediately their relationship is not what Sherlock is talking about.

“You don’t want to do what?”

“This. Moriarty. The shadowy supervillain, the battle of wits, the epic showdown. I don’t want to do this.”

He pauses, contemplates the rooftop of the flats across the alley as he drains the last swallow of tea.

“The last time I faced Moriarty…” he takes a deep drag off his cigarette, exhales. “I enjoyed it, John. I wanted to play his games. I wanted to show off, prove how clever I was. I hate myself for it, but it’s the truth. I was engaged, I was entertained, and I loved it.

“But I’m... I’m not the person now that I was then. I no longer have that hole inside of me that I have to fill with puzzles and playacting and drama. I’ve changed so much, John, and it goes even deeper than what you see. I want something different, now. I want a chance to build a life with you.”

John blinks, momentarily taken aback by the depth of feeling in Sherlock’s words. “Sherlock. I want that too, more than anything.”

“We have so much to deal with, just between the two of us. So many broken pieces that need to be glued back together. But I think we can. I think we can do this, and that’s what I want. I want... this. Us. I don’t want to play Moriarty’s stupid little reindeer games any longer.”

“Things could be different, this time,” John points out. “The last Moriarty... Sherlock, he was obsessed with you. Personally. Basically, he wanted to be your psychopath boyfriend. The new one, the new Moriarty, he may have the same name, but whoever he is, this Moriarty is a different man. He wants different things. Maybe he won’t come after you.”

“You heard what Lee said. He’s angry at the damage I’ve done. He takes it personally. Whoever this person is, he didn’t come to be James Moriarty by letting bygones be bygones. No, he’s going to come after us. Not me, but us. What we have is the most important thing in the world to me, and that makes it my greatest liability.”

He takes one final drag off his cigarette, stubs it out on the metal grate, drops it into his empty mug.

“Three years ago…” Sherlock sighs, shakes his head. “I didn’t know what I was risking. I was stupid and reckless because I didn’t know what was at stake. I was a naive fool. That was my weakness, then. This time I know what is at stake. I have love and happiness and everything I never thought I’d have in my grasp, for the first time in my life. And that is my weakness, now.” Sherlock looks at his bare feet, wiggles his long toes. “I don’t want to do this, but I must, because now I know what I stand to lose.”

John is quiet for a moment, not quite sure what to say.

“You’re not doing it alone, this time,” he finally offers.

“You’re right,” Sherlock says slowly, as if considering. “I’m not, and I’d do well to remember that.” He looks over at John and smiles, but it doesn’t quite touch the sadness in his eyes.

They sit on the fire escape for a while longer, each lost to their own thoughts.
John leans over, kisses his shoulder. “I love you, you know.”

“I love you, too,” Sherlock murmurs, but his voice is soft, a bit far away, and John can tell he’s already on the path to his mind palace, heading to that place where not even John can reach him.

“Come to bed soon?” John asks. Sherlock nods but says nothing, doesn’t move, gazing into the night sky.

John climbs back through the window, makes his way carefully down the steps, kicks off his pants and slides back into the still-warm bed.

Several minutes pass before he hears Sherlock’s light, graceful footsteps descending the stairs. John turns to his side, curls in on himself, tries to push away the chilly sadness threatening to wrap around him.

He knows Sherlock loves him. He does, and he believes Sherlock when he says he is a changed person. John also knows, though, that a mystery this profound, this unsettling will call to Sherlock like an addiction, like a physical need in his veins that he won’t be able to ignore until he’s answered the questions, solved the riddles, teased the puzzle apart.

In a moment Sherlock will come in, pull on a dressing gown, and leave, go out into the living room to be alone, to think, to retreat far into himself, remote and untouchable. And John will be, for all intents and purposes, alone.

He knows Sherlock loves him, but a mystery like this...John knows he will have to share him with the Work for a while. Maybe a long while. Maybe forever. And he will live with this, because he loves Sherlock more than anything in the world, loves him so much he will accept having only part of him rather than nothing at all.

He will let Sherlock pull away, disappear inside himself when he needs to. The Work takes precedence. And John knows this. Hell, he knew this going in. And it’s fine.

Sherlock slips into the ensuite; the toilet flushes, water runs. John, wanting to spare him from having to make halfhearted excuses, closes his eyes, pretends to sleep as Sherlock enters the bedroom.

It’s fine. It is. He will make it be fine.

Sherlock stands at the foot of the bed a moment, as if hesitating; then he’s kicking off his pyjamas carelessly and slipping into bed, the mattress creaking as his naked body settles behind John, pulling him close. His arm slides around John’s waist and slips under his elbow; he gently presses his hand against the centre of John’s chest, over his heart.

He smells of sex and cigarettes and mouthwash and night air, and the knot in John’s chest--the one he hadn’t even allowed himself to acknowledge--well, it doesn’t disappear, not entirely, but it loosens. Considerably.

John opens his eyes.

“I thought you’d want to get to work,” he says, low and quiet. Sherlock presses against him, chest flush against his back, his skin still cool from the outdoors.

“Later,” he murmurs, then kisses the back of John’s neck gently, just once.

John exhales, relaxing into Sherlock’s embrace. He doesn’t say anything. He doesn’t have to.
Together they watch the night turn into morning, dark grey dissolving into pink and gold as another day dawns over London.

Epilogue

October

Polite knuckles rap on his door, startling him out of his reverie.

He turns away from the window of his office, swiveling his chair to face the pretty young department assistant smiling at him from the doorway.

Emma? Ellie? No, Elizabeth. She looks like an Elizabeth, all long dark hair and big brown eyes, shining with excitement over the start of a new term.

“It’s time sir. Are you ready?”

“Oh course,” he says, rising. “Lead the way, my dear.”

He follows her down the hallway, out the door, to the stone walkway. Of course he knows where he’s to go, he has been here nine days and he had every building, every pavement, every inch of this small, nondescript campus memorised twelve hours after he arrived--but it’s a better move to feign ignorance, to allow the young lady to think she’s being useful, being helpful to the brilliant but slightly dotty, late-middle aged, almost elderly man.

Appearances are so important, after all.

“I hope you’re excited,” Elizabeth says. “We are so thrilled to have you here. It’s a small school, to be sure, no Oxford or Cambridge, but the students here are bright and eager to learn--”

“And I’m eager to teach them,” the older man replies with a smile. “It’s a lovely kind of semi-retirement, getting to pass along some of my life’s work to the younger generation. You know,” he says, with a conspiratorial grin, “Mathematics was my first love, and I always wanted to be a teacher, really. Economics just kind of...happened to me. I spent years behind the scenes, working on the theories others put to use and, well. I suppose this is my time to step in front of the curtain.”

“Well,” says the young woman, “We all end up where we’re supposed to be, in the end, don’t you think?”

“Indeed,” he murmurs. “At least, I hope so.”

The pair enter a square, rather squat two-story red brick building, the slightly worn linoleum under their feet shiny with start-of-term, just-polished smoothness. The assistant takes him to the third door on the right side of the hallway.

“This is you,” she says with a smile. “Good luck, sir.”

“Thank you, my dear,” he says graciously, turning the doorknob. “See you back at the office.”
He enters the room with a deliberate, careful gait, looks out at the student’s faces, all gazing at him expectantly as he closes the door carefully behind him.

On a side table sits four neat stacks of hardcover books. He walks over, picks up a stack, takes it to the first row of students.

“I took the liberty of purchasing your textbooks for you,” he says conversationally as he passes out copies of Digital Economics and Game Theory: a Treatise. “After all, as the author I get a substantial discount, and I know you’re all skint uni students.”

A polite, nervous titter ripples through the room. He smiles, reassuring, the perfect picture of a kindly older man, intellectual yet personable in his tweed jacket and bowtie. The teacher every student hopes to have.

“Well then,” he says, positioning himself behind the lectern. “Let’s get started, shall we?”

The rows of shining young faces gaze back at him expectantly.

“Good afternoon,” he says. “My name is Professor James Moriarty.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much to everyone who read, kudos'ed, commented and subscribed. You're worth more than gold to me.

There is more of this story to tell (obviously), so check back in a bit and see how that's coming along.

If you want to keep tabs on what I'm up to come follow me on tumblr!

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Until next time...

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